



MEDIA RELEASE

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How good are we at influencing?

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

The study of over 1,500 managers and professionals across Australian workplaces revealed that over 70% of those surveyed, lacked what it takes to be truly influential in their organisations and require further development in order to lift their game.

In essence, we're not good at connecting with people who are critical to our success - particularly those we don't get on with or who come from other parts of business. We don't take the time to understand what inspires and motivates them and usually don't get their input and co-operation when it comes to getting our ideas and initiatives off the ground.

We don't build and maintain our networks especially well and when it comes to handling difficult issues and dealing with conflict, we run a mile.

While we may have the expertise and skills necessary to do our job, our inability to take the influential high-ground prevents us from being truly effective in our roles.

According to OPIC CEO, Peter Zarris, the result reflects the continuing 'silo-driven' nature of organisations – a hangover from the past - where people from different functional areas or departments rarely communicated and interacted with each other.

"The result is that projects that require buy-in from all areas of business often never get off the ground and those that do, are usually bogged down by competing differences and points of view."

He also blames an age-old emphasis on recruiting and promoting people according to academic brilliance and technical expertise. "We've been led to believe for far too long now that top marks at school and university will automatically translate into rapid progression through the corporate ranks.

"Certainly at the outset, technical know-how and specialist ability are vital to early success in our careers but as we move into more senior roles, this becomes less important. Unfortunately, too many organisations still have a tendency to promote on expertise, rather than on an ability to lead and influence effective outcomes."

However he says with the trend to more matrix-type structures in organisations - which promote a team approach to project development, drawing team members from different functional areas or departments - is forcing change.

"This, coupled with increased globalization - where innovation, creativity and speed to market are critical - is encouraging greater communication, networking and interaction across all areas of business. It is forcing people to work more collaboratively across organisations and for those that don't, the fall-out could be disastrous."



According to OPIC organizational development expert, Steve Arthurson, it is vital that organizations understand the value of influencing as an enabler and that access to the tools and processes to help individuals improve their influencing capability, not be limited to corporate leaders.

“Restricting these tools to leaders means that influencing cannot occur consistently across an organization and if our functional experts are unable to network, collaborate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts, the flow of new ideas, products, and innovation will be slowed down dramatically – something organizations can ill afford.”

He also recommends that everyone - from the CEO to people on the shop floor – master the ability to influence outcomes.

Becoming better influencers

To become better influencers, OPIC recommends that corporate employees:

- **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. In the case of a general manager it would be the CEO, the board, their direct team, their opposite number in other divisions, customers, suppliers and people in the community who their business impacts on. For the PA, it would be the personal assistants of the people in their boss's network.

- **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. Conflict is a normal part of collaboration, but most people often avoid it at all costs. As a result we leave the “undiscussables” undiscussed. We aren't prepared to talk about the elephant in the corner. Good influencers don't avoid conflict – they seek out any areas of disagreement and discuss these openly, in a positive and constructive way.

Mr Arthurson says this more inclusive approach to working with people is a radical departure from the old command and control style of negotiating with people where success was determined by know-how and expertise or “how vigorously you argued” the point.

“It takes the ego out of negotiating, forcing people to be more humble in their dealings with others.”

However, he says negotiation and consultation should not be about compromise as this leads to a less than optimal outcome. “Influence is about building the best possible outcome which requires us to be more selfless in our discussions and more able to build on someone else's ideas rather than just to present our own.”

How much time should we devote to influencing activities?



According to Mr Zarris, for those in middle management and below, at least 10% of their time or 4-5 hours a week, with the amount of time devoted to influencing activities increasing incrementally.

He says by the time they reach CEO or general manager level this type of activity should be accounting for 80% of their working week. These activities should involve everything from attending cross functional meetings, MBWA (Management By Walking Around), conducting skip a level one-to-ones with lower level management, formal communiqués such as publications or multi-media presentations to keep staff informed, one-to-ones with other directors to ensure that information flow, people development, and blockages to success are properly addressed.

“In future the ideas and projects that get past first base will be the ones determined by those who have put in the hard yards and who’re prepared to devote time to the full spectrum of influencing activities.”

What do our top influencers look like?

- They have an understanding of who is important to them, both inside and outside their organisations.
- They have an innate understanding of who they are and what their strengths and weaknesses are.
- They’re very good at listening for content and underlying emotions.
- They’re comfortable at engaging with everyone across the business and up and down the hierarchy.
- They understand the value of broad-based networks and use these networks to achieve collaborative outcomes.
- They give credit to those who’ve helped them achieve effective outcomes.
- They see conflict as normal and work effectively to resolve it. Where they are unable to deal with it themselves, they call in the experts.

More about OPIC

Melbourne-based learning and development company, the OPIC Group, has been providing businesses across Australia with coaching, mentoring, training and career development solutions for over 14 years. The organisation also runs regular seminars on influencing, people development, leadership development and team building.

For more media information contact:

Peter Zarris on (03) 9529 5855 or 0419 323 278.

Steve Arthurson on (03) 9529 5855 or 0419 229 919

Wendy Parker on 0422 694 503 or email: parkern@bigpond.com