

June 2006

## How influential are our HR professionals?

MEDIOCRE and at times downright ineffectual, according to research by leading Australian learning and development company, the OPIC Group.

A new study by learning and development company, OPIC, revealed that 67% of HR professionals across Australia lack what it takes to influence outcomes in their organizations and require further development in order to lift their game. This study was part of a broader examination of over 1,500 middle and senior managers from corporate Australia.

The key skills associated with effective influencing are:

- Creating relationships and alliances via effective networking
- Engaging with people across business
- Building common ground through collaboration
- Managing conflict
- Strategic and more in-depth influencing capabilities

*Specific areas where HR professionals require further development to improve influencing capability.*

<b>Networking</b>	<b>Engagement</b>	<b>Collaboration</b>	<b>Conflict Management</b>	<b>Strategic Influencing</b>
10%	11%	12%	26%	54%

The study showed that while HR managers are generally good at networking, engaging, and collaborating, they are not as successful when it comes to dealing with conflict and being strategic in their influencing endeavours – that is identifying opportunities where they could work together with stakeholders to the mutual advantage of both.

OPIC CEO, Peter Zarris says one of the key reasons HR professionals fail on these two fronts is the fact that they have a service mentality and see their internal stakeholders much in the same way as a customer service operator views an in-bound customer.

“They have a pronounced desire and drive to give the customer what they want and they are less inclined to stretch their relationship with stakeholders by challenging them and really pushing their point of view when it comes to identifying new opportunities.

“For example, in situations where frontline managers reward staff by promoting them, HR managers should not acquiesce to this practice - as is often the case - but should bring home the fact that while the staff in question may be good at the job they're doing, they may not have the necessary skills for the more elevated role.

“They should instead strongly encourage other ways of rewarding staff.”

He says that HR practitioners must learn not to shy away from conflict. "They need to see it as a normal part of everyday business and if handled well, it can create new and better ways of doing things.

"Good influencers never leave the 'undiscussables' undiscussed. They deal with them then and there; they get them out into the open, looking for common ground and a way in which both parties can move forward."

Mr Zarris says the effective use of conflict is critical to influencing strategically and to pushing forward with new opportunities and to partnering with stakeholders at the frontline.

"One of the most commonly stated frustrations from frontline executives is that they would like their HR colleagues to be more than just administrative support. They'd like them to be more of a partner – even if it requires the occasional jousting."

He also blames undue emphasis on day to day transactional activities for HR managers' failure to influence strategically. "As a result leadership issues simply fall by the wayside."

- **Implications of not acting**

Mr Zarris says failure to act will mean that HR professionals they will continue to be seen as administrators who simply respond to requests and not as leaders capable of driving change.

"They will continue not to be taken seriously by managers from other parts of business and they will never have a place at the decision-making table. However, taking the influential high ground will elevate HR managers to leaders who are capable of providing the solutions business needs."

## Steps to improve their influencing skills

- **Build stakeholder networks.** Identify all the people – both inside and outside your organization - who impact on your area of business and who are important to your success. Depending on the size and structure of an organization, this can vary. Your stakeholder management plan should not only outline the key people who need to be influenced, but also what their key issues and needs are. Remember, your plan should also include stakeholders you don't have close affiliations with and people you don't necessarily get on with.
- **Engage with stakeholders.** Once you know who is important to you, actively initiate meetings in order to understand what your stakeholders do and the challenges they face. Also show a willingness to engage in conversations outside your expertise. These meetings will also provide you with an insight into where you could potentially collaborate or share resources. It is not good enough to simply meet on one occasion. Networking with people needs to be an ongoing activity.

- **Collaborate with stakeholders.** Simply including your stakeholders in your decision-making, is not enough. You need to find out what their ideas or views are first, before you offer your own. Don't be prescriptive; listen to what they have to say first. Taking a consultative and collaborative approach arrives at a result far superior to the one you originally devised.
- **Manage conflict.** Deal with it directly. Good influencers don't avoid conflict – they seek out any areas of disagreement and discuss these openly, in a positive and constructive way.
- **Influence strategically.** Identify opportunities where you can work with stakeholders in reaching mutually beneficial outcomes. Influencing strategically also involves a much deeper and more personal insight into your stakeholders - not just their challenges and drivers but how they feel emotionally about issues. This enables you to empathize with them and where there are problems, to acknowledge them, allowing for a much stronger and longer lasting relationship.

Mr Zarris recommends that managers devote at least 40% of their time or 10 hours a week to influencing, with the amount of time devoted to these activities increasing incrementally with seniority.

These activities should involve everything from one to one meetings with all managers, to setting up cross functional forums on key issues, facilitating building alliances between functions.