



## **Leading with Limited Authority: You Don't Have to be a Person of Influence to be *Influential***

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Do you work with people who are highly resistant to change or squelch new ideas? Do you have a difficult time convincing your education co-workers that business partnerships are critical for making classroom learning more rigorous and relevant?

In September 2004, I became the Coordinator of Business and Community Partnership for Hilliard City Schools (HCS). HCS is the 8<sup>th</sup> largest school district in Ohio with over 15,000 students, 23 buildings and 1,700 staff. This position, from which I recently resigned, proved to be challenging on both professional and personal levels. I came to the school district after working for many years at the Ohio Arts Council. An agency of 40 staff members, where I had most recently served as the community development director and chief knowledge officer for a major change initiative. During the first several months of transition, the enormity of the school district was almost more than I could comprehend. How could I chart a course that would be personally and professionally meaningful, while helping to improve the educational learning environment for children?

I've written this article to highlight a variety of resources and strategies that helped me 'lead with limited authority' to contribute to the success of the district; while validating the importance of partnership building with business and community organizations. I hope you will find a new idea or two that you can use tomorrow.

Many authors on the topic of leadership suggest that rather than waiting for higher-ups to lead, it is the responsibility of everyone to lead, no matter where we fall in the organizational chart. In fact, one-third of our time should be spent leading up, one third spent leading horizontally – with our peers, and one-third leading down. This requires influencing others with whom we have no direct authority to change what they are doing, as well as influencing others over whom we have authority, but often have little influence.

### **1. Practice Reciprocity**

I spent the first few months in my new position getting to know the administrative team. I made appointments with all 23 principals to spend some time getting to know them and learning about their hopes, dreams and aspirations for their work, as well as their building's culture. I always ended those conversations by offering to help find support, funding or solutions for their goals and challenges. Dr. Robert Cialdini discusses the Rule of Reciprocity in his book, *Influence*<sup>1</sup>. The rule says that people will repay, in kind, what another person has provided to them. Slowly, one-by-one, a few of the principals would call with projects they needed assistance with. After working with them to find possible solutions, they would recommend me to their peers as a resource, further validating the work, and completing the circle of reciprocity. I was careful to "under promise and over deliver" on each project, creating relationships built on trust and confidence. In addition, having others endorse and validate your work is more effective than trying to "sell" yourself.

### **2. Determine Your Circle of Influence**

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*<sup>2</sup>, Steven Covey talks about the need to be proactive. Proactive people focus their efforts on their Circle of Influence. I had to stay proactive and address the challenges I could do something about, like securing additional financial resources for classroom teachers. In the early months of the position, I focused on the part of my job that felt most comfortable - helping staff members write grants. As a seasoned grant funder, reviewer and writer, I felt confident, from the beginning, guiding teachers through the proposal writing process. In addition, I was able to build my leadership authority, initially on a small scale, with individual teachers, which felt comfortable to me. The result of that work was increasingly positive energy that continued to widen and magnify my Circle of Influence.

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<sup>1</sup> Cialdini, Robert B. *Influence: Science and Practice*. 4th ed. Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Covey, Steven R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Free Press, 1989 and 2004.

### 3. Link Your Work to Larger Organizational Goals

The most important, overarching goal for our school district is to improve student achievement through relationships that foster rigorous and relevant learning environments. I continuously business partnerships with the district's goal at every opportunity. The core message for my department was that meaningful relationships with businesses and community organizations support rigorous and relevant learning experiences. I attended countless meetings and workshops that included content, that as a non-educator (my degrees are in music and business), I didn't fully understand, but I would then strive to describe my work in language that aligned with the language of the teachers and administrators in the district. I believe the language we use and the way we describe building business partnerships is critical for long-term success.

### 4. Beware of The Curse of Knowledge

Chip and Dan Heath outline their theory of the Curse of Knowledge in the book, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Other Die*<sup>3</sup>. The Curse of Knowledge says that once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. This makes it difficult for us to share knowledge with others, because we cannot readily re-create the listener's state of mind. In order to effectively lead with limited authority, we must speak in terms that our co-workers or bosses will understand and get enthusiastic about. The Heath brothers offer a six-point framework for avoiding this challenge that begins with **distilling your ideas down to their core, most critical elements**. Once you have a core, **credible** message, identify **unexpected, surprising facts** that will generate interest in your work or idea. When crafting a message, use **"universal language" that is concrete** and that everyone speaks fluently. As mentioned earlier in this article, make people care by **invoking self-interest**, and **developing an association** between your work/idea and something they already care about. Finally, tell a compelling story that motivates people to act. By taking the time to craft a clear message about your work or idea, you will help those you are trying to lead focus on the key task or decision to be made.

### 5. Additional Ways to Lead with Limited Authority

- As you think about how to craft your message or "sell" your idea, ask yourself "why" what you're proposing is important. Asking "why?" will allow you to drill down to the core of what's worth doing, and a message that will be hard for challengers to argue with. In addition, don't ask "why" only once, ask 3 or 4 times. This will not be easy or comfortable work, but it's critical for staying necessary and relevant, not to mention positioning yourself as a thoughtful leader.
- Listen to your superiors and identify the difficult challenges they are concerned with, but don't seem to have many answers. How many times have you heard, 'That's a great idea, but we don't have the resources to launch that program or purchase those resources, even though we know it would be good for students'?
- Challenge the prevailing organizational wisdom. Don't let your colleagues get away with saying, "We've always done it this way." Find ways to ask: "What if we?, Why can't we?, Couldn't we?, or How can we?". Albert Einstein said, 'You can't solve a problem with the same consciousness that created it.'
- Invite and gather a guiding coalition – colleagues from up, down, and within the organization to begin creating solutions. Ask them to consider a "pilot" project.
- Identify the problem with other co-workers or a third party. However, draw attention to issues without drawing too much attention to yourself. Don't make it your issue; make it many people's issue or the system's issue.
- Research solutions in other places or other people solving similar challenges. Examples: attend workshops, read case studies from other organizations, talk with other business partnership coordinators to brainstorm solutions, use electronic networks to share resources and thinking.

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<sup>3</sup> Heath, Chip, and Dan Heath. *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. New York: Random House, 2007.



- Identify human and financial resources for experiments (within your own control, when possible) to facilitate action.
- Create new outcome measures to evaluate programs. Ten years ago our understanding of the term 'number of hits' would have had a very different connotation from today's.
- Understand the challenges of your boss' or colleagues' dilemma and pains of change. Choose tactics accordingly. Don't blame or attack. Look at the situation from his or her point of view. One of the primary tasks of many superiors is to maintain equilibrium.
- Remember, your position in the organization allows for a short attention span. How long would you be allowed to speak at a meeting? Sixty seconds? Thirty seconds? Use time wisely: make interventions simple, intelligible and relevant.

**Contact:**

*Christy Farnbauch founded Strategic Links, LLC in 2006 to help people, organizations, and communities achieve their goals and dreams. She helps clients use new, practical knowledge, customized for each situation, to increase creativity, leadership, participation, and financial resources. Christy believes that people and organizations benefit from strategic, collaborative conversations that link learning with relationship building. To learn more, visit her website at: [www.strategiclinks.info](http://www.strategiclinks.info) or call 614-657-4406.*