
HOW LEADERS INFLUENCE THE NAYSAYERS

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It is fifty years since Pink Floyd released their classic song titled “Us and Them”. This same dynamic in the workplace can be a classic source of misery for managers. What are the leadership strategies to get past opposition, polarization, or apathy in teams, organisations, and among stakeholders?

This Article is the third in my series about how leaders influence others. Influencing is a critical leadership skill, and while it may not be a cure-all, it certainly is more useful for leaders than the lack of it. In my first article, I examined the nature of influence and described the Three Influence Steps that I recommend for leaders. My second article explored the research by neuroscientists which is expanding our understanding of the greater scope we have to be influential. In this latest article, we come up against the naysayers.

You may be a naysayer yourself right now. Perhaps you are thinking that the us-and-them attitude is a relic from a bygone era, much like Pink Floyd themselves, and that “we

are a really tight outfit now, Richard”. That is a great achievement but not always my experience, nor what leaders and clients always share with me in my work with organisations and executive teams. Sometimes, there is a divide between leaders and the rest, and both sides openly talk amongst themselves, about “us and them”. There can be open consensus in one group that other folks further along the chain are apathetic and resistant to change. It is not unusual to find leaders who are very frustrated, dealing with certain individuals. It is not a rarity to have polarization or personality clashes in Executive or management teams. And it can be surprising how many clients, customers and stakeholders get labelled “difficult”. This can be occurring in the best of organisations. It is also obvious that Us and Them is a rampant theme in current world events and social developments. The dark side of the moon may be an optical illusion, but a dark side to the earth seems very real.

Dictators have some simple solutions for dealing with opponents and nuisance makers. They sack them on mass, or transfer them to some malaria-ridden post, or jail them, or they poison their underpants. The latter example, unfortunately, is not an invention of my puerile imagination or that of the bumbling Maxwell Smart. It shouldn't need to be said, but it does need to be said often and loudly given our attraction to short-cuts and even shorter leaders with thin

moustaches, that dictatorship is not the same as leadership. It also may be obvious that I am influenced by the Charlie Chaplin strategy of mockery towards vicious dictators.

Managers can be required to be directive and instructional in their roles, but that does not make them dictators. It also needs to be acknowledged that successful leaders and change agents who achieve results in business or public life, sometimes are described as dictators. This can be a mere concoction by their frustrated critics and losing competitors, and other times it is a well-earned title.

Just as managers and leaders know they cannot expect stellar results by simply ordering teams to collaborate well, or ordering individuals to perform at their peak, nor can they simply command that there be no disagreements or dragging the chain or white-anting of initiatives. Carrots and sticks can work to some extent, but they have their own limitations. If the cheap solutions are exhausted or unacceptable, it may be time for leaders to start influencing the naysayers. William Ury from Harvard University was one of the authors of the best-selling book on negotiation titled *Getting To Yes*. That simple little book led to the creation of an impressive cottage industry on negotiation housed at Harvard Law School. A bloated and ghosted book titled *The Art Of The Deal*, did not originate from that source.

Ury's research and work since that breakthrough effort, has been directed at the parallel challenge of how to influence the naysayers. He has dealt with lots of organizational and global conflicts and written a raft of books, including a deceptively simple one appropriately titled *Getting Past No*. Ury is more imaginative than I am – he uses Five rather than Three Steps to describe the bones of his strategy.

Previous participants of mine will have been introduced to the idea of the Balcony and Dancefloor. Devotees of Chris Argyris from Harvard Business School, Ron Heifetz at the Kennedy School or William Ury from the Law School, may dispute who originated the metaphor, but all three academics have made good use of it in their work. Not surprisingly, Ury's **first** piece of advice for would-be influencers is to go to the Balcony. Why? Because faced with refusal, obstruction and cynicism, the temptation for leaders after stifling their impulse to scream, can be to overreact by pulling rank, making threats, striking back, breaking off the relationship, or even worse, retreating or giving in.

The balcony is any way of gaining greater awareness of self and circumstances. It could be the room next door or going for a run, or it could be taking some deep breaths or exercising mindfulness right there and then. The balcony allows a leader to gain distance from their own emotions, prejudices and identity around hot button issues. That

distance allows the leader to be more reflective and to begin to strategize about interests, alternatives and tactics. Don't undermine your own credibility through your reactions and don't make a hasty decision – buy time and engage in quality thinking. That's why you are paid the big bucks, despite AI.

Once you have disarmed yourself, the **next** requirement is to disarm the others. Ury advises a surprising approach to achieve this – he recommends that you Step to their Side. This practice is counter-intuitive, but a breakthrough proposal from Ury. Listen actively, ask clarifying questions, and paraphrase their statements. Acknowledge their points and feelings. Naysayers may have legitimate concerns, or even some valuable perspectives you have overlooked. Focus on any areas of agreement and state your own views clearly and as an addition to their statements rather than a contradiction. Language is your friend or enemy at this stage. Avoid using a topic-changing or dismissive “But”, which is masquerading as a qualification. Insert the word “Yes” into the dialogue whenever it is appropriate as a counter to the background negativity. Be respectful – not performative. If attacks or counterproductive behaviour continue, call out the behaviour and insist on rules. Respect and positivity should not hurt your formal authority, but may embellish your informal authority. You may still judge this as “kowtowing to adversaries” and wrong. Former PM Rabin supported

diplomacy in the cauldron of the Middle East, and famously told his internal naysayers that you don't make peace with friends but with your enemies. Some folks on his own side assassinated him for his efforts. My best advice to leaders is: be courageous, influence both sides, and watch your back.

Next, it is time to Reframe from Positions to Interests. This is the heart of the problem-solving conversation. I have written in detail about this practice in my first two articles on Influencing for Leaders. You can access them for free at www.searleburke.com/publications-directory. And remember to make use of my Interest and Value Triangle, with its focus on Relational and Procedural Interests, as well as the full range of Substantive Interests.

Proceeding to Ury's **fourth step**, his advice is to Build Them A Golden Bridge. This is about making it easier for them to say yes. Present different options to choose from, rather than a constant demand for compromise. Give them credit whenever they contribute to solutions, and make it easier by breaking the problem and the solutions into small parcels. The Bridge is also about giving them a graceful way of retreating, which avoids too much loss of face. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy promised Krushchev through a back channel, to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey. The world should be thankful that in this case both leaders were clear-headed enough to ignore their own side and allow the other

enough wriggle room to retreat. In industrial disputes, the victors try to avoid crowing about it, and often allow the losing side to frame the outcome first for the media.

Finally, you still have your sources of power and authority as the leader. You may have kept these in reserve while searching for a resolution, but you did not relinquish them. If progress is still elusive, don't make threats or try to force a solution down their throat says Ury. But now you use your power to bring them to their senses rather than their knees. Explain the reality of the situation in terms of the attractiveness of your alternatives compared to their alternatives if a stalemate ensues. This is a power move, and the more you use power the more you need to take steps to keep defusing the situation too, so you don't undo all your good work. Keep reminding them of what is in it for them, and how it serves at least some of their important interests.

I find some managers like to use this reserve step right at the start to set realistic parameters. There are advantages to this approach and it may speed up the process. But there are also significant risks of derailing the achievement of your goal and undermining any future relationship. It can be like smashing others with a baseball bat to remind them to take you seriously, and then suggesting "Let's play nice".

Reviewing these steps it may have struck you that it is preferable for the influential leader to be *proactive in the first place*, which is my counter to *déjà vu all over again*. Don't wait for the naysayers and opposition to gather steam in rallying against your decisions or change initiatives. Larry Susskind from MIT is a big fan of the near-consensual strategy for leaders. He has written a rather large tome titled the *Consensus Building Handbook*, about ways leaders can build a large coalition of what he calls "the constructive middle". This proactive leadership approach is designed to prevent the small minority of cynics or hardliners from above or below, scuttling initiatives before sufficient support and buy-in has been won to ensure unassailable momentum.

Your level of influence as a leader can also be impacted by how you navigate what I call the "locational dilemma". This is another way to get on the front foot. I am not talking about the pressing issue of your accommodation, but the choices you make about where to locate yourself in relation to those you lead. A traditional approach has been to place yourself above the flock, huddling with the other leaders. There can be a lot of informal us-and-them pressure from your fellow leaders, and from the led, for you to separate yourself this way. Ostensible motives for a leader to prefer this location are to protect and assert your authority, or save precious time, but it can come at the expense of influential leadership.

Another favored location for leaders is to be charging ahead of the others, and using charisma, inspiration or shiny example, in the hope of exerting a magnetic pull on the group in your preferred direction. Yet another smaller group of us, may like to plonk ourselves right in the glittering centre of our followers and suck up all the oxygen by hogging their attention. The latter narcissistic approach has no resemblance to the practice of Aboriginal elders who traditionally have preferred an inner and outer circle to achieve engagement in dialogue and decision-making.

Separation is a common feature of many of these locational choices, and attempts to influence can look more like pulling random levers. There is a perfectly good argument for avoiding being overly chummy with those you lead, but too much separation and specialness not only costs you in terms of relationship and communication, it interferes with your ability to be genuinely influential. And it will cost you in terms of your ability to build a “tight” organisation with strong teamwork and an adaptive culture. The latter is a great container to influence, and benefit from, the naysayers.

I am thinking we should leave the world of “Us and Them” to Pink Floyd. The saxophone in their version is so great, and their creation has the virtue of not being destructive.

Influential leadership is very creative and constructive too!

