

Leadership: Intentional Influence

Plenty of today's crises are the natural consequence of company leaders' ineffective or misdirected influence on workforce behavior

By Joseph Grenny

SPECIAL REPORT

New Rules of Management

It's ironic that when you ask leaders—even good ones—what constitutes leadership, you often get vague, disparate, and vapid responses. You'd think that of all people, this population would offer crisp and concrete definitions of their own crucial work. Instead, you get references to energizing, visioning, pathfinding, modeling, and a dozen other tangents of real leadership—but almost no reference to the central task of leaders: influencing.

This is especially disconcerting in an era where Fortune 500 companies are crumbling under the weight of financial strain and once powerful and confident leaders are crawling to Washington begging for bailouts. The vast majority of today's crises are the natural consequence of ineffective or misdirected influence. Either leaders have been incapable of influencing their employees to create value for customers (e.g. the U.S. auto industry), or they've exerted influence that has driven employees to unconscionable behavior bringing the global economy to its knees (i.e. the financial sector). Today more than ever, we ought to see clearly that leadership isn't a combination of fuzzy concepts and proclivities. Leaders are responsible for intelligently and ethically influencing behavior in a way that creates value.

Fortunately, not all leaders are missing the mark. I recently met one of the few leaders who, in my experience, has a concrete expression of leadership on the tip of his tongue. Tim Tassopoulos, chief operating officer of Chik-fil-A, says it this way: Leadership is intentional influence.

I couldn't agree more. For 20 years my colleagues and I have worked with leaders to help them increase their capacity for influencing change. But it came as a surprise to us that prior to helping them learn how to influence, we had to draw their attention to it as their core work.

Tim, on the other hand, understands that it all comes down to whether one of his 50,000 front-line associates with a few discretionary minutes decides to lean against a wall or walk out to the dining area and clean tables. Tim's success or failure as a leader does not come down to whether he is charismatic, visionary, or inspirational. It comes down to whether, at the end of the day, people behave in ways that improve results. Period.

With that said, the second biggest problem leaders face is that few of them have any systematic way of even thinking about—much less practicing—influence. Oh, we

complain about it a lot. All leaders can point to dysfunctional, political, unproductive behaviors in their organizations. For example:

- **Fiefdoms.** Most leaders complain that people in their companies put the interests of their department over the interests of the company. In one Fortune 500 company, the training department encouraged a vendor to sue another division of the company to prevent that division from cutting separate deals with the vendor, which would have threatened the training department's monopoly.
- **Compliance.** In U.S. hospitals, 2 million patients will be infected this year by the very caregivers who are trying to heal them. An enormous percentage of these infections could be avoided if leaders could just find a way to influence people to wash their hands consistently. Compliance rates today hover somewhere between 30% and 50%!
- **Silence.** More than 90% of respondents in a recent study we conducted at VitalSmarts reported they are currently working on a cross-functional initiative that they are certain will fail. Our research showed that the primary cause of these failures is silence. People see lots of problems in their initiatives, but they work in organizations where it's not O.K. to speak up about them. Our study found that this pattern of problem behavior is a root cause of more than 85% of project failures.

Given that few leaders can even define leadership, it's no surprise that their performance is mediocre at best. We recently studied the successes and failures of more than 1000 leaders from 50 global companies to influence strategically critical behavior change in their companies.

We were stunned to discover that fewer than 1 in 20 had any evidence of success in spite of their belief that change was crucial. As we combed through the data, some key insights emerged that help us understand why so few leaders either grasp or exert influence well:

1. Leaders act as if it's not their job to address entrenched habits.

Most leaders put a great deal of time into crafting strategy, selecting winning products, and engaging with analysts, shareholders, and major customers. But few realize the success or failure of their grand schemes lies in influencing the behavior of the hundreds or thousands of people who will have to execute the big ideas—their employees.

By contrast, the most influential leaders—the 5% who succeed consistently at influencing profound and essential behavior change—spend as much as half of their time thinking about and actively influencing the behaviors they know will lead to top performance. The 95% who dither and fail tend to delegate what they dismiss as "change management" to others, most often leaders in human resources—who often lack the credibility to influence real change. The average leader spends little, if any,

of his or her time on active efforts to create behavior change. Consequently, nothing changes.

2. Leaders lack a theory of influence.

Very few leaders can even answer the question, "How do you change the behavior of a large group of people?" And yet, this is what they're ultimately paid to do. It isn't just about making a decision; it's about getting people aligned to execute the decision. And this means influence. Imagine discovering just as the anesthesia is taking effect that your heart surgeon—the one hovering over your chest with a scalpel—is working off a "gut hunch" about how to conduct a bypass. Unless leaders become articulate about a repeatable and effective way of influencing profound, rapid, and sustainable behavior change—they'll continue to rack up predictably high failure rates at leading change.

3. Leaders confuse talking with influencing.

Many leaders think influence consists of little more than talking people into doing things. It's no wonder most influence efforts start with PowerPoint presentations. But profound, persistent, and overwhelming problems demand more than verbal persuasion. Anyone who's ever tried to talk a smoker into quitting knows there's a lot more to behavior change than words.

Leaders make the same mistake when they publish platitudes in the form of Mission and Values statements, give a few speeches on why these values are crucial, and then assume their job is done.

4. Leaders believe in silver bullets.

When leaders actually attempt to influence new behavior, it's common for them to look for quick fixes—to fall into the trap of thinking that deeply ingrained bad habits can be changed with a single technique. The failure mode is to rely on any single approach.

Some host star-studded retreats. Others hand out inspiring posters and color-changing mugs and think people will line up for change. Still others believe it's all about incentives, and so they tinker with the performance-management system or tie new behaviors to executive bonuses. The research shows that when leaders rely on just one simple source of influence to drive change, they almost always fail.

In the future, I'll use this column to share what we've learned from leaders who don't suffer in ignorance about influence. Over the past 20 years, my colleagues and I have sought out and studied a different kind of leader. We've tried to find those who had remarkable abilities to influence change—rapidly, profoundly, and sustainably.

We've studied up close the methods used by one remarkable influencer who—with no formal authority—has changed behavior in thousands of U.S. hospitals. We've looked first hand at one influencer who has saved 5 million lives from AIDS—simply by influencing behavior change in a country of 60 million people. We worked with a corporate chief who within 12 months influenced deeply entrenched habits in employees with an average of 26 years tenure.

What we've learned is that when you know what you're doing, change can happen relatively quickly. And it all starts with gaining greater clarity about what leadership really means, then finding a way of thinking about the fundamental principles of influence.