

# Organisational Development

## Putting Theory into Practice



### An Approach to Influencing Leaders

Sarah Akhtar offers up her thinking about an approach to influencing the leaders and boards within our organisations.

#### Before we begin some context . . .

Organization Development (OD) is a planned, organization-wide effort to increase an organization's effectiveness and/or efficiency to enable the organization to achieve its strategic goals. *So how does this happen?* Well I guess it depends, because sometimes it is about promoting organizational readiness to meet change, and other times its about restructuring a current organization to better absorb a necessary change or, putting in place a development strategy to change basic beliefs, values and attitudes . . . the list goes on!!

The point is that OD interventions are about change. An important role for any OD practitioner is to help leaders increase their capacity for influencing change and this is one reason why personal influence is an essential skill for OD practitioner's to have.

#### So what do we mean by the 'influencing leaders'?

Influence is simply the power and ability to personally affect others' actions, decisions, opinions or thinking. For some of the leaders we support, this is often about compliance and getting others to go along with a plan (you might say that it's using the 'stick' rather than the carrot to get the job done). For the humble OD practitioner, however it is about sponsorship and a genuine commitment from the top team to endorse and truly support a task or plan. In reality, we can rarely rely on job titles or authority, and this is another reason why influencing skills are important to OD leads (you might even consider this to be a core part of your role?).

#### How can we influence leaders - an approach to think about?

The Center for Creative Leadership cites three kinds of influencing tactics: logical, emotional and cooperative. In a previous OD consultant role I attended the 7 C's of Consultancy and this is where I first came across this model. At the time it was described as a useful 'tool' for influencing clients, who at the time were mostly senior leaders. I quickly realised that what I actually needed to do was learn to be 'adaptive' and to 'flex' my approach so that it met with the needs and preferences of the leader I was currently working with.

It did take a lot of practice (and still does), but I've used it repeatedly to engage and manage stakeholders. The practicing really helps you to become more aware of your own influencing 'style' and learn in a more structured and conscience way what best influences others.

The *logical* tactic (head) taps into reasons that essentially make up your business case and can include both organizational and personal benefits (the ones that matter that is!!) To really get the hang of this and to do it well, I realised that I needed to spend a lot of time not just knowing the priorities but actually understanding the importance leaders attached to these priorities, (in other words the drivers for wanting staff survey results to improve, for changing the culture or improving services).

The *emotional* appeal (heart) connects your project to individual goals and values and means linking a business case to a clear vision which the leader (or another stakeholder can fully support). Of course, to make an emotional appeal you must have some relationship with and understanding of the person/s you're appealing to. It is therefore important to spend time getting to know an audience and understand what might be switching them on/off, what might be keeping them awake and what 'credible' might look and feel like for this group. Furthermore, this will help you tailor credible messages that resonate really well with the stakeholder's reality and view of the world.

The focus of the *cooperative* approach (hand) is to build a connection with the person/s you want to influence in order to get the support you need for your business case. This is the 'doing' bit, which can simply mean just figuring out what can be done together or in partnership, finding out what ideas others have or maybe drawing on a leader that already supports your business case and has credibility.

### **In a nutshell, some key insights that you might find useful:**

- One of most important tasks for leaders is to influence the behaviour of the people who will make the big ideas a reality - employees! Leaders that invest time in thinking about what will change behaviours are perhaps the most influential and queue OD!
- Few leaders that are responsible for aligning their people with the execution of key decisions, can answer the question, 'How do you change the behaviour of a large group of people?' OD can thus add value by supporting leaders to put in place repeatable and effective ways to influence behaviour and succeed in leading change.
- Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that 'influencing' means talking people into doing things. Persuasion has its place, but actually behavioural change takes a lot more than just words; we can therefore use head/heart/hand tactics to help organisations accomplish their goals.
- Your ability to influence others needs to be a part of your OD toolkit, because without it, you run the risk of not being able to support leaders to lead change.

- Make a plan for the work of building relationships (because it takes a lot of effort). Decide who you need to influence and figure out as best you can what matters to them (this will help with influencing). Think about where you need to build partnerships and learn when it makes sense to talk to specific individuals (including leaders).
- And finally, trust is key; no matter who the stakeholder, it is important for OD leads to foster relationships based upon trust.

