



Are You An Influential Leader? What You Must Change to Make Things Happen By Connie Dieken



The age of automatic executive influence is over. You can thank Ken Lay and Jeffrey Skilling for that. Influence automatically assigned by position and power plummeted when the federal prosecutor pulled back the wizard's curtain to reveal the crucial difference between influence and *manipulation*. As a result, it's far more challenging for today's leaders to win buy-in and gain support for ideas and visions. True influence now follows access to information, as I'll explain later.

Lay was the Ken doll of influencing people through organizational chart dominance, back when charisma and slick talk were enough to inspire and move people to action. In his heyday, Lay made things happen instantly. Build Enron Stadium? Check. Create the Kenneth Lay Chair of Economics at his alma mater? Check. Get Alan Greenspan to accept an Enron Award? Check. Lay and other corporate titans like WorldCom's Bernie Ebbers, Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski, and Adelphia's John Rigas worked their magic.

But the Enron prosecutors shrewdly exposed the dark side of influence—*master manipulation*. After the verdict, jurors said they were swayed to convict Lay because he touted Enron stock to employees while at the same time secretly unloading millions of dollars of his own stock. He'll now trade pinstriped influence for possible prison stripes.

As a leader, it's crucial that you influence others to make things happen, whether you're inspiring your team to finish a project, building buy-in from the board, or cajoling a colleague to see your point of view. This can also include soothing investors, influencing analysts, or persuading reporters to give your organization positive coverage.

I believe ethical influence is a critically important trait for today's business leaders. It's the power to change the development of fluctuating actions, thoughts, or behaviors without coercion or manipulation. And it's especially vital now that others have access to endless outside resources like The Smoking Gun, Google, and blogs that spout influential messages like geysers. Easy access to information has trumped automatic influence, causing others to be skeptical of what you say and to challenge your leadership, even if they don't reveal their resistance to your face.

Here are a few tips to help you gain influence in today's business climate:

- **Frontload and simplify.** Take a page from the Enron prosecutors. They distilled astounding amounts of information into a simple case. They frontloaded their case with how the duo knowingly misled investors, analysts, and employees. They resisted the

urge to throw every issue against the wall and see what would stick, as many leaders mistakenly do. Make your messages straightforward and simple, and you'll help others follow your lead.

- ***Lead as you are.*** As I coach emerging leaders across America, I see an alarming number of people who mask their true personalities with a false veneer; they tell me they're secretly afraid that they're not impressive enough in their natural state. This is a credibility-killer. The more authentic you are, the more you'll earn the respect of others.
- ***Merge purpose and passion.*** Oprah blends them. Steve Jobs combines them. Influential communicators define their purpose with absolute clarity and use their passion to light a fire under others. What's your purpose? Define it passionately and live it honestly.
- ***Use positive candor.*** Influential people are straightforward when they communicate. They don't sugarcoat bad news to avoid conflict. They don't get overly aggressive to display their toughness. Express yourself candidly, but kindly, and you'll raise performance levels.
- ***Seek commitment, not compliance.*** Compliance is fleeting—it's an obligation to submit and obey. Commitment, on the other hand, is a pledge, an assurance of goodwill. Lay and Skilling used their influence to force subordinates to paint a positive picture for investors. The employees complied, but then spoke the truth at trial.
- ***Transfer ownership of your ideas.*** The Ritz-Carlton has mastered this technique. Every day, the company's employees gather for 15 minutes to discuss one of the company's core values. This ensures that the leadership's core values are transferred to front-line employees and creates behaviors and actions that bring them to life.
- ***Don't get caught in the blame game.*** Your employees aren't whipping boys. Blame is toxic to leadership and organizations. Lay and Skilling tried to feign ignorance and blame others, and in the process they became poster boys for corporate cover-your-butt behavior. Accountability is king, and naïveté is no excuse.

There's no free hall pass to influence. Even an estimated \$60 million in legal fees couldn't buy Ken Lay and Jeffrey Skilling a way out of the mess they made through unethical influence. Their joint defense—that Enron was undone by the Wall Street Journal and Wall Street speculators—was trumped by the true stories of government witnesses.

Today's workers are drawn to leaders who are honest, decisive, and candid. They're swayed by action, not empty talk. As the T-shirts for sale on eBay declared, they "Got Lay'd by Enron," and they've had enough. The Enron jury turned the screws on unethical influence. Good riddance.

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