



FEATURE

Lead from the Middle: How to Impact Results Regardless of Your Title

[By Dan Coughlin]

Your boss wants three projects done immediately, your peers are focused on hitting their department's planned goals, your employees want raises and promotions, and your customers are demanding faster, better, and cheaper service. So what are you, as a mid-level manager, supposed to do?

Lead.

Leadership means influencing how other people think in ways that generate better, sustainable results both for your organization and the people in it. Notice: leadership equals ability to influence, not your title.

Four Keys to Influencing Others:

1. Create a leadership framework.

You only need three things to lead. You need to know your organization's three most important desired outcomes, the three most important outcomes the person you're trying to influence wants to improve, and ways to influence how that person thinks. Take out a sheet of paper and answer these questions:

- What are my organization's three HPOs (highest-priority desired outcomes)?
- What are the three HPOs for the person I'm trying to influence?
- How can I influence that person to think in ways that will generate better results both for the organization and for what he or she wants to achieve?

Now you're ready to lead. It doesn't matter what your title is or what role you have in the

organization. It also doesn't matter what title or role the other person has. Just lead.

2. Hone the tools of influence.

There are at least five ways to influence other people: demonstrate, ask, share, clarify, and challenge. Here's a brief description of each:

Demonstrate: In everyday situations, demonstrate the behavior you want to see in others. I'll never forget the manager who screamed, "We have to be more hospitable with our guests!" Ironic, eh?

Ask: Ask your boss, "What is the most important business outcome you want to improve over the next six months, and what three things do you think we could do that would have the greatest positive impact on improving that outcome?" By asking that question, you have narrowed the focus going forward and clarified where not to spend your time. You can use this same question with your peers and with your employees.

Share: If the other person is into sports, share a sports analogy. If the person is into music, share a music analogy. Find a connection outside of the topic at hand and share a story or an analogy that could influence the other person's way of thinking.

I worked with a former college track star who was the senior director of operations for a

\$4 billion division. He was very talented, but he was not effective when it came to working with the operations and human resources departments. I asked, "When you were in college, was it possible for you to win your event but for your team to lose the track meet?"

He said, "Of course. That's why I had to focus on supporting my teammates. It wasn't enough for me to just win." I waited silently. And then he said, "Okay, okay, I get it. I need to support the other departments."

Clarify: Clarify the risks and rewards of taking action by asking the group, "What are the potential risks if we take this action, and what are the potential rewards if we take this action?" Write the answers on a flip chart. Simply clarifying what lies ahead can influence the group to make better decisions regarding what to do and what not to do to improve results.

Challenge: Ask, "Is this our best effort?" That gracefully concise question penetrates through long-winded reports and PowerPoint presentations. It forces people to be honest with each other. If it is their best effort, then they can move forward with clear minds. If it isn't, then they can determine what they still need to do. Use this one sparingly, and you will find it is very powerful.



FEATURE

3. “The enemy of the leader is sameness.”

The late Bill Gove, a magnificent professional speaker for more than 50 years, used to say, “The enemy of the speaker is sameness. Even if you tell the best stories or have the best analogies or use the most effective humor, your impact will eventually wear off if you do the same thing over and over and over.”

The same is true for leaders. Be flexible, and use a variety of approaches to influence the way people think. If you don’t, even your best efforts will be negated because people will think they know what is coming next and will tune you out.

4. Don’t be a mood-ring leader.

Susan, the director of marketing, had eight bosses in three years. You read that right. Without leaving her company, she reported to eight different executives over a three-year span.

One day she said to me, “Dan, my boss says I’m a mood-ring leader.”

I said, “He called you a what?”

She said, “Do you remember the mood rings in the 1970s?”

I said, “Vaguely.”

She said, “They changed colors whenever the person wearing one had a mood change. My boss says my reputation is that I change my leadership style every time I get a new boss. Consequently, nobody trusts me when I say we should go in a certain direction. What should I do?”

Susan had a common challenge. She thought leadership meant doing what her boss wanted her to do. That’s not leadership. That’s compliance. That’s taking the easy way out. It’s also a shortcut to career disaster. I gathered input on Susan from her peers that supported what her boss had told her and shared it with her.

As I shared this input with Susan, she at first put her head down, and then she looked me in the eye with a transformed demeanor and said, “I don’t care if I fail. I’m going to lead my department the way I believe is the right way.”

She went back to her preferred leadership style, which was to give people personal

attention, coach them behind closed doors, allow them to make mistakes, and remove barriers that other people insisted on putting in place. At first, she struggled with trying to be herself, but in the end, she did extremely well and was promoted to the next level.

To be a leader, take a stand on a given issue, decide what you believe in, and work to influence how other people think in the way you believe to be most effective.

About the Author:

As a keynote speaker, Dan Coughlin provides practical advice on business acceleration. He has provided more than 3,000 hours of on-site executive coaching. His clients include Toyota, McDonald’s, Marriott, Coca-Cola, the St. Louis Cardinals, Boeing, and AT&T. His new book, *Accelerate: 20 Practical Lessons to Boost Business Momentum*, arrived in bookstores in May of 2007. He has been interviewed by *The New York Times*, *Investor’s Business Daily*, and the American Management Association. To reach Dan, email dan@thecoughlincompany.com or visit www.businessacceleration.com.