Why Influence Is a Two-Way Street

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By Jonathan Hughes, Jessica Wadd, and Ashley Hetrick

THE ABILITY TO WIELD INFLUENCE IS essential to getting things done in today's complex, often matrixed organizations. Because most strategic initiatives require cross-functional collaboration, even C-suite executives often find themselves accountable for outcomes whose success depends on resources outside of their direct control. Managers we surveyed over a nine-year period reported that they had to rely on influence and collaboration with others to accomplish about one-third of their goals, on average.

In these contexts, it's easy to equate developing influence with developing soft power that can be used to persuade others to do what you think is right. But it's also in these contexts where the traditional model of influence can fail organizations. Most of us need to collaborate with people who have a variety of perspectives, priorities, and incentives. Different business units and functions — which, by design, have different goals, priorities, and operating procedures — must balance competing objectives and synthesize conflicting points of view in order to advance the goals and success of the enterprise as a whole.

Based on our research and consulting experience, we've identified four distinct approaches to influence: coercion, manipulation, selling, and joint problem-solving. (See "How Influence Is Wielded in Organizations," p. 75.) While coercion and manipulation are, thankfully, the least common, selling — or focusing on getting others to agree with your position or perspective — is predominant. In our research, respondents who reported that people at their organizations tended to focus on getting others to agree with them outnumbered (by nearly 2 to 1) respondents who reported that a collaborative, joint problem-solving approach was most prevalent.

Selling — trying to get others to agree or provide support by showing them why one's own idea is best and/or how it will benefit them — was reported to be the dominant approach to influence at 38% of our survey respondents' organizations. While it's not toxic in the ways that manipulation or coercion are, it's not benign; this form of influence can lead to endless arguments rather than good decisions. An executive at one highly matrixed company described to us how people became mired in continuous nonproductive debates about where to make strategic investments. In an atmosphere where everyone was seeking to bring others to their point of view, there was no way, as he put it, "to bring debate to

closure and then execute on an aligned direction."

When selling behavior is the most prevalent influence type in an organization, it produces suboptimal compromises, at best. Individuals who reported that selling is the dominant mode of influence at their company were 40% more likely to report that after getting others to agree, they later realized a different course of action would have been significantly better. A large majority — 86% — of respondents agreed that being more open to the objections, concerns, and different ideas of others would have led them to pursue a better course of action.

Compliance Versus Collaboration

To arrive at good solutions and decisions (and, equally, to avoid unwise or immoral ones), we need a different model of influence. Research on leadership and organizational effectiveness has found that even when it is possible to rely on direct authority and hierarchy to achieve an objective, doing so is usually not the best approach. Influence efforts that are focused on getting others to agree or comply do nothing to enable the productive integration of different perspectives and priorities. Morale and productivity are enhanced when people are persuaded that a plan or decision makes sense; they both suffer when people feel pressured by sales tactics to agree with a course of action.[1]

The good news is that a more collaborative approach is already apparent at many organizations. Joint problem-solving was the second most common way to exercise influence that survey participants reported. We found a high correlation between problem-solving as the dominant mode of influence and several measures of organizational health and effectiveness. Companies where individuals reported that influence efforts relied predominantly on joint problem-solving were nearly eight times more likely to report that roles in their organization were clear and unambiguous, and more than twice as likely to report that organizational complexity did not impede the speed of decision-making.

Respondents who reported that differences are a significant source of learning and innovation at their organization were nearly six times more likely to report that joint problem-solving was the dominant mode of influence. They were also nearly three times more likely to report that it was easier to achieve results using influence versus relying on direct authority.

This is what we call *collaborative influence* — enlisting the support or cooperation of others, without relying on formal authority, to achieve individual or common goals, especially in the face of competing priorities or conflicting perspectives. We'll now turn to how to foster that approach to influence in an organization's culture.

Toward a Culture of Collaborative Influence

Given that humans are social creatures, many of us find disagreement uncomfortable. Building a culture of collaborative influence requires leaders to frequently communicate that different priorities and perspectives across different organizational units are inevitable, and indeed healthy, while also explaining how they contribute to common goals for the larger enterprise. People in distinct functional areas will necessarily have different expertise and access to different information — which means that disagreement is a feature, not a bug, in an organization's design.

Based on our experience, the following five strategies enable leaders to foster an approach to influence that is collaborative and emphasizes joint problem-solving across their organizations.

1. Expand job definitions and responsibilities so that they provide guidelines for cross-functional engagement. Offer written guidance or training that clarifies expectations for interactions with colleagues. This should be incorporated into employee onboarding.

Senior leaders at Applied Materials have woven a collaborative approach to influence into the company's operational fabric by attending closely to job definitions and responsibilities for individual roles and teams — including how to work with other functions. The company's 2023 revenues outpaced the rest of the wafer fabrication equipment sector for the fifth consecutive year — and that success depended on very close alignment of all of its teams, according to Mike Parcella, vice president of global sourcing and supply chain operations at Allied Materials. That priority shapes how managers write job descriptions, define cross-functional objectives and incentives, and review individual performance.

"We seek to provide maximum clarity to people on what they are responsible for as individuals, which includes very specific guidance on how they should engage with colleagues across our matrix who are not in their department," Parcella said. For example, to avoid

bogging down engineers in supplier negotiations, they are directed to focus initially on determining technical requirements. They then work in partnership with a member of the sourcing team to find the best supplier and ensure that the right agreement terms are put in place. "We know that people from different functions may not always agree on what to do or even how to do it; however, we believe having a diversity of ideas is productive, as it helps us find the best solutions," Parcella said.

As a result, organizational complexity — intrinsic to any large, diversified company — doesn't hinder Applied Materials' people as they collaborate across functions to foster and sustain innovation.

2. Replace traditional influence training with training focused on collaborative influence. In our research, 71% of respondents indicated that a lack of effective influence skills at their organizations "impeded the quality and speed of decision-making and innovation." To remedy this, many companies invest heavily in training programs to equip their people with better influence skills. Because individuals must regularly secure assistance from others who don't report to them, and they often need to align on common plans in the face of competing priorities, it's natural to conclude that people need better influence skills to make decisions together and collaborate to implement them.

Unfortunately, much of this training reinforces a compliance paradigm because it largely focuses on how to win agreement. Influence training should be both practical and normative: It should go beyond tactics for getting others to comply and provide guidance for how to constructively engage colleagues and multiple stakeholders in effective joint problem-solving and decision-making.

Sanofi offers an example of the potential effects of such an approach. Fifteen years ago — after years of growing through acquisitions into a top-10 global pharmaceutical and health care company — Sanofi experienced mounting challenges across its highly matrixed organization. Decisions were delayed. Limited collaboration across business units and functions resulted in redundant investments and missed opportunities for innovation. Employee engagement scores declined, as did revenue. Senior executives decided to address these challenges through a global training program to build collaborative influence skills focused on joint problem-solving and mutual persuasion.

The results demonstrate the impact of training based on the paradigm of using influence to arrive at optimal decisions rather than to obtain compliance from others. "We recognized early on that training thousands of people on how to be better at persuading others to agree with them was not going to improve collaboration, nor the

quality of decision-making, nor the performance of our highly complex and matrixed organization," said a former executive in Sanofi's patient advocacy group. However, according to the executive, training built around a new influence paradigm — one focused on collaboration and joint problem-solving — has been transformative. Where disagreements over priorities and plans were once politicized and acrimonious, they are now handled openly and in a manner that leads to more creative solutions and better decisions. Morale has also improved.

3. Engage in cross-functional goal-setting and alignment of incentives. While functional silos are inevitable, to achieve broader enterprise goals, people need to work across these silos and influence others with different goals, priorities, knowledge, and ways of looking at the world. To facilitate this, senior leaders should coordinate and align goal-setting across functions, guiding each individual function to revamp its key metrics and set departmental goals and incentives that support overall enterprise goals. This makes it easier for functional managers and workers to navigate and balance competing goals and objectives, resolve differences that inevitably arise, and make joint decisions through collaborative influence as they work with their counterparts in other functions.

Consider this example: For several years, we worked with a global company struggling to bring costs down. Individuals in its procurement organization were expected to achieve aggressive savings targets. This resulted in escalating conflict and mistrust between people in procurement and individuals in other groups, such as R&D, product management, and sales, who had very different goals and priorities. Procurement's ability to influence other groups to reduce costs steadily diminished.

To address those issues, we helped the company revamp incentives in the procurement organization. While the entire organization still had savings targets, individuals in procurement did not. They were instead measured on concrete behaviors that included "identifying creative cost-saving opportunities" and "supporting the success of our customers by tapping into innovation from our suppliers." Other areas of the business that worked with procurement provided feedback on those measures. Moreover, overall procurement savings

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How Influence Is Wielded in Organizations

Selling is the dominant approach to exercising influence among survey respondents' companies, but it's closely followed by a more collaborative way of making decisions.

Selling	38%
Joint Problem-Solving	35%
Manipulation	18%
Coercion	9%
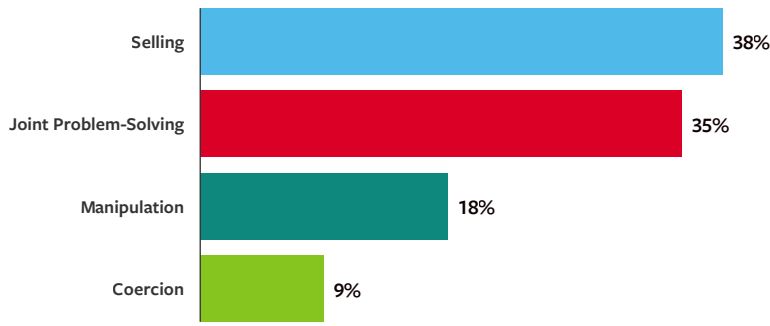
targets were defined and agreed to through a joint process with leaders in other functional groups — and those groups were measured on achieving the savings targets for their functions.

Initially, many people were concerned about the time and effort required at multiple levels of management to set targets and ensure that individuals took action to achieve those targets. As it turned out, the extra effort the new approach required was more than offset by the greatly reduced time and effort spent battling among competing goals (such as achieving more savings from suppliers versus getting new products to market quickly to increase market share and revenue). Within one year of implementing the new incentives, the company exceeded its savings targets — and markedly improved collaboration among procurement and the rest of the enterprise.

4. Rethink criteria for promotions to management and executive leadership. In developing and selecting leaders, companies should place greater emphasis on collaborative behaviors that drive organizational performance, such as a willingness to embrace dissenting views, self-skepticism, and openness to conflicting perspectives.

Our research found that when individual behaviors change at scale, with people working across boundaries within the organization and engaging in collaborative influence, improvements in decision-making, learning and innovation, and business results will follow. And, unlike most companies, where organizational complexity is a significant challenge, organizations where joint problem-solving is the predominant approach to influence are 3.4 times more likely to also report that complexity *does not* impede the quality and speed of decision-making.

5. Model behaviors of collaborative influence. Leaders need to walk the talk and provide living examples of how people can change their plans or position on an issue because they embraced disagreement and actively sought out different viewpoints — especially from people lower in the organizational hierarchy and from different business units, functions, and geographies.

At Equifax, Joy Wilder Lybeer, chief revenue officer, promotes productive disagreement and openness to others' influence. Speaking of the organization's 14,000 employees, she said, "They all have their different goals and incentives, and my job is to help ensure that everyone is aligned to deliver maximum value to our customers. Naturally, all those smart people often disagree about what is best for a given customer, or for our customers overall. I often have my own point of view, but there are always people closer to the situation than I am who have more knowledge and expertise. The last thing I want to do is try to convince anyone of anything. Instead, I need to help people listen to each other — to influence and be influenced by each other simultaneously."

THE REAL MEASURE OF SUCCESSFUL INFLUence should not be whether an individual can get others to agree or comply but whether they can work with others who have different priorities and ideas to make and implement decisions that are best for the organization. Organizations seeking to achieve excellence in a turbulent marketplace need a culture of influence that is both practical and normative — one that goes beyond tactics for getting others to comply and provides guidance for how to constructively engage colleagues and multiple stakeholders in effective joint problem-solving and decision-making.

We need to start thinking of influence not as a matter of seeking agreement *from* others but *with* others. We need to focus not only on being persuasive but also on being open to persuasion. When we seek a better solution than any individual could create alone, we unlock learning and innovation. ■

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