INFLUENCE TACTICS

Leadership involves influencing other people to facilitate the performance of collective work. To be effective, a leader must influence others to carry out requests, support proposals, and implement decisions. In large organizations, a leader must be able to influence superiors and peers as well as subordinates.

The success of an attempt by one person (the “agent”) to influence another person (“the target”) will depend to a great extent on the agent’s influence behavior. The most common form of influence behavior in organizations is a “simple request” based on legitimate power. Target compliance is likely for a simple request that is clearly legitimate, relevant for the work, and something the target person knows how to do. However, if the requested action would be unpleasant, inconvenient, irrelevant, or difficult to do, then a “proactive influence tactic” may be necessary to gain target compliance or commitment.

Since the early 1980s, researchers have attempted to identify specific influence tactics and assess their effectiveness. This article will describe 11 proactive tactics that are commonly used by leaders and the conditions in which they are most likely to be successful. The findings are supported by studies involving the use of several different research methods.

RATIONAL PERSUASION

Rational persuasion uses explanations, logical arguments, and factual evidence to show that a request or proposal is feasible and relevant for attaining task objectives. A weak form of rational persuasion may include only a brief explanation of the reason for a request, or an undocumented assertion that a request is desirable and feasible. Stronger forms of rational persuasion include a detailed explanation of the reasons why a request is important and presentation of evidence that it is feasible.

Rational persuasion is more likely to be effective when the target person shares the same task objectives as the agent but does not recognize the proposal is the best way to attain the objectives. Along with facts and logic, a rational appeal usually includes some opinions or inferences that the target person is asked to accept at face value because there is insufficient evidence to verify them. Thus, the success of the influence attempt also depends in part on whether the agent is perceived to be a credible and trustworthy source of information, inferences, and predictions.

APPRISING

With this tactic the agent explains why a request or proposal is likely to benefit the target person as an individual or help to advance the person’s career. For example, a requested task may provide opportunities to learn new skills, meet important people, or gain more visibility as a competent professional. Like rational persuasion, apprising often involves the use of facts and logic, but the benefits described are for the target person rather than for an organization in which they are both members. Apprising is more likely to be successful if the agent understands the
target’s needs and how a request or proposal may be relevant for satisfying them. To use this tactic successfully, an agent must be perceived as credible.

INSPIRATIONAL APPEALS

An inspirational appeal is an attempt to develop enthusiasm and commitment by arousing strong emotions and linking a request or proposal to a person’s needs, values, hopes, and ideals. Some bases for an ideological appeal include the desire to accomplish something worthwhile, to perform an exceptional feat, to be a member of the best team, to support values such as freedom and justice, or to participate in an exciting effort to make things better. An inspirational appeal is more likely to be successful if the agent understands the values, hopes, and fears of the persons to be influenced. Effectiveness also depends on communication skills, such as the agent’s ability to use vivid imagery and metaphors, manipulate symbols, and employ voice and gestures to generate enthusiasm and excitement.

CONSULTATION

Consultation occurs when the target person is invited to participate in planning how to carry out a request or implement a proposed change. Consultation can take a variety of forms when used as an influence tactic. One example is to present a proposed policy or plan to discover if the target person has any doubts or concerns about implementing it, or suggestions for improving it. Another example is to present a general strategy or objective (instead of a detailed plan), then ask the target person to suggest specific action steps for implementing it. Consultation is more likely to be effective if a target person perceives that the objectives of the requested task or proposal are worthwhile, and the invitation to provide inputs is sincere.

EXCHANGE TACTICS

This type of influence tactic involves the explicit or implicit offer to provide something the target person wants in return for carrying out a request. This tactic is especially useful when the target person is reluctant to comply with a request because it would involve considerable effort and inconvenience. Exchange tactics are a way to increase the benefits enough to make it worthwhile to comply with the request. An essential condition for effective use of exchange tactics is control over something the target person desires (e.g., a pay increase or promotion, assistance on another task, political support). Sometimes the promise may be implicit rather than explicit. That is, the agent will offer to return the favor in some unspecified way at a future time. An exchange tactic will not be effective unless the target person believes the agent is willing and able to deliver the promised benefits.

COLLABORATION

This influence tactic involves an offer to provide necessary resources and/or assistance if the target person will carry out a request or approve a proposal. Unlike exchange, which usually involves an impersonal trade of unrelated benefits, collaboration involves a joint effort to accomplish the same objective. Collaboration provides a way to reduce the difficulty or costs of carrying out a request. This tactic is especially appropriate when compliance would be difficult for the target person.

PERSONAL APPEALS

A personal appeal involves asking someone to do a favor out of friendship or loyalty to the agent. It follows that this influence tactic is not feasible when the target person dislikes the agent or is indifferent about what happens to the agent. Personal appeals are most likely to be used when asking for something that is not part of the target person’s regular job responsibilities (e.g., provide assistance, do a personal favor).

INGRATIATION

Ingatratiion is behavior that makes the target person feel better about the agent. Examples include giving compliments, doing unsolicited favors, acting defer-
ential and respectful, and acting especially friendly. When making a proactive influence attempt, a very useful form of ingratiation is to state why the target person is especially qualified to carry out a request (e.g., based on exceptional skills or prior achievements). When ingratiation is perceived to be sincere, it tends to strengthen positive regard and make a target person more willing to consider the agent’s request. However, ingratiation may be viewed as manipulative when it is used just before asking for something. Therefore, ingratiation is usually less useful for an immediate influence attempt than as part of a longer-term strategy to improve relationships with people.

LEGITIMATING TACTICS
Legitimating tactics involve attempts to establish the agent’s legitimate authority or right to make a particular type of request. Compliance is more likely when a request is viewed as legitimate and proper. Legitimacy is unlikely to be questioned for a routine request that has been made and complied with many times before. However, legitimacy may not be evident for a request that is unusual, or when the target person does not know what authority the agent has. There are several different types of legitimating tactics. Examples include providing evidence of prior precedent, showing consistency with organizational policies and rules, showing consistency with professional role expectations, and showing that the request was approved by someone with proper authority.

PRESSURE
Pressure tactics include threats, warnings, and assertive behavior such as repeated demands or frequent checking to see if the person has complied with a request. Pressure tactics are sometimes successful in inducing compliance with a request, particularly if the target person is just lazy or apathetic rather than strongly opposed to it. However, pressure is unlikely to result in commitment, and the use of this tactic may have serious side effects. The harder forms of pressure (e.g., threats, warnings, or demands) are likely to cause resentment and undermine working relationships. Sometimes pressure tactics are necessary to obtain compliance with a rule or policy that is important to the organization, such as safety rules and ethical practices. However, in most cases, a softer form of pressure (e.g., persistent requests, reminders that the person promised to do something) is more likely to gain compliance without undermining the agent-target relationship.

COALITION TACTICS
Coalition tactics involve getting help from other people to influence the target person. The coalition partners may be peers, subordinates, superiors, or outsiders. When assistance is provided by the superior of the target person, the tactic is usually called an

Influence Tactics in a Korean Village

Korea is a society marked by considerable concern over status, face, and group cohesion. The following example of a woman “leader” in a Korean village makes clear that she must behave in a way that accords with all these concerns in order to maintain her influence.

May one say that the chairwoman of the club was merely a figurehead because she, as head of the meeting, did not seem to have any distinctive influence? If one retains the idea of a “western political model” based on a democratic structure, she is a figurehead for the group. To carry the idea through, however, the procedure of discussion and decision-making is not based on an idea of democracy but rather on that of unanimity. In this context, the “leader” does not have to be a person of marked influence in the decision-making process. She is not a figurehead but rather a middleman in the meeting, functioning, in effect, as a go-between for the group. There is no despotic idea in the context of a total consensus in this essentially egalitarian society. The chairwoman stands as a middleman between the government and the village. Although the government may call her a “leader” in the village, she properly does not occupy this role.

“upward appeal.” A distinct type of coalition tactic for gaining target support for a proposal is to cite the prior endorsement of it by people whom the person likes or respects. Coalition tactics are usually used in combination with one or more of the other influence tactics. For example, the agent may bring along a supporter when meeting with the target person, and both agents may use rational persuasion to influence the target person.

EVALUATING PROACTIVE TACTICS

Each influence tactic can be useful in an appropriate situation, but some of the tactics are generally more effective than others. The most effective tactics include rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, consultation, collaboration, and apprising. Sometimes, a combination of tactics is necessary to influence the target person. Regardless of what tactics are used, however, there is no guarantee they will be successful. In addition to the type of tactics used by the agent, the outcome of any particular influence attempt is affected by other examples such as the power and authority of the agent, the type of influence objective, the perceived importance of the request, cultural norms about the use of the tactics, and the amount of mutual trust and friendship between the agent and target. An influence tactic can result in resistance if it is not used in a skillful manner, or if it is used for a request that is improper or unethical. Effective leaders understand what tactics are appropriate in a particular situation and how to use them.

—Gary Yukl

See also Coalitions; Coercion; Gender and Authority; Obedience; Power: Overview

Further Reading


INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP

Innovation introduces something new or makes changes in something already established. In the world of work, leadership in innovation is needed especially in reacting to competitive markets, in designing new products for existing markets, in reacting to changes in work processes as technology improves, and in encouraging employees to increase their levels of expertise and organizational commitment. The challenge for leaders is to maintain the cutting edge in their areas of responsibility so as to keep their organizations in the forefront, either through new or renewed processes.

OVERVIEW OF THE INNOVATIVE PROCESS

Margaret Wheatley supplied an overview of innovation for leaders: “Innovation is fostered by information gathered from new connections . . . from active, collegial networks . . . from ongoing circles of exchange, where information is not just accumulated or stored, but created. Knowledge is generated anew from connections that weren’t there before” (1992, 113). This overview details a need for information, collegial networks, circles of exchange, and knowledge generation. Another important innovative process is called competence building, in which employees are encouraged to “take charge” of their organizational lives by taking on more responsibility,