

## **“Strategic Influence – more than schmik!”**

If one googles the phrase “Strategic Influence” we see literally thousands of references to a controversial department of the Pentagon established by the US in the advent of the war in Iraq which has since been disbanded. In contrast the humble program designed several years ago for AIM has arguably less ‘reach’ .... but is still running.

More and more those working for organisations realise the critical importance of being able to wield personal power and the eroded impact and acceptability of positional power in all but a few select (aka military or emergency services) organisations, and even then, only when they are responding to ‘crisis’. This has partly occurred because of the generational shift in the workplace and the fact that many employees left home in their 20’s so that no one would tell them what to do anymore. But it is also because much of what an organisation has to do these days to earn true competitive and sustainable advantage revolves around values and culture, ethics and social conscience which are all intangible ‘soft’ aspects of business. One can’t force attitudinal change in the way one can rationalise a product line.

A discussion of *strategic influence*, namely the very deliberate joining of two words, must firstly be precipitated by a discussion on influence and its uneasy bedfellow, manipulation. It could be argued that both are underpinned by intent, utilise power, both have impact on relationships, both can get results and both can generate choices in the recipient of the respective influence or the manipulation. However *influence* is more likely to involve the sharing of complete and balanced information that affords “effective choice”, utilises persuasive power rather than coercive power, tends to engender ownership, not resentment or manipulation’s best case scenario, forced compliance.

I have a confession to make. We are tragics of the hit series “24” at our place. Six seasons later, what is the extraordinary enduring appeal of the character Jack Bauer that goes beyond the action-packed style of the show and its real time competitive advantage? He faces moral dilemmas, as the singularly focussed operative, who has blinding clarity about the outcomes he needs to achieve ( a few hours to save LA) and a situational context that somehow makes torture permissible to viewing audiences in their millions. Yes, there is a good dose of coercive power but he is totally transparent regarding his intent with the bad guy protagonist (“You have information we need and I’m going to get it”), provides the rationale (“Otherwise thousands of innocent people will die”) and gives the person an explicit choice (“Tell me what I need to know or I’ll hurt you”). Could any organisation employ the same communication tactics to get the job done and ever be regarded as an employer of choice? I think not. The context relevant to the Counter Terrorist Unit in LA somehow makes his actions credible, at least for the viewer, if not, perhaps, for the bad guy!

So might some say there are times when the end justifies the means? Ethically speaking, in our lines of work, that doesn't hold. Strategically? If one considers that rarely in life is anything a one-shot deal, then coercive persuasion and its evil twin manipulation are risky because of the likely adverse impact on the relationship assuming the 'manipulatee' catches on. The manipulatee is likely to feel any/all of "mad", "sad" "bad" or "had".

Predictably I am advocating for influence over manipulation although there are times as a parent when I need to put my glasses on to see the very fine (read as imperceptible!) line between a threat and a logical consequence. I am sure to the child they are often one and the same and I am left to rationalise that it was my intent (ie what was in my head, agent of change or axe murderer) that dictates the difference. Thus even when intent is pure, perception counts for much.

Perhaps you are sold on the idea that influence is the way to go. The reality is that we are only one half of the influence transaction and as long as we are not Tom Hanks living on an island with only a Wilson volleyball for company, then the reaction of different parties; possessing different needs, personalities and values will be variable. Effective influence requires behavioural and communication flexibility.

What is perhaps a little daunting, even onerous, is that even if we've committed to influence over manipulation as a way of life, and recognised the critical importance of shared value and behavioural dexterity, influence must still have a purpose. Thus *strategic* influence involves the consideration of *context* and the pursuit of premeditated *outcomes*, sometimes the use of frameworks/tools eg. gatekeeper analysis or a comms. strategy that informs a strategic approach, rather than adopting a simple position on something and trying to beat or wear down the other party. Yes, when we attempt to persuade we are trying to create movement in the other person and that may involve espousing evidence, selling benefits and establishing the correct emotional match with the audience. Being *purposeful* however separates the expert persuader from the good communicator.

So context, situational versatility and purposeful pursuit of outcomes are what characterise Strategic Influence. However those elite persuaders who, along with the agreements they strike, endure, do so because they have found an exquisite balance between the ongoing relationship with the other party, the respect for choice and genuine empowerment *and* the outcomes they seek to achieve. In aspiring for that balance they know that long after they have left the room, their impact is felt in the genuine commitment of people around them to achieve what they on their own, could not.

**Leanne Faraday-Brash MMgmt BA Hons MAPsS AFAIM CSP** is an organisational psychologist, coach, facilitator, speaker and facilitator and Principal of Brash Consulting, specialising in organisational psychology, EEO & workplace justice, organisational capability and change. She can be reached at [lfb@brashconsulting.com.au](mailto:lfb@brashconsulting.com.au) or [www.brashconsulting.com.au](http://www.brashconsulting.com.au)