



The Truth About Influence in Leadership

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Influence is earned through trust, communication, and integrity - not authority. People commit most deeply to leaders whose actions consistently align with their values.

The Truth About Influence in Leadership

"People follow leaders by choice. Without trust, at best you get compliance."
– Jesse Lyn Stoner

Most leaders have asked themselves the same question at some point in their careers.

Why don't people do what I ask?

The question usually surfaces during moments of frustration. A project stalls despite repeated conversations. Accountability starts slipping. A team appears disengaged. A leader feels as though they are communicating clearly and reinforcing expectations consistently—yet the desired behavior still fails to happen.

What makes this question important is not simply the frustration behind it.

It is the assumption underneath it.

Many leaders unconsciously equate authority with influence. If they hold the title, have expertise, or occupy a leadership

position, people should naturally follow their direction.

But leadership rarely works that way.

Authority can create temporary compliance. It can create movement driven by pressure, obligation, or fear. But genuine influence is something entirely different.

Influence is not about controlling people. It is about inspiring people. It is about creating trust that is strong enough for others to willingly move in the same direction because they believe in your leadership, your intent, and your values.

Organizations today are operating in an increasingly complex environment. Teams are navigating change fatigue, uncertainty, emotional exhaustion, competing priorities, and rapidly evolving expectations. In that environment, authority alone becomes insufficient. People want clarity. They want trust. They want to feel that leadership genuinely understands what they are experiencing.

The leaders who create lasting influence understand something deeper.

Influence is built through relationships, communication, and values. These three areas shape how people experience leadership every day.

Do they trust you?

Do they understand your intent?

Do your actions align with your words?

Do they feel respected?

Whether leaders realize it or not, people are constantly answering these questions.

And those answers determine whether individuals simply comply—or fully commit.

Relationships Are the Foundation of Influence

One of the biggest misconceptions in leadership is the belief that relationships are secondary to performance. But relationships are often the very thing that determines whether execution succeeds in the first place.

The health of a team can usually be traced back to the quality of trust between people. Likewise, many leadership failures are not rooted in strategy alone. They are rooted in broken trust, emotional disconnection, weak collaboration, or environments where people no longer feel psychologically safe.

This is why relationships are not simply a soft skill. They are infrastructure.

“Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge.”
– Simon Sinek

People perform differently depending on the environment leadership creates around them. In high-trust environments, individuals become more willing to contribute ideas, ask questions, challenge assumptions, and remain engaged during difficult periods.

In low-trust environments, people begin protecting themselves.

They stop speaking honestly. They withhold ideas. They avoid accountability. They disengage emotionally.

Trust changes everything.

When people trust a leader, they become more receptive to feedback, accountability, and direction. They are more willing to navigate ambiguity because they believe the leader’s intentions are grounded in support rather than ego or control.

But trust is not built through motivational speeches or occasional moments of inspiration. Trust is built through consistency.

People pay attention to whether leaders follow through on commitments. They notice whether accountability is applied fairly. They observe how leaders behave under pressure. They watch how conflict is handled.

This is where emotional intelligence becomes essential.

The most influential leaders are not simply aware of operational dynamics. They are aware of human dynamics.

They understand how their presence affects a room. They recognize emotional shifts within conversations. They notice when tension is rising within a team.

Leaders who lack self-awareness often create unintended consequences. A leader may believe they are creating urgency while their team experiences anxiety. They may think they are being direct, while others experience them as dismissive or impatient.

The strongest leaders consistently ask themselves an important question.

How are people experiencing me?

Communication Shapes How Leadership Is Experienced

Leadership communication is often misunderstood. Many people assume communication is simply about delivering information clearly enough that others understand what needs to happen. But communication is far more than information transfer.

Communication shapes interpretation. It influences emotion. It impacts trust.

And ultimately, it determines whether people feel connected to leadership or disconnected from it.

Every individual processes communication differently. People bring different experiences, communication styles, insecurities, emotional triggers, and assumptions into every interaction. This means influential leaders do not simply repeat the same message louder when people fail to respond.

They adapt. They ask questions. They seek understanding. They recognize that clarity is not measured by what was said.

It is measured by what others understand.

One of the biggest communication mistakes leaders make is assuming intent automatically transfers. It does not.

A leader may intend to empower autonomy while their team experiences a lack of support. A leader may think they are creating accountability, while others experience criticism.

This is why adaptability matters so much in leadership communication.

The best leaders understand both themselves and the people around them. They recognize where their natural tendencies may create friction. They intentionally adjust their communication

approach in service to better connect with others.

This is not about becoming inauthentic. It is about becoming effective.

People cannot align around confusion. When priorities constantly shift, expectations remain vague, or communication lacks consistency, momentum begins to erode.

But influential communication also requires context.

One of the most overlooked leadership skills is explaining the “why” behind decisions. People are significantly more likely to support difficult changes when they understand the reasoning behind them.

“Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing.”

– Albert Schweitzer

Listening is another critical component of influence. Many leaders hear others. Far fewer genuinely listen.

Listening is not waiting for your turn to speak. It is fully seeking to understand another person’s perspective. People feel valued when they feel heard.

Values Quietly Define Leadership Credibility

Values are easy to discuss when circumstances are comfortable. The true test of values occurs under pressure.

This is where leadership credibility is either strengthened or weakened because people pay far more attention to leadership behavior than leadership language.

Employees listen to what leaders say. But they believe what leaders consistently do.

Values shape decisions. They influence how accountability is handled. They determine how conflict is approached. They reveal whether integrity remains intact when shortcuts appear easier.

This is why leadership influence can erode quickly. Trust built over years can weaken through moments of inconsistency.

People constantly evaluate whether leadership behavior aligns with organizational values. They observe whether leaders own their mistakes. They pay attention to how people are treated when outcomes are not ideal.

***“People don’t buy what you do;
they buy why you do it.”
– Simon Sinek***

Culture is not shaped primarily by mission statements hanging on walls. It is shaped by repeated leadership behavior.

I learned this lesson early in my career.

During college, I interned with a financial institution where we assisted individuals with loans, credit lines, and home mortgages. Like many young professionals entering the workforce, I was eager to prove myself.

Eventually, the effort paid off, and I secured a sizeable mortgage loan for a client purchasing her first home. I remember feeling proud—not simply because of the sale, but because I felt I had helped someone move toward an important milestone in life.

As we moved through the paperwork process, I missed a document requiring the client’s signature.

It was an honest mistake.

By the time I realized it, she had already left. I immediately went to my supervisor to explain the situation and discuss how I could resolve the issue. I still remember his response.

“That’s okay. Just sign it for them.”

In that moment, everything changed. The lesson was no longer about paperwork.

It became about values.

I did not sign the document. And shortly afterward, I chose not to pursue a full-time role with the organization. That experience reinforced something every leader should understand.

People are always paying attention. They watch how leaders behave when circumstances become difficult. They observe what behaviors are tolerated. They notice when integrity becomes negotiable.

Leadership credibility is not built through polished speeches. It is built through everyday decisions.

Influence Is Ultimately About How You Choose to Show Up

Many leaders spend years trying to strengthen authority when what they truly need is a stronger influence.

Authority may create compliance. But influence creates commitment. And commitment is what drives trust, accountability, innovation, resilience, and sustainable performance.

The leaders who create the greatest impact understand this. They invest deeply in relationships. They strengthen communication. They align their behavior with their values.

It is about creating environments where people willingly bring forward their best.

“Become the kind of leader that people would follow voluntarily, even if you had no title or position.”
– Brian Tracy

And that work requires intentionality. It also requires reflection. Because leadership pressure can distort self-awareness. Under stress, leaders often become more reactive, impatient, defensive, or narrowly focused on outcomes.

The strongest leaders remain open to growth. They continue learning from their experiences. They stay curious. They invite feedback. And they voluntarily shift their approach to what the moment and their teams need.

Because influence is not ultimately about controlling people.

It is about creating trust strong enough that others willingly choose to follow you.

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