How to Influence "Unreasonable" People:

*Dealing with Resistance,
Stubbornness, and
the Selfishly Motivated*

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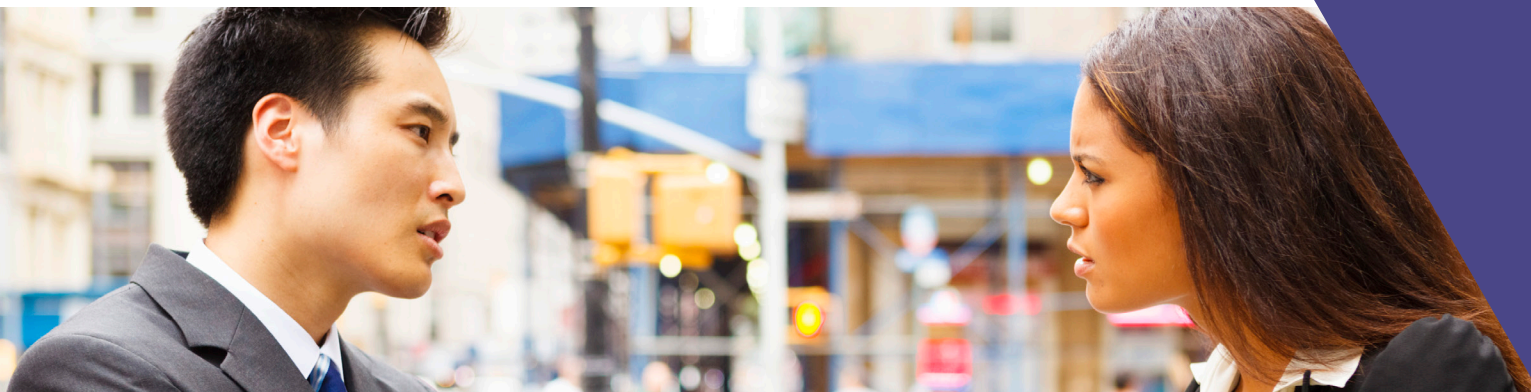
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Eighty-four percent of people report they sometimes or often need to influence unreasonable counterparts within their companies, a multi-year study finds. One in four reports people at their companies rely predominantly on manipulation or coercion to get their way. How can we navigate a workplace where we need the cooperation and assistance of others who often seem disinclined to provide it? We need better ways to influence others — and a new way to think about what influence is.
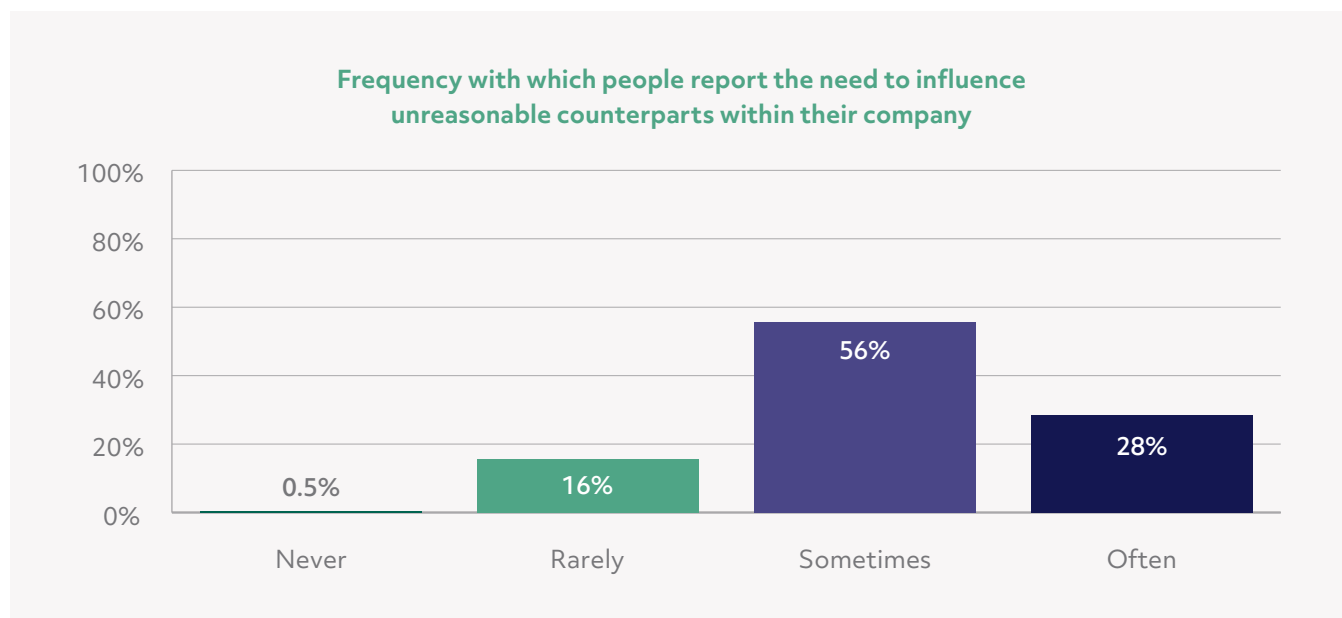
Frequency with which people report the need to influence unreasonable counterparts within their company

Figure 1, Vantage Partners Organizational Effectiveness Study (2013-2018)

People are people so why should it be, You and I should get along so awfully
— *From the song "People Are People" by Depeche Mode, 1984*

"She always says, 'Sorry, we're just too busy now.'"

"All he cares about is hitting his own numbers."

"That department is where great ideas go to die."

"They always say no."

How commonplace are comments such as these in your company? A six-year organizational effectiveness study led by our firm, Vantage Partners, finds:

84% of us report needing to influence unreasonable counterparts within our companies.

56% say we "sometimes" — and **28%** say "often" — deal with people we consider unreasonable, and often solely focused on their own objectives, in our workplace.

An astonishing **one in every four individuals** — based on responses from more than 750 people at 500 companies worldwide — reports that the most common approach to influence in their company is either manipulation or coercion.

How do so many apparently toxic workplaces persist? How can "unreasonable" people be so pervasive? And how can we effectively navigate such a challenging workplace terrain?

Aside from the rare pathological outlier, the vast majority of people we find difficult to influence are likely not inherently unreasonable or irredeemably selfish. Of course, they're not likely to sacrifice their careers for our benefit. But most people genuinely want to do the right thing. We are social creatures. So, while self-interest and some degree of selfishness are part of human nature, these darker impulses are kept in check by our desire to be seen by others as reasonable and fair dealing. Nonetheless, reasonable people often act in ways that make sense to them, but often seem unreasonable, selfish, or even irrational to others.

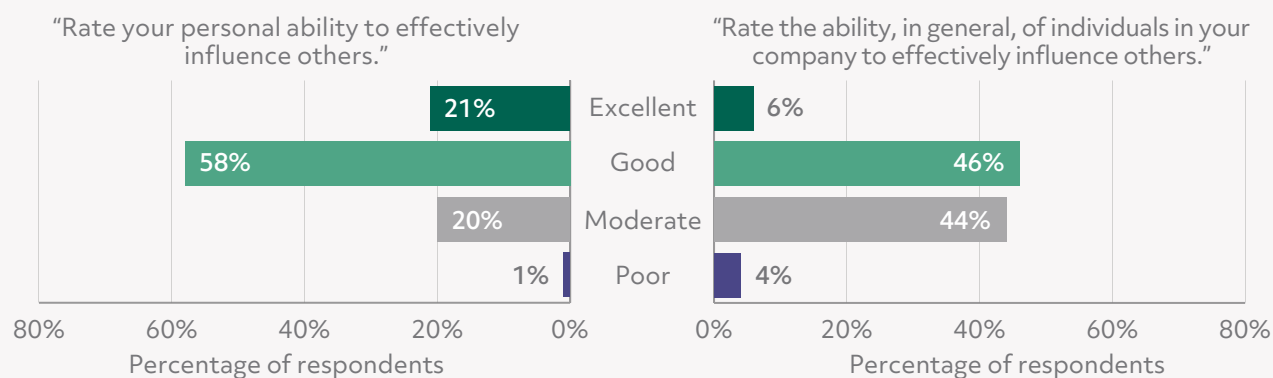### The Cycle of Dismissal: 'If Someone's Wrong, It's Almost Certainly You'

Abraham Lincoln famously said, "I don't like that man. I must get to know him better."

Influencing "unreasonable" people starts with recognizing that those we see as unreasonable or motivated only by selfish considerations almost certainly do not see *themselves* that way.

We generally see *ourselves* as acting reasonably, if perhaps not always nobly. We need to remember that others see themselves and their actions the same way. If we don't always live up to our highest ideals, well, we might regret it, but then say to ourselves, "I was forced by circumstances (and particularly by the actions of others) to behave differently than I would have preferred." We often don't cut others that kind of slack. Instead, we attribute their

Self-regard bias seems to be evident in assessment of influence skills

"Rate your personal ability to effectively influence others."

"Rate the ability, in general, of individuals in your company to effectively influence others."

	Personal ability	General ability
Excellent	21%	6%
Good	58%	46%
Moderate	20%	44%
Poor	1%	4%

Percentage of respondents

Respondents were **3.5 times** more likely to report their own influence skills as "Excellent" compared to their colleagues.

Figure 2, Vantage Partners Organizational Effectiveness Study (2013-2018)

behavior to flaws in their character. ("She's just not a team player.") Psychologists refer to this as "fundamental attribution error." (Speaking of biases that distort how we see ourselves versus others, respondents in our study were 3.5 times more likely to report their own influence skills as "excellent" compared to their colleagues!)

The reality is that human beings are complicated. We *all* act out of a complex set of motivations, including, but not limited to, narrow self-interest. We care about receiving recognition for our contributions, getting our bonus, receiving that next promotion. Incentives like these inevitably shape our *own* views and actions, just as they do for others — and often to a degree that we fail to fully recognize or acknowledge. There aren't a lot of saints out there, and expecting selfless behavior from our colleagues is bound to leave us frustrated, taken advantage of, or both. The good news is almost all of us want to act with integrity and do the right thing — even if we often disagree about what the "right thing" is!

Working to see others as they see themselves (especially when they're withholding help or support we need and think we deserve), *and* trying to see ourselves as they see us, is a good first step. But human beings are also prone to binary thinking. When confronted with different points of view, the natural and almost inevitable reaction is to conclude that someone is right, and someone is wrong. (In such circumstances, the person who is wrong is almost certainly you, not me!) Divergence in thinking often produces debate, which then often becomes argument, and can rapidly escalate into a "cycle of mutual dismissal." Consider the scenario below:

> Lee's team has spent months gathering data and creating a business case for a new initiative. He has just shared this work with Taylor, his counterpart in another department, whose buy-in and support he needs. But Taylor says, "I have concerns. The data I've seen indicates the market isn't as strong as you seem to think, and this initiative might result in us losing current customers."
>
> How does Lee react? With an open mind, curious to hear more from Taylor and learn from her different perspective? Or with frustration that the support and assistance he needs is not immediately forthcoming, and perhaps with a degree of defensiveness?
>
> "Look Taylor, you haven't spent all the time we have considering this from all angles. Our market analysis is sound, I can assure you." Perhaps Lee also thinks

to himself, "You just don't like the idea because it didn't come out of your department, and you don't want my team to get the recognition, and extra funding, instead of yours."

> Now how does Taylor react? Is she open to reconsidering her initial skepticism? Or does she conclude that Lee is reacting defensively because he has ego-invested in his proposed initiative, and thus lacks objectivity? Taylor (sighing inwardly) responds, "Look Lee. We're on the same side here. I'm just trying to make sure the company doesn't commit significant resources to an initiative that's likely to fail. And honestly, I don't want you to end up owning that kind of failure."

Now Lee and Taylor find themselves falling in the "cycle of dismissal." Each believes the other is wrong, and increasingly, sees the other as acting in less than good faith. The more they each respond to one another based on this perspective, the more their actions reinforce their perceptions of one another. If they have a good relationship, they might nip this dynamic in the bud or dial it back before things get toxic. They might simply agree to disagree. Or, maybe they reach some sort of compromise where Taylor provides less support to Lee than he wants but does not actively oppose his initiative. That's the *best* case – versus ongoing conflict and a damaged relationship. But papering over possibly important differences does nothing to generate learning that might improve Lee's plan, or ensure that the two of them, and others, make a wise decision about whether the company should invest resources in this new initiative.

Transforming Differences in Opinion from a Source of Conflict, to the Fuel of Innovation

Even in relatively small organizations (and even more so in larger ones), individuals have specialized jobs — hence differential knowledge, and different priorities. It's tempting to attribute disagreement and resistance from others to their lack of comprehension, competence, or commitment. But seemingly unreasonable counterparts have access to information we don't. They have different experiences and see things from different vantage points. Their objections and criticism, no matter how unconstructively articulated, are precious assets. Even the most self-interested resistance usually contains nuggets of insight — about potential risks, possible alternatives, and other opportunities. Instead of digging in our heels, we need to dig into a learning conversation, to embrace dissent rather than overcome objections, and uncover such nuggets, no matter how deeply buried or well-disguised they might be.

Common Influence Paradigm	Problem-Solving Influence Paradigm
Contrasting Assumptions	
■ I see the whole "picture" ■ There is a right answer; different opinions indicate that someone is wrong ■ My job is to get those who are wrong to "see the light" and agree with me ■ To persuade others, I need to preempt or "handle" their concerns and objections ■ Resistance from others indicates ignorance or bad faith	■ I have something to learn from those who see things differently than we do ■ A complex situation can generally be interpreted in several valid ways ■ To be persuasive, I need to be open to persuasion ■ My job is to work with others to identify/develop the best solution—not to get them to agree with me ■ To be successful, I need to invite, respect, and explore the concerns and objections of others
Contrasting Behaviors	
■ Emphasize the benefits of an idea or proposal ■ Discount or disprove objections raised by others ■ Poke holes in the views of others ■ Argue/debate ■ Trade favors	■ Demonstrate curiosity and engage in respectful questioning ■ Listen attentively ■ Put forth views as hypotheses ■ Invite challenge and dissent ■ Jointly brainstorm alternative theories/solutions

At some point, however, learning must give way to decisions and actions. We've all still got our jobs to do, and results to deliver, and we need support and help from others. How do we get it? Paradoxical as it might seem, we need to stop thinking of influence as trying to get others to agree with us, and instead as a process of joint exploration and problem-solving. Especially in complex organizations with myriad competing priorities, influence cannot be a one-way street. The chart above highlights how our assumptions and behavior shift when we reconceive influence as a joint problem-solving activity.

Returning to our hypothetical protagonists, when Taylor raises concerns with Lee's plan to expand in a new market, how should they avoid fueling the cycle of dismissal? A conversation focused on joint problem-solving opens the door to more creative thinking and better decision-making.

Lee might still suspect that Taylor is, in part, motivated by self-interest and competition for company resources. But he also reminds himself that she likely also cares (at least a *bit*) about what's good for the company. Moreover, regardless of motivation, there might well be merit in her concerns. "OK

Taylor. Tell me more about your view of the market and what I might be missing here," Lee says.

Ideally, Taylor responds with a combination of empathy and humility. As skeptical as she is of Lee's plan, she holds out the possibility he might be onto something. Knowing that her questions and concerns could easily trigger defensiveness, she thinks hard about how to raise them in a way that will be easier for Lee to hear. She avoids leading questions with an accusatory edge — "Have you thought about how disruptive this will be for our current customers?" Instead, Taylor leads with a focus on common ground — but without pretending there's not disagreement. "If your analysis is right Lee — and I'm currently skeptical — this is a major opportunity and one we all need to get behind. But I'm worried about existing customers getting confused and frustrated. What's your team's best current thinking on how to ensure that doesn't happen?"

Lee shares some ideas, and since he no longer perceives Taylor as a blocker and adversary, it seems natural to ask her for her reactions to what

he has shared, and to ask for other suggestions she might have.

Now sell and resist influence dynamics have been replaced by joint problem-solving. Rather than spiraling into the cycle of dismissal, Lee and Taylor find themselves in a virtuous cycle where their differences become the fuel for creative thinking. Maybe this discussion produces a better go-to-market plan. Or perhaps Lee does conclude that entering this new market indeed is too risky. If so, he is able to reach this conclusion because it no longer feels tantamount to admitting error (or even incompetence) and being on the losing side of an argument with Taylor. Or just maybe, a collaborative, side-by side conversation produces an entirely new plan for growth — very different from both Lee's original plan and Taylor's prior thinking.

When such collaboration goes beyond individual actors and pervades a company's culture and a joint problem-solving approach to influence is routinely employed, our research finds that people are able to learn from disagreement, make better decisions, and develop innovative solutions.

Individuals in our study who reported that joint problem-solving (versus, selling, manipulation, or coercion) was the most common style of influence at their organization were 4.9 times more likely to report that differences are a significant source of learning and innovation, than as a source of conflict and inefficiency.

Even in less collaborative work environments, we can and should cultivate new ways of thinking about influence and new ways of acting to influence others. If we respond to others as if they are unreasonable adversaries, we will inevitably encourage more adversarial and seemingly unreasonable behavior. Alternatively, if we engage those whose views and behaviors seem irrational or selfish with respect and curiosity, we will, at an absolute minimum, gain some useful insights. And far more often than not, when we treat counterparts as if they were rational and well-intentioned (even when they seem not to be), we will find that they respond to us in ways that are much more reasonable and collaborative. In the short term, we will immediately increase our ability to influence the thinking and behavior of others. Over time, we will help to replace the cycle of dismissal with a virtuous cycle of collaboration.

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