

Authentic Influence

Thinking it through before acting upon it

by Nicholas Dungan

Before we attempt to exercise influence, we ought to analyse what we mean by influence and what the meaning of that influence implies.

First and foremost, if we are decent people seeking to use our influence towards beneficent ends, the influence we wish to exercise must be *authentic*: genuine, heartfelt, inspired by good will and intended to create good will. To be authentic, such influence must be both *legitimate* on the part of the person exercising influence and *voluntary* on the part of the person being influenced.

To be legitimate, the influence we wish to exercise must be ethical in its ends and in its means. This influence does not allow for anything dubious, unseemly or illegal, nor even slightly suspect, a bit dodgy, disingenuous: nothing underhanded, no cutting corners, not two-faced.

Authentic influence must also be voluntary on the part of the person being influenced. The art of persuasion is just that: the ability to inspire others to act in the way that we desire them to act, but based on the consent, the acquiescence, even the enthusiasm of those others.

For influence to be voluntary, there is one aspect that must be missing: fear. Influence exercised by creating anxiety, or making threats, or using intimidation, is negative influence. This putrid sort of influence will be resented by others and will last only until they can find a way to avoid it or reject it or overcome it.

The triangulation of trust

Once we have determined that the influence we wish to cultivate must be authentic, legitimate and voluntary, then we can examine the components which make up authentic influence. These components are the truth, the sense of reality and awareness of 'the other'. Together they constitute a triangle that inspires trust on the part of those whom we wish to influence.

The value of the truth should be obvious, but in our day and age sometimes seems to be under threat. Yet the apprehension that we live in a 'post-truth' era of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' actually serves to make the truth more valuable, not less. All philosophies and all religions have always emphasised the centrality of the truth. The Buddha said: 'Three things can not hide for long: the Moon, the Sun and the Truth.' Respecting the truth requires courage and character. And if we deviate from the truth, our influence will not last long, nor be effective, nor be beneficent, because others will not trust us.

If the opposite of the truth is falsehood, the opposite of the sense of reality is denial, or delusion. The eminent philosopher Bertrand Russell, when asked for his advice to future generations, gave this guidance on how to confront situations: ask yourself first ‘What are the facts?’. If we attempt to influence others based on illusion, or an idealised version of reality, or an artificial intellectual construct, then, even if we are deemed ethical and truthful by those others, we will still be written off as dreamers disconnected from the real world, and we will fail to exercise our influence.

The third side of the triangle of trust, along with the truth and the sense of reality, is awareness of ‘the other’. We can try to influence all we want, but without the other, there is nobody to receive our influence. Even more than this, the way we design and project and gauge our influence should be largely a function of who the other is, how we judge her or his receptivity, what we think her or his sensitivities are that will allow our influence to be appreciated, and received voluntarily. This applies just as much, indeed more, when ‘the other’ is actually several, or many, others.

Ancient wisdom, modern intelligence

We should not be surprised to learn that the art of authentic influence which we think we have unearthed for ourselves was actually articulated long ago. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, identified three modes of the art of persuasion: ethos, logos and pathos.

- *Ethos* applies to the speaker and the speaker’s ethics and reputation. Ethos requires the truth.
- *Logos* means the message, the substance of the influence. Logos requires the sense of reality.
- *Pathos* refers to the emotions through which our audience receives our influence. Pathos requires awareness of the other.

<i>ethos</i>	<i>logos</i>	<i>pathos</i>
the truth	the sense of reality	the other
influencer / leader	message / substance	emotions / soft skills