

Thinking About Influence

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How an individual thinks about influence largely determines how that individual acts when seeking to influence another person. From many years experience we learned that merely attempting to train effective influence behaviour has little lasting impact—unless participants are also challenged in terms of how they perceive, think about, or frame ‘influence’, and the influence situations which give them difficulty. This article sets out to examine how individuals tend to frame influence, and how, using an approach developed by Argyris (1992), this thought process can be challenged.

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Current notions about *influence* are reflected in some of the definitions appearing in popular dictionaries. For example, the Random House defines influence as meaning ‘the capacity or power of persons or things to produce effects on others by intangible or indirect means’, and ‘to move or impel (a person) to some action’. The Compact Oxford dictionary defines influence as ‘the power or ability to affect someone’s beliefs or actions’, or ‘the power arising out of status, contacts or wealth’. Webster lists five definitions, among which we even read: ‘corrupt interference with authority for personal gain’.

The first popular modern book on the subject was Dale Carnegies’ best-seller *How to Win Friends & Influence People*. But a recent

Amazon.com reviewer, Andrew Parodi, warns: “...these techniques work very well in the context of sales and public relations, i.e., in relationships that are not expected to be deep and/or long-lasting. [They] may make a person come across as a bit ‘plastic’.” Cialdini (2001) has written a well-researched book to examine ‘the science and practice of influence’. Tellingly, his research is based on what he calls ‘the psychology of compliance’, and is based on his studies of ‘compliance professionals—salespeople, fundraisers, advertisers, and others’. According to Cialdini, influence is about gaining *compliance*.

Not surprisingly, many individuals whom we encounter in our programmes and workshops behave as if they perceive or think about

'influence' as a typical salesperson. We see them behaving (sometimes in a 'plastic' manner!) as if influencing others is a matter of 'getting someone to do what I want', 'persisting until the other party agrees', 'persuading others to acknowledge that I am right and they are wrong'.

What we witness during our programmes

How individuals think about influence becomes evident when watching their behaviour during the initial stages of a personal skills development programme.

For example, a group, working under the watchful eye of a video-camera, is given a task to complete. The task is, in itself, not very difficult, but time pressure is applied and experienced. What we see individuals doing during such an initial activity can be characterised as: pushing their own points of view; persuading, arguing, reasoning or even cajoling others; selective listening; asking few questions. At the same time, they are almost excessively polite, and avoid direct confrontation. The less assertive individuals are passive, go along with the perceived leaders, and are very cautious in their use of language.

We begin the subsequent review by asking participants about their experience of the exercise. In the first instance the reactions are generally positive. When the facilitator probes more deeply into the feelings of the less active participants a different picture begins to emerge, and there is usually a complete turn-about when the videotape is reviewed. At that point, participants begin to ask themselves, in some amazement, 'How is it possible that we talk past each other so consistently?', 'How is it possible that someone voiced the correct approach to the problem right at the start only to be totally ignored?' And indeed, it becomes evident to them that questions were rarely asked

and not everyone participated actively. In fact, they agree, there was very little *influencing* of any sort going on!

Participants agree that nobody had the *intention* to overrule anybody else, to play the boss or to drop out. Everyone's intentions were honestly focused on the completion of the task in the best possible way. They wonder how it is possible for there to be such a difference between what a person wants to do, and often genuinely believes himself to be doing, and what others observe and experience him doing. Argyris (1992) explains this as the difference between 'espoused theory' (that which we truly believe is the right thing to do or be, such as cooperative, polite, and helpful) and 'theory-in-use', that which others might infer from our actions.

Reflections

In situations which are experienced as 'difficult', individuals develop a one-sided and biased perception of the situation and of the other person(s). 'Difficult' situations are those in which 'it isn't working', which are complex, in which conflicting interests play a significant role, deeply held different points of view are present, and so on.

An activity early in a programme (as described above) confronts individuals with new and unfamiliar surroundings and people. They experience themselves as challenged to demonstrate effective influencing behaviour. This is also a difficult situation for them, and therefore triggers one-sided thought processes. Characteristic of these are that one sees oneself as reasonable, as well-informed self-evidently right. The other party or parties are seen as unreasonable, less well-informed and sometimes as also having less-than-honourable secondary objectives (hidden agendas, resistance, stubbornness, etc.)

Participants develop and retain 'blind spots': they are aware of their own (laudable) intentions, of the behaviour of the other person and the impact that has on themselves. What they fail to see or be aware of is the intention of the other person (who feels that he is just as 'right') and the impact which their own behaviour has on the other person. Such blind spots are not unique to the participants on our programmes, they are very common if not indeed universal, as Argyris has described. The following matrix (Figure 1) was drawn up by Action Design (2005), a group of consultants who work closely with Argyris and his intellectual legacy, and defines what is meant by 'blind spot'.

What I can see	What I cannot see ('blind spot')
What I am trying to achieve	How I do what I do
What I am up against	The impact I have on you
How you do what you do	What you are trying to achieve
The impact you have on me	What you are up against

Figure 1

To a one-sided mind-set, a unilateral frame, belongs the notion that, once one is committed to a particular outcome, it would be a sign of weakness even to offer that outcome as a sub-

ject for discussion. The objective becomes 'winning'. This leads to strongly-held ideas about what needs to be done during a meeting: convince, appeal to generalities which are impossible to oppose, restrict the agenda to what is seen as really important. This needs to be done, however, in a circumspect manner, because being explicit is inherently risky. Open confrontation is avoided; specific objections from the other party are skirted, as they might result in losing ground. If opposition does occur it tends to reinforce rather than lead to a re-evaluation of the frame. "See, I thought so; it's impossible to talk sensibly with him!" (see Figure 2).

An alternative way of looking at influence

Books like those of Carnegie and Cialdini are not bad or wrong, but they do 'teach' individuals to 'frame' influence in a very one-sided manner. Influence, we hear, is about the use of power, whether derived from position, connections, or money. Influence can be bought or sold. Influence is about manipulation, about 'winning'.

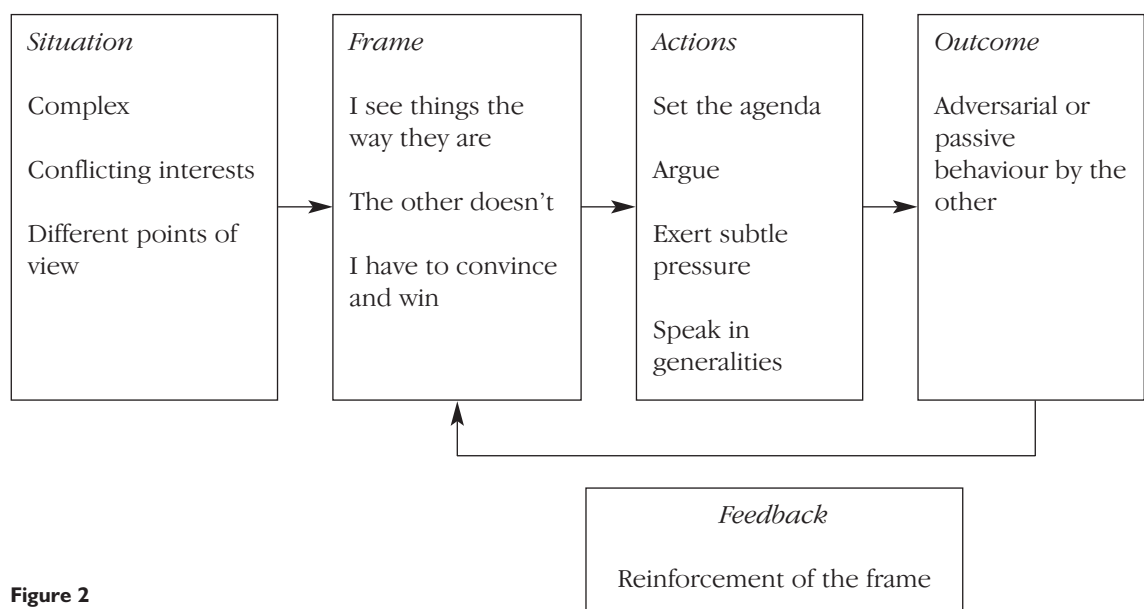


Figure 2

In our workshops and in this article we wish to emphasise that there is an alternative way to look at influence. Influencing is a two-way process in which the willingness to be open to the influence of the other person is equally as important as the influence which one wishes to exercise oneself. It is not a matter of winning or losing. The outcome is then a well-considered choice in which emotional as well as rational considerations have been thoroughly examined and weighed. This requires a preparedness by both parties to submit their views to critical examination. Influence is more than just a skill which can be trained and mastered to a greater or lesser degree. Effectiveness in influence also requires an attitudinal change. In our workshops we seek to help participants to examine their own convictions and how these impact on their behaviour. Skill practice is a part of this process but not the core of the programme. We make thankful use of the intellectual legacy of Chris Argyris, which helps individuals to look at themselves in a critical and methodical manner, in combination with the useful influence behaviour model developed by Learning Consortium.

Left-hand column analysis

Merely attempting to train new skills has little effect—unless participants are also challenged in terms of how they perceive, think about, or frame the influence process. We therefore see it as a fundamental part of our programmes to stimulate this process of reflection. We do this in a number of steps:

- By way of preparation we ask participants to write out a typical dialogue, in two columns. In the right-hand column participants write down the actual words which he or she and the other person used. In the left-hand column we ask participants to write down both their unexpressed thoughts and their un-

pressed feelings, as they recall these occurring during the dialogue. This form of representation originated with Chris Argyris, and offers the opportunity to analyse the impact of one's frame.

- During the programme we analyse these situations by looking at what an individual in fact did or said, and which convictions underlie the actions. Frequently, these convictions appear to be unproductive in the sense that they contribute to defensive patterns of behaviour and hence to an unsatisfactory outcome.
- Subsequently, we search for alternatives for the operative beliefs and convictions, a process we call re-framing. We search for an alternative which is more bilateral, and which allows for true learning.
- Finally, we support the individual, coming from this alternative frame, in finding or creating more productive interventions.

In the following case study, offered to us by a participant, we will illustrate how this learning process works in practice.

The Case of Andrew

Andrew is an independent consultant who specialises in Customer Relations Management. At the request of a project manager at a financial services organisation (for which he had worked on several previous occasions) he developed a pilot workshop which he delivered for a regional office. The participants' evaluation of the workshop was very mixed. Some were quite positive, others very negative.

While the pilot workshop was being delivered the project manager was moved to another position. His successor, Sandra, called Andrew to say that she had difficulties about paying the invoice because the pilot workshop had resulted in so much negative feedback. Andrew felt

irritated and uneasy. Isn't a pilot designed as an experience to learn from? He had hoped, after fine-tuning the workshop on the basis of the feedback, to be able to deliver the workshop in all the organisation's regions. He made an appointment with Sandra, in order to get acquainted and to discuss the various issues arising from the pilot programme.

Andrew wanted to build a positive relationship with Sandra. He wanted to influence Sandra to agree to pay the invoice.

Several important moments in that conversation are reproduced in the two-column structure described earlier.

The conversation continued in a similar vein for a while longer. Andrew and Sandra took leave of each other, with the agreement that

Sandra would call a week later. Andrew felt very upset as a result of this meeting. He had achieved very little and was satisfied only with the fact that he had managed to control his emotions and had apparently come through relatively unscathed.

First step: analysis of behaviour and underlying convictions

As stated, the first step in the analysis consists of looking at Andrew's specific behaviour and draw on the concept of 'blind spots'. Andrew was aware of a great deal but not of everything.

For example, Andrew uses the expression 'to be honest' and is not aware of the possible

What Andrew thought and felt	What Andrew and Sandra said
<p>(After half an hour of getting acquainted) <i>Well, we seem to have established a good initial rapport. I might as well raise the key issue now.</i> <i>Feeling: comfortable</i></p>	<p><i>Andrew: Now that we've gotten to know each, shall we have a look at the workshop?</i> <i>Sandra: Okay. You've seen the feedback, and it wasn't very good.</i></p>
<p><i>I'm not going to agree that the feedback was all bad, you have to read it carefully</i> <i>Feeling: wary</i></p>	<p><i>Andrew: To be honest, the feedback is not positive, but certainly not entirely negative either (goes on to explain the programme design and what worked well and less well).</i></p>
<p><i>I can make a gesture now, I'm quite prepared to invest some time in this.</i> <i>Feeling: confident</i></p>	<p><i>Andrew: Given this feedback I'm prepared to invest some of my own time in the further development of this workshop.</i> <i>Sandra: I told you, I have real difficulty with your invoice. It's quite a large amount and the feedback was negative.</i></p>
<p><i>This isn't fair!</i> <i>Feeling: anger</i></p>	<p><i>Andrew: I understand your position, but, once again, the feedback varied strongly.</i> <i>Sandra: But for me the feedback was negative.</i></p>
<p><i>Sure, you read what you want to read!</i> <i>Feeling: irritated, cynical</i></p>	<p><i>Sandra: You have to understand that there is an opportunity here to support our CRM programme with your workshops in all our regions. I want to do that with you. But if I have to pay this invoice that's going to give me a bad feeling, which will make it difficult to work with you in the future.</i></p>
<p><i>Hey!!! This is blackmail! You will pay, as was agreed with your predecessor. I have never been blackmailed by a client. I won't accept it, and if necessary I'd rather terminate the relationship right here.</i> <i>Feeling: shocked and angry</i></p>	<p><i>Andrew: I understand your position. But as I said, I just offered to invest my own time in further development</i> <i>Sandra: I'm talking about partnership and I do not understand that we have to pay an invoice when the feedback is negative. It's a risk for both of us, that is what partnership is all about.</i></p>

impact of these words on Sandra (“watch out, Sandra, you’re not being honest, there is only one truth, my own”). He says two times that he understands Sandra’s position, but shows very little interest in it: he asks few if any questions, for example concerning what Sandra means by ‘partnership’.

With particular reference to the left-hand column, we looked, together with Andrew, at his frame.

Andrew readily agreed that he had come to think about Sandra in very negative terms: she over-emphasised the negative feedback, she blackmailed, she was not honest, she was a slippery snake, she didn’t listen. Andrew saw himself in this meeting as honest, open and reasonable, as someone who was prepared to negotiate and was willing to put something on the table. He wanted to stay calm and not disrupt the relationship. He was unwilling to be blackmailed and wouldn’t give in to it. Given these thoughts, he perceived it as his task to convince her: ‘she must agree’. He quickly noticed that this was not going to work, but that only reinforced his frame. As a result of his blind spot he was unable to step outside his own frame.

This is what we see repeatedly: as a result of the ‘blind spot’ individuals get locked into their own emotions, they hold the other person responsible for these and they develop strong negative attributions about the other. They climb a ‘ladder of inference’, with unpleasant consequences as a result (Senge, 1994). Without being aware of the fact, they base their actions on only a part of what is relevant in the situation (namely, what they themselves perceive and experience). The next step on the ladder is interpretation, or ascribing meaning. Virtually always, in difficult situations, these interpretations are negative. (“Hey!!! This is blackmail!”) A step further up the ladder conclusions are drawn (“I’d rather terminate the relationship right here”) which in their turn lead to further unproductive behaviour.

Furthermore, Andrew hides his feelings, his interpretations and his conclusions from Sandra. That is understandable, because these are not thoughts what are easily shared (or verified) and the feelings not easily expressed. That Andrew hides so much is also something which he has to hide. And so he utters expressions like “I understand your position” and repeats his offer to invest his own time. These expressions are not remotely related to the thoughts and feelings he is experiencing at the time.

Re-framing

The next step is to arrive at a more productive frame. Characteristic of a productive frame in the context of influence is the realization, that while one’s own opinion or viewpoint is valuable:

- It is probably based on incomplete information, on a restricted selection of relevant facts.
- One’s own interpretations and conclusions are not the truth, but only one way of looking at and understanding reality.
- This understanding is strongly influenced by personal values as well as by earlier experiences.
- Others see things which we miss.
- These things which we miss can lead to equally logical interpretations and conclusions, which will be different from our own, even if they are based on the same ‘raw data’.

Part of this kind of multilateral frame is the conviction that ‘influence’ is not synonymous with proving oneself right; ‘having influence’ is a matter of ‘reaching good, well-considered decisions’. ‘Good’ in the sense that they are based on what both partners consider being the relevant facts and that both partners feel committed to the decisions. A re-frame is

achieved by realising a transformation 'from negative to positive' in the thoughts and feelings which are almost always found in the left-hand column.

Andrew was able to make a major shift in the way he perceived the situation. He realised it was possible that Sandra wanted to work on the basis of true partnership, that she was looking for people who offered value to her organisation, that she felt responsible and wished to share risks. He acknowledged that Sandra probably had good intentions, though she might have expressed herself somewhat clumsily. He saw that she did offer opening for the exchange of opinions and interests.

His thinking became considerably more positive than it had been during his meeting with Sandra. Andrew could also start to think differently about himself. For example, that he should use his emotions, not in an accusatory manner, but as authentic feelings which belong to him and are important. That he could test his thought processes ("Am I missing something?") and that it would have been worthwhile to explore Sandra's thought processes. In that way he could have evaluated her logic in the same way as he evaluated his own.

Re-crafting a dialogue

Only after these steps can we support our participants, by means of exercises and role-plays, to test out other forms of language and other interventions, based on a re-frame as we have sketched above.

In our programmes we go on to help participants to master three distinct sets of behavioural skills, which when effectively combined, will ensure productive dialogue.

1. Behaviours associated with being clear and direct in terms of expressing own viewpoints, opinions, judgments,

requests and commitments. These behaviours are more than words; they are based on taking full responsibility for one's utterances. ('I'-dimension behaviour).

2. Behaviours associated with seeking clear understanding of others' viewpoints, opinions, judgements, requests and commitments. Also: behaviours intended to examine others' judgments of or reactions to one's own assertions. The behaviours are based on willingness, indeed a commitment, to take the other person seriously and to respond accordingly. ('You'-dimension behaviour).
3. Behaviours associated with building up trust and a positive (working) relationship: being open and transparent about one's own feelings and needs, and being truly open to and accepting of the feelings and needs of the other person. ('We'-dimension behaviour).

Andrew worked on being more explicit about his own thinking, and testing the validity of his reasoning with the other person. He committed himself to developing the skills required to achieve a real understanding of Sandra's point of view, rather than just repeating that he "understood her position". Realising that a long-term positive relationship would be the only way for him to move forward with Sandra and her organisation, he also worked on opening himself up more to Sandra's needs and feelings, while being transparent about his own.

Had Andrew *not* been able to re-frame the situation, it is doubtful whether he would have been prepared to put energy into applying different behaviours in situations like the one with Sandra. By effectively deploying the behaviours outlined above, and with a greater awareness of the traps which his own thinking processes create for him, Andrew could go into his next

meeting with a 'Sandra' with an enhanced sense of confidence in his ability to craft a mutually acceptable outcome.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Adrie van den Berge is fascinated by the recalcitrance of many problems in organisations: they refuse to go away despite repeated and concerted efforts to vanquish them. As a consultant and trainer he helps individuals to identify stalled learning processes and the unproductive mental

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