

How to Influence

How can senior executives influence peers and employees in an organisation? **Dawn Murden** finds out



You don't have to be a CEO to implement change, but how do you do it without direct control? In order to convince colleagues on the best route forward, senior executives must master the art of influence.

"I don't think it's easy to influence but it's vitally important," says **Simon Farry**, Vice President for Sales and Marketing within Copper and Diamonds at Rio Tinto.

"Due to today's economic and business volatility, you're trying to implement change quicker than before; you have to be able to influence if you're going to do that, otherwise it can take an organisation longer to evolve."

According to **Simonetta Rigo**, Senior Vice President for Brand, Marketing and Consumer Engagement at global payment services company Western Union, control doesn't equal power.

"In my experience of working across global and highly matrixed organisations, control is an illusion and, more often than not, driving change is something that requires extensive cross-functional and cross-departmental collaboration," she says.

In other words, it's about making sure everyone is on board because they feel they're part of the idea.

This is a notion that **Ann Coughlan**, Director for Customer Propositions in Hong Kong at AIA Group, also buys into.

She explains: "A senior executive can gain influence by setting a clear and compelling vision and articulating the desired outcomes. People will follow,

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act and be part of the creation because they are positively influenced by what they see and hear."

There's no point in being overly directive when communicating with those who are not your direct reports, peers or the CEO. According to **Charlie Wagstaff**, Managing Director at Criticaleye, the emphasis should be on inspiring through emotion, not governing by control. Indeed, emotional intelligence (EQ) plays a big role in the ability to influence.

"You need to tailor your message to the individual and ensure it's relevant," he comments. "One idea or project could impact a number of individuals in different ways – work out how and what is important to them. You have to navigate their personality and, in many ways, appeal to their emotions."

Getting individuals excited and motivated about change can give a project the push it needs. It was an

important tactic for **Simon**. He wanted Rio Tinto to enter a high-end sector of electronic and aerospace applications, while at the same time making the company's aluminium smelter one of very few in the world capable of servicing that industry.

"I knew we had the technical capability, but we needed to make some changes to our production process, which ultimately meant higher costs," **Simon** explains. "In a heavily engineering-influenced organisation, to make a fundamental change to production... required significant influence, trust, plus commitment to building value and managing the associated risks."

On top of developing the commercial business case, **Simon** concentrated on getting people energised. "I took the Head of Operations to Japan and Europe to meet the customers and see first-hand their desire for the product," he says.

"The electronics and aerospace sectors were more exciting compared to the typical end uses for primary aluminium. At the time the Airbus A380 was under development and our high-end aluminium product was to be used in its construction."

Hard Facts

While emotions are crucial, it's also vital to demonstrate a clear case and use factual evidence to support it.

This was something **David Gooding**, Group IT Director at waste management company Biffa, found when he embarked on changing the company's commercial sales offer to SMEs. >



There was a great deal of flexibility at the local level, which enabled the sales team to navigate what each customer wanted. However, the offering became so complex that it stretched the middle office functions, created unnecessary cost and made it difficult to retain customers in the long term.

Both the Managing Director of the business unit and the team were apprehensive about change and concerned it would impact their ability to be competitive. "There was a lot of noise from the sales teams saying they wouldn't be able to sell anymore," says **David**.

He used a data-driven approach and ran workshops to convince them it was best for the business, their teams and customers.

With buy-in from the MD and CEO, the company moved forward and the change has since been a success. "We put together a metrics dashboard to report back exactly what progress we were making," **David** continues. "Stats indicated it had no detrimental impact on selling. The graphs showed that during that period performance improved.

"The CEO got excited about that; he showed it to the Chairman and shareholders, and said: 'We invested money but we got this value.'"

Strength in Numbers

Simply telling someone about a project or a proposed change may not be enough to get them on side.

David Horlock, Managing Director for Asia Pacific at BSI, predominantly deals

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with operations across a region of 12 countries. On top of this, he works with the head office in London at which there are stakeholders who are not direct reports.

David has found that when communicating a required change – such as a system created in the UK that is not fit-for-purpose in a country like Vietnam – it’s more effective to empower his direct reports to communicate the issues at hand.

On a regular basis he invites managers from the UK out to his countries. "Particularly in multi-matrix organisations, people tend to have a fear of head office or going against the way things have been done for years. So, I try to create an environment where everybody has a say," **David** explains.

"If I can get my country managers or subject matter experts in those countries to speak up then it's not just coming

from me, it's coming from the business. It's not preaching or injecting people with my ideas, they are seeing it for themselves."

As custodians of the business, senior executives have an obligation to improve it. Of course, there will be barriers, such as emotional resistance, politics, defunct technology or a lack of funding or data, but senior executives must use their influence to get through this.

Simonetta from Western Union adds: "Influencing is as critical as being able to make decisions, deliver results and manage people. You cannot be a successful senior executive without it." ■

Featuring Commentary From:



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