These 3 Common Leadership Habits Silently Undermine Your Authority

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Key Takeaways

- Top-tier leaders master the art of influence by creating space for others, actively listening and seizing informal opportunities to drive change.
- Talking too much can limit a leader’s ability to empower their team, while deep listening builds trust and fosters collaboration.
- Building influence extends beyond formal meetings into everyday interactions where trust and rapport are established.

As you climb the corporate ladder, your ability to influence employees, colleagues and higher-ups becomes a key leadership skill, yet it’s not one you’re typically taught in business school or on the job. It’s a skill that you must learn through experience, often by trial and error.

As an executive coach, leaders often ask me, “How do I become influential? Is there a trick to get people to like you at work?” While there’s no secret formula, there are proven ways to be more impactful, as well as common pitfalls that can limit your influence. Let’s explore three of the most frequent.

1. Talking too much

One of the most common barriers to influence is dominating conversations. While well-intended, talking too much can stifle innovation. If you want to influence effectively, you need to learn when to speak up and when to make room for your colleagues.

I recently coached a senior executive who was contributing actively in every meeting. Initially, she believed she was sharing her strategic vision. In reality, she was dominating the conversations and stifling creativity. She had hired senior leaders, yet treated them like junior staff. There might be times when you need to give direction, but leadership, especially as you climb the ladder, is about empowering your team, removing roadblocks and then getting out of their way, not telling them what to do.

We came up with several strategies to transform her from a manager to a true influencer. First, I challenged her to sit through an entire leadership meeting without speaking, as I wanted her to make space for her leaders to step up. She was nervous, but her team quickly took charge and presented issues — and solutions — that surprised her.

Second, I encouraged her to transition her engagement from monologues to questions. This repositioned her from a subject matter expert to a true leader who used her influence to unblock others and drive meaningful change.

Related: 15 Traits That Set Influential People Apart

2. Not listening enough

While not always the case, leaders who talk a lot often struggle to listen deeply. This can erode trust, as people who don’t feel heard are less likely to follow your lead. Think about it: Would you want to work for someone who doesn’t truly

listen to you? Probably not.

A simple way to improve your listening skills is to take notes when others speak and repeat back what you heard. Try this, and I promise you'll be shocked by how often you misinterpret what someone has said.

Another complementary strategy is to resist preparing your response while someone is talking. This requires a lot of intention and practice, especially in the workplace, but you'll get better with time. Instead of thinking about what you're going to say next, really focus on the other person. You don't need to summarize every detail. Even just recapping the person's emotions can be helpful: "It sounds like you were frustrated."

One of my clients found it helpful to take a deep breath before responding. This short pause allowed her to ground herself and ensured she wasn't responding too quickly. Her colleagues tended to share more during that silence, and the information she uncovered changed how she led.

3. Limiting influence to formal settings

Many leaders think influence only happens in formal meetings. In reality, there are plenty of opportunities to influence, including hallway conversations, email threads and Slack conversations. All of these can be just as powerful – if not more powerful – ways to drive change.

A long-term client came to me frustrated that she couldn't get buy-in on a major project. After some digging, we discovered the primary issue: It wasn't her idea but her approach. While her colleagues could count on her to get work done, she had only surface-level relationships with them.

I challenged her to engage in more informal – yet equally

intentional and meaningful – conversations to build rapport and trust. As she was task-oriented by nature, she created a simple spreadsheet to keep herself accountable. She quickly strengthened her relationships and got several of her peers to verbally share their support for her ideas in meetings. Over time, these organic conversations became more natural, and she even ditched the spreadsheet.

Related: No One Talks About This Skill, But It's Quietly Powering the Most Effective Leaders. Here's How to Develop It.

Final thoughts on building your influencing skills as a leader

Remember that influencing skills aren't innate, so try to be easy on yourself as you practice driving change through other people. Try one (or more) of the techniques and watch how your confidence, trust and impact grow. You've got this!

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