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## Influence Strategies in Organizations

People in organizations engage in interaction and influence. We often limit our thinking about organizational influence to “leadership”—the influence of a manager over a subordinate—or perhaps to that and “politics,” which could include all other forms of influence. However, throughout organizations, at all levels, across levels, up and down, people are trying to influence one another.

## Seven Basic Strategies

The Kipnis-Schmidt Profiles of Organizational Influence Strategies (POIS) were developed through research to find out what means of influence people use in organizations and which ones work best in certain situations. These studies, which are reported in Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson, identify seven basic influence strategies:

**Reason:** Influencing people by relying on data and information to support one’s requests. The influencer plans, prepares, and uses expertise rather than “shooting from the hip.” Facts and logical arguments are used to convince the “target” person. Reason is the most popular strategy used in organizations. The base of power here is the influencer’s own knowledge and ability to communicate this information. Reason is used even more to influence bosses than to influence co-workers or subordinates. Whenever possible, however, reason is the first choice of influence strategy.

**Friendliness:** Influencing someone by causing that person to think well of the influencer. A number of tactics can be used to accomplish this, such as “acting friendly” and “sensing” the other person’s mood before making a request. This strategy seeks to create a favorable impression of the influencer so that the target person will be more inclined to do what the influencer wants. A person’s use of this influence strategy is based on the person’s own personality, interpersonal skills, and sensitivity to the moods and attitudes of others. Friendliness is used more with subordinates and co-workers than it is with supervisors, but, overall, is used almost as widely as reason.

**Coalition:** Mobilizing other people in the organization to assist the influencer. The influencer operates on the premise that there is “power in numbers.” The influencer’s power in using this strategy is based on his or her alliances with co-workers and others in the organization. Coalition is a complex strategy that requires substantial skill and effort. It is, however, a widely used one, although it is used less with subordinates than with co-workers or supervisors.

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**Bargaining:** Influencing others through negotiation and the exchange of benefits or favors. The tactics used are based on the social norms of obligation and reciprocity. The influencer reminds the target person of past favors that he or she has done and/or offers to make additional concessions in order to get what he or she wants. In short, the influencer relies on a trade. What the influencer has to trade is derived from two sources: the influencer's own time, effort, and skill or the organizational resources that the influencer controls. Bargaining is common, but is used less with supervisors than with co-workers or subordinates.

**Assertiveness:** Influencing people by one's forceful manner. It involves the use of demands, the setting of deadlines, and the expression of strong emotions. Assertiveness gives the impression that the influencer is "in charge" and expects compliance with his or her wishes. At times, visible emotion and displays of temper accompany this strategy. Assertiveness is most often used with subordinates; it is used less with co-workers or supervisors.

**Appeal to Higher Authority:** Relying on the chain of command to create influence. The influencer uses people higher up in the organization who have power over the target person. Other people and outside power are used to influence the target person indirectly. There are two ways in which this strategy is used: by formally appealing to the chain of command or by informally asking higher management to deal with the influencer's request or to speak to the target person on the influencer's behalf. This strategy is not widely used and is used less with supervisors than with co-workers or subordinates. Perhaps the risk of "going over the boss's head" causes people to avoid using this strategy with their managers.

**Sanctions:** Using rewards or punishments to influence others. The use of sanction may involve either a desirable gain or an undesirable consequence. The use of sanctions is a classic approach to influencing people and may seem to be the most obvious influence strategy. However, its use clearly depends on the influencer's access to rewards or punishments and on his or her ability to actually deliver them. Even so, this is one of the least used strategies, and it is used only with subordinates.

By understanding his or her own pattern of use of the seven strategies, a person can identify and correct problems in attempts to influence others. Examples of such problems would be using a particular tactic with inappropriate targets or overusing one or two strategies rather than selecting appropriately from the available range.

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## The POIS Profiles

Each of the POIS instruments generates two profiles for the seven strategies. The first one shows the respondents' typical use of each of the seven strategies. The second profile shows what they do when their first attempt to influence someone is resisted. For both, the highest scores indicate those strategies that they are most likely to use. The profiles also tell respondents how they use the strategies compared to others who previously completed the POIS.

The instructions for the POIS permit respondents to chart or graph their scores in terms of high, average, and low ranges. Most people want to know what their profiles mean: are they "good" or "bad"? However, the POIS is not designed to yield value judgments about respondents' personalities. Instead, the POIS profiles allow respondents to compare their scores to norms for four major types of influencer behaviors:

- Bystander. Individuals with Bystander profiles have low scores on most influence strategies. Such individuals apparently do not exercise influence in their organizations.
- Captive. Individuals with Captive profiles have high scores on only one or two influence strategies. They tend to be limited in their choice of influence. That is, regardless of what they want, they use the same one or two influence strategies.
- Tactician. Individuals with Tactician profiles have average to high scores on three or four influence strategies. They are versatile in their approaches to the use of influence.
- Shotgun. Individuals with Shotgun profiles have high scores on most influence strategies. These individuals use a wide range of strategies in order to persuade others. However, they may not be as successful as they wish, because they are striking out blindly, regardless of the appropriateness of their strategies.

Obviously, the Tactician profile seems to have the best chances for success, because there is a need to vary one's influence strategies, to choose a strategy on the basis of which one is most likely to yield positive results. The basis for analyzing situations and making appropriate choices can be found in strategic influence theory.

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## Strategic Influence Theory

The goal of Kipnis and Schmidt's theory is to help people to understand how they use influence in their organizations. In particular, this theory provides information about the reasons for one's past choices of influence strategies and presents guidelines to help people to broaden the range of strategies that they use to influence other people in their organizations.

Strategic influence theory is based on an analysis of the personal and situational "TRAPS" that often lock people into using ineffective influence strategies. Once these traps are recognized, people can learn to expand their repertoires of influence strategies. Obviously, being able to use a wide range of influence strategies can enhance a person's ability to get things done.

The theory describes four traps that research has found to be related to the use of the seven influence strategies. The four traps are:

- Target of influence (target person),
- Resources available to or possessed by the influencer,
- Adverse reactions of the target person, and
- Purpose of the use of influence.

## Target

People frequently vary their influence strategies depending on whether they seek to influence their bosses, co-workers, or subordinates. Many people apparently believe that they always should use a particular strategy with a particular target of influence. For example, a common stereotype is that people should use friendliness with their supervisors and assertiveness with their subordinates. The trap is that this stereotype limits the influencer in terms of flexibility in "tailoring" the influence strategy to fit different people in different circumstances. All influence strategies have the potential to be used effectively in the appropriate circumstances. When some strategies are never used, the influencer not only is situationally inflexible but also may be limited to using only two or three of the seven strategies.

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## Resources

It is well recognized that people's resources guide their choice of influence strategy. For example, people who believe that they possess no resources that are valued by others may hesitate to attempt to influence others. Resources can be based on organizational position or on personal characteristics. Examples of organizational resources include control of budgetary matters, control of information, and the extent to which the work is considered important by the organization. Examples of personal resources include expertise, self-confidence, and personal manner.

Many people fall into the trap of not recognizing the full range of resources that they control. As a result, they hesitate to exercise influence or they select ineffective strategies. For example, people who do not recognize the importance of their personal resources, such as their expert knowledge, may feel that they have no "clout." As a result, these people may remain passive and feel helpless when called on to direct others. Because they do not take their personal resources into account, they may not think that they can use strategies such as reason, bargaining, and coalition.

## Adverse Reactions

Adverse reactions refer to situations in which the target people resist doing what potential influencers request. There are several subtraps that people fall into when such resistance is encountered. Some simply give up when faced with refusals. Others rigidly persist in using an initially ineffective influence strategy. Still others escalate prematurely and use sanctions or strong assertive demands to overcome the resistance of target people. These strategies often are inappropriate in the early stages of resistance and, hence, are ineffective. For example, if a person is using the initial strategy of friendliness in trying to persuade a supervisor, when faced with refusal, this person should consider other strategies. For instance, a more appropriate strategy may be the use of coalition or reason.

Effective influencers are flexible. They recognize that strategic choices can be made to overcome the resistance of target people. These strategic choices generally have been found to begin with the use of reason and simple requests. Only after resistance is encountered do effective influencers select other strategies. These new strategies then apply just enough pressure to overcome the resistance of target people.

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## Purpose

The purpose for exercising influence usually is to influence others organizationally or to promote one's own self-interests. Examples of organizationally motivated reasons are a desire to "sell" others on the worth of a new organizational program or an attempt to ensure that others do their work properly. In these instances, the person has the interests of the organization in mind when attempting to influence others. Personally motivated reasons for exercising influence include seeking to obtain an increase in salary, better work assignments, time off, or a promotion. The trap here is that the person may use the same strategy for each, regardless of what is wanted from the target person, rather than choosing the strategy that is most appropriate for obtaining what is wanted. For example, if a person's goal is to influence a manager to promote a new and better system of work, reason may be the most effective strategy. Effective influencers, then, take into account who they are trying to influence (the target), their resources (both personal and organizational), how to react to resistance, and their own reasons for exercising influence.

## Selecting Specific Strategies

Situational influence theory provides a framework for examining situations and helps a person to identify the key aspects of a specific situation. In itself, it does not prescribe which influence strategy to use in a specific situation or even in a certain type of situation. However, from the original research that was done to develop the POIS, some guidelines have been derived regarding which strategies seem to succeed in certain types of situations with certain types of targets.

**Reason.** Reason is used most frequently in selling ideas. If their jobs require expertise, influencers most likely will find this strategy to be advantageous and effective. Its use is associated with acceptance of objectives. One possible problem in using this strategy could be a failure to develop ideas adequately and to organize information logically. The use of reason requires preparation time, thought, and communication skills.

**Friendliness.** Influencers are most likely to use the strategy of friendliness when they want personal favors, when they want assistance with their work, and when their power base is weak but they must convince the target people of their courses of action. Overuse of this strategy could lead the other people to suspect their motives and their work competence.

**Coalition.** Coalitions frequently are used for both personal and organizational reasons. The strategy of coalition can be used to obtain personal benefits and assistance on the job. The strategy also is useful in selling ideas to others. This can be a powerful strategy but it is not without danger. Overuse of coalition could create the impression that an influencer is conspiring against the target person.

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**Bargaining.** Bargaining involves making concessions in exchange for getting what is wanted. This strategy is used most frequently when the influencer seeks personal benefits. A drawback of this strategy is that it creates obligations that the influencer must fulfill in the future. What is traded might not be worth what is received in exchange.

**Assertiveness.** Assertiveness is a two-edged sword. It is used when influencers know that they are right and wish to improve organizational effectiveness. When used effectively, assertiveness may overcome the resistance of target people. However, when used ineffectively, it can create ill will. This strategy often is used as a backup strategy when target people are resistant. Assertiveness can be used in combination with other influence strategies such as reason. It frequently is used when duty requires that the influencer convince someone of a course of action.

**Higher Authority.** Higher authority is a backup strategy to be used when influencers know from experience that the target persons will not agree to their requests. This strategy is used for many different reasons. The problem that results from frequent reliance on this strategy is that it could undermine relationships with target people.

**Sanctions.** Sanctions are used almost exclusively with subordinates, who expect that their boss has the authority and the right to provide rewards and punishments. Sanctions must be used with great care, because a failure to follow through will lead to a loss of credibility and, hence, a loss of ability to influence.

When influencers clearly can define the targets, their own resources, the possible adverse reactions of the targets, and their purposes in making the attempts, they can review the range of strategies defined above and decide which are most likely to be effective in a particular situation. This is quite a contrast to being “trapped” in one of the limited profiles—the Bystander or the Captive.