**Influence and Authority:**

**How are you using your power?**

By Cheryl Scanlan

Power in leadership - we've all seen it done well and done poorly.  There is something about the catalytic effect of power on leadership that creates a wealth of energy and fuel for dynamic change and growth or causes sparks to fly without order and semblance. The latter creates nothing but unnecessary fires that need to continuously be put out, sapping the company people resources. Leveraging power to ignite your company for its intended future targets requires understanding two types of power which, handled well, will unleash that untapped potential your business currently holds.

Influence and authority are close, yet worlds apart. Webster defines influence as "the power to change or affect someone or something: the power to cause changes without directly forcing them to happen." Authority, on the other hand, is defined as "the power to give orders or make decisions: the power or right to direct or control something." Both involve power; they differ, however, in the wielding of that power. One is focused on the person or object I wish to change; the other is focused on my power to change it.

One of my employees shared a story about how much she loved going on road trips with her dad as a kid. Not only because he insisted on taking the "scenic route", but because when they were on their way home, he would always let her tell him how to get there. At first, he just let her direct him through the neighborhood. As she grew older, he made every turn she suggested from the highway to home. It sometimes took twice as long to get there because of his complete compliance to her instructions, but she eventually grew confident in her sense of direction. As a result, she is the first person her friends call when they are lost. Not because her Google maps works better but because her dad taught her to have a sense of direction long before she would need to rely on it.

**As we explore influence and authority, we uncover three ways true leaders drive an organization to its highest and best potential:**

**1. Choose to Be Bigger Than Your Title**

So, you made it. You earned the title and the corner office and have ears paid to listen to you and hands paid to work your strategy. Although a title gives you position in the company hierarchy, it does little for how you are positioned in the hearts of the people you lead. A title does not make you a leader; only you can do that.

My employee's dad understood a critical leadership principle: that sometimes the greatest act of leadership is using your title to empower someone else. Rather than automatically taking over the steering wheel because you can - who can you empower in the way you navigate leadership? Who is sitting in your organization right now with the potential to drive growth with some intentional development? My employee could have learned how to drive okay on her own, but was able to be a good driver sooner because her dad invested in her early in the relationship. He used the boundaries of a safe place to develop her confidence so that when she was on her own, she would be able to navigate life more confidently.

In a recent Ted Talk on "Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe" Simon Sinek unpacks this thought:

"Leadership is a choice; it is not a rank. I know many people who we do what they say because they have authority over us, but we would not follow them."

Just because you know how to drive, doesn't mean you've cultivated the discipline it takes to teach someone else to do the same. How do you embrace your position without using it as a crutch? Do you tend to leverage authority or influence more when it comes to developing your team? This is an area where a positive and intentional relationship is key. You may prefer a book to read or trick of the trade that could solve your leadership woes. But, at the core of navigating people toward a common goal is good old-fashioned relationship.

Sinek concludes his Ted talk by observing the counter-cultural loyalty of military leadership. He remarks that:

"In the military, they give medals to people who sacrifice themselves so that others may gain. In business, they give bonuses to people who sacrifice others so that they may gain... It's not that people in the military are inherently better than those in business - it's just a different environment. And it's one that values trust and cooperation."

What kind of coaching relationship do you have with your team? Who is it time to put in the driver's seat? You might be surprised at the places you and your business can go when you start to trust others to help you get there.

**2. Choose to Lead from Wherever You Are**

Perhaps you're reading this article feeling frustrated that your supervisor isn't a better leader.  You're lamenting that, "one day when I have the title, I'll lead differently."  My son David used to feel that way about our parenting style.  I recall with a smile him saying "when I'm a parent, I'm going to make doing chores fun for my kids!"  He was already getting a glimpse into the kind of leader he wanted to become, but to his credit, he was usually obedient even if not pleased with our approach.

Gaining the title will afford you an opportunity for influence no more than standing in a gym will make you a fitness model. What distinguishes you as a leader is that you lead before you're paid to lead. You influence before you're noticed.  You serve and build and make a better environment within your sphere of influence rather than letting circumstances guide your growth.

Leading from the middle is not easy. But, if you can figure out how to navigate people toward a vision when this is not expected of you, you will find that when the title does come your way, you can more naturally withstand the pressure that comes with it.  John Maxwell encourages us to gain influence through Actions and Attitudes. Be the kind of person you want to see in your in your manager. Learn the highways and byways of effective influence and authority now.  Find people who are better at it than you and then practice their ways, keeping in mind you do not compromise your own value system (for another post). Once you achieve a leadership role, you won't have the same kind of time to figure out how to navigate and the pressure could cause you to crash and crash hard.  So take the time now, early on, to practice.

Look around you - what can you leave better than you found it? When is the last time you approached your managers trying to see things from their point of view? Instead of "here I am, tell me what to do," what if you first considered what might their priorities be? What could happen if you consistently went to the table with "I thought you might need this, so I went ahead and prepared it as well as some additional work. How else can I help you this week?"

In addition to the vertical influence, take it lateral. If you were the director, what kind of culture would you want built into your team? You can start building that now. Practice speaking that way now. Stay those extra hours and bite your tongue during that water cooler conversation. Go that extra mile to help someone on a project in which you won't get the credit. The limelight is not what makes a leader - it simply highlights the good, the bad and the ugly of a leader. Leaders are made in the unseen hours and proven in the spotlight.

**3. Don't Delegate Too Soon.**

I had a client who spent his whole life leading through influence. This won him friends and made him likable in his company, but it didn't help him create necessary boundaries and structure which left significant gaps in his leadership. His emphasis was influence. He was very uncomfortable with authority. As a result, senior level employees started filling in those leadership gaps that he left; reshaping business proposals, taking authority where he wasn't,calling shots that he shied away from. He was frustrated with their "trumping" actions, until he understood these natural leaders were simply filling the gap he was leaving. He took that frustration and used it as fuel to help him grow. Realizing that he didn't like the way his business was being led made him own his position of authority, which helped others fall into place.  
  
Ken Blanchard says that, "The key to successful leadership is influence, not authority." I would argue that you need both. The key is being self-aware enough to know which one you leverage more naturally and which one could be your blind spot. Part of being a good driver is owning your position to its fullest potential. Perhaps you've been on what feels like a cross-country road trip with your organization, and you're ready to hand over the steering wheel for a while. Delegation can be a powerful thing, but done prematurely, will create more harm than good.  
  
Bernard Marr speaks to this in his article on "7 Tasks Successful Leaders Never Delegate":  
  
"I'd like to argue that there are some things that should never be delegated because they will make you too far removed from your team, open you up for criticism, or ultimately paint you in a bad light... The most powerful leaders in the world understand the power of delegation. But the best leaders will make a point of keeping these items on their personal to do list, no matter how important or powerful they grow to be."  
  
Think through the last time you were frustrated with an employee for not doing something well. Was the root of the problem the employee's apathy or lack of understanding? If they weren't taught how to navigate the task at hand, chances are, you've delegated too much too fast.  
  
Even if you are trying to transition out of the driver's seat altogether, a healthy pace is critical. Good succession planning is often over-looked and under-rated. Owning both the influence and the authority of your position now will help you pass it on with integrity later. Trying to pass on a legacy that isn't yet grounded is like sending your child on a road trip before they have taken driver's ed. You need to set the navigation for your organization before handing over the keys. What bumps in the road need to be avoided? What stops are important on the way? What speed does your organization best travel and how often does it need to take a pit stop to be serviced?  
  
Whether your next step is retirement or expansion, taking a few steps back in leadership delegation can be a humbling thing, but pales in comparison to the expense of premature power transfer.  
  
In conclusion, by appropriating two critical forms of power - influence and authority -leaders learn to orient themselves to the people around them and lead from a vision for the future ahead rather than from their frustrations in the past. Whether you are the driver, the backseat passenger, or transitioning somewhere in between, you'll be amazed at the places you will go.

**About Cheryl Scanlan**

Cheryl Scanlan, MCC, CMCC, BCC is president of C3Advantage. She has worked with CEOs that are in Fortune 100 through next generation small business owners. Having also run a multi-million dollar firm in New York, Cheryl knows the importance of business goals and the impact of teams. Cheryl's thought partnering method helps leaders see clearly what is fuzzy, articulate what is currently unintelligible, and generate coherent & executable strategy.