

INFLUENCE

Every year *TIME* Magazine dedicates an entire issue to the most influential people in the world. It tells us the stories of individuals whose ideas have sparked something remarkable. These honored individuals are not cut from the same cloth. They range from actors and powerful leaders of countries, to entrepreneurs and researchers. We are intrigued by them and want to know what makes them influential. Why? More than ever before, influence is a powerful discussion topic in developing leaders and strengthening organizations. Mastering the art of communication to effectively influence people is essential to achieving success.


No longer is influence or persuasion considered the old cliché of “selling” someone the lowest quality product for the highest price. Influence has become a defining leadership characteristic, requiring skills such as exchange, reciprocity, trust, relationships, commitment, consistency and likeability. Being able to communicate using compelling influence and authentic persuasion are key leadership requirements.

Every day we see billboards, bumper stickers, YouTube videos, TV commercials and we hear advertisements on the radio; all designed to motivate us to buy or think differently about something. We use a softer version of these skills with our boss, team, co-workers, vendors, family, friends or others to move our ideas forward. Influence is a key leadership skill that can lead to successful relationships and win-win collaboration.

Influence is having a vision of the optimum outcome for a situation or organization and then, without using force or threats, motivating people to work together toward making the vision a reality. It grows out of well-nurtured relationships. It is the end result of actions, behaviors and intentions geared toward building trust, establishing credibility and adding value. The following are six things to consider in effectively influencing others:

1. **Assume everyone you interact with is a potential ally.** Don't assume the worst in others. Be positive and give people grace.
2. **Clarify your goals and objectives.** Consider, why do I need to communicate with this individual? What is at stake?
3. **Seek to look through the lenses of the other person.** Use all of your senses. Be intuitive. Consider what is going on in the world of the other person. What makes them tick? Why do they do what they do?
4. **Figure out what you have to offer each other.** How can the relationship be mutually beneficial?

5. **Cultivate the relationship.** Take time to work on the association, which always requires some form of communication.
6. **Influence through “give and take” or reciprocity.** This does not always happen at the same time for everyone involved. For instance, I can help you now. Down the road, you might be able to help me in some way.

Although *TIME*'s “Top 100 Most Influential People” are very different in what they've accomplished, they have all had to clearly communicate ideas, seek buy-in and build relationships to have others commit to their vision. Clearly, influence plays a significant role in the daily lives of leaders. 

Exploring Six Powerful Influence Triggers

There are six triggers that can lead people to say “yes.”

- **Reciprocity** — There is an overwhelming urge to repay debts, to do something in return when something is done for us. This deep-seated urge is so strong, it is the very essence of what it means to be human.
- **Commitment and Consistency** — We are driven to remain consistent in our attitudes, words and actions. Therefore, when we are led to make a commitment of some kind, there is an urge to remain consistent with that original commitment.
- **Social Proof** — Most of us are imitators in what we do. We ask, “What do others think about this? What do others feel? What do others do?” Then we act accordingly.
- **Liking** — We are always more likely to say “yes” to those we know and like. We readily comply with requests from those who are similar to us and for whom we have good feelings.
- **Authority** — In this age of specialization, we are more prone to respond to authority than ever before. We look to experts to give us the answers and show us the way. Even symbols of authority, like titles and clothing, are enough to trigger a response.
- **Scarcity** — In general, the fear of loss is more powerful than the hope of gain. By properly managing the instinctive tendency to avoid losing something, you can trigger a favorable response.

Note: I am indebted to Robert B. Cialdini, Ph.D. for his personal advice and his book, [Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion](#).

On the Leader's Bookshelf

Outliers, by Malcolm Gladwell

Mike Malone, President and CEO Northwest Arkansas Council

Lately I've been citing lessons from Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers* in many of my talks and conversations. Gladwell's book is a quick, enjoyable read that uses a number of real-life anecdotes and examples to make the point that innate talent and desire shouldn't be viewed as the only determining factors for success.

Instead, Gladwell argues that extraordinary success comes from the confluence of a number of external factors that shape each individual's life story – for better or worse. For example, he cites the thousands of hours of “practice” that Bill Gates had as a computer programmer with free access to a mainframe before he started Microsoft. He tells the story of Steve Jobs growing up “in the shadow of Silicon Valley,” buying spare computer parts at flea markets and garage sales as a teenager. He illustrates the advantage that a birth date or birth sequence can have on academic or athletic performance. And, the socio-economic status of families in which talented individuals are raised often plays a key factor in how successful they become later in life.

To boil it down, he's really highlighting the significance of the “nurture” part of the “nature vs. nurture” debate. As an adoptive parent, I've seen firsthand how the culture in which our girls have been raised, exposure to new ideas and opportunities, and a great educational system are shaping their growth and development in ways that genetics cannot.



Both professionally and in interpersonal relations, I try to put these lessons from *Outliers* to work as well. I work with a lot of interesting personalities and individuals each day and many times, I'm asking them to invest more money or time on a project, to take on new tasks or approach a regional challenge differently. An understanding of the confluence of factors at work in that individual's life and within their organization is essential to understanding how they'll respond to whatever we're asking them to consider.

The old proverb says “success has many fathers.” Gladwell reminds us that success also has many mothers...and teachers...and hours of practice...and training opportunities...and good timing...and...I'm out of space.

Mike Malone is President and CEO of the Northwest Arkansas Council, a nonprofit organization of 100 business and civic leaders working to identify solutions to challenges facing the fast-growing, dynamic region. Recognized for over 21 years for its work to improve regional infrastructure, Mr. Malone leads an organization that's turned some of its attention toward creating jobs and improving economic opportunity in Northwest Arkansas. A summary of the Council's four-part strategic growth plan is available at www.greaternorthwestarkansas.com.

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