

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Creating Strategic Influence

by Dr. Mike Armour

When you hear the term "strategic leadership," what picture comes to mind? More than likely you envision someone who excels at big-picture thinking, insightful planning, and consistent execution.

Missing in this list, however, is another essential element. It's what Richard Hughes and Katherine Beatty in their book *Becoming A Strategic Leader* call "strategic influence."

The PBF Principle

Strategic influence is an art unto itself. It's the creative ability to draw others into alignment with your strategic objectives. And the operative word here is "draw." Strategic influence is not about using your authority to compel strategic alignment. Instead, strategic influence aims at willing cooperation from others.

Among the skills most essential to strategic influence is PBF — personal behavioral flexibility. The more flexible you can be in your communication style, in your motivational style, in your managerial style, in your working style, the more likely your success with strategic influence. I call this the PBF Principle.

Becoming the Steersman

It's an interpersonal version of an axiom in the field of cybernetics, the study of systems dynamics. The word "cybernetics" itself comes from an almost identical term in Greek which means "the steersman." Cybernetics zeroes in on what "steers" systems, both in machines and among people.

Cybernetics quickly discovered that it's relatively easy to identify "the steersman" in any system. The steersman will always be the element best embodying the Law of Requisite Variety. This law is stated in a number of different ways (as you can discover by just doing a Google search on "requisite variety"), but it essentially boils down to this: In any interactive system, the element with the greatest flexibility will have the greatest influence on the system.

You can see this with the heating and cooling system in your house. A host of components comprise the system. Some are static, like the ducts and piping. Others periodically power up or power off, like the fan and the compressor. But what controls the system is one little device called a thermostat.

Unlike the components whose only options are to be on or off, the thermostat can respond to settings across a broad range. While every component is essential, the

"steersman" is clearly the thermostat. It is able to control the system because it possesses the "requisite variety" in its modes of operation.

Personal Behavioral Flexibility

Now apply this principle to interpersonal relationships. The person with the greatest personal behavioral flexibility — the greatest PBF — becomes the steersman in any relationship, if not in the short run, certainly over the long haul. High personal flexibility translates into more behavioral options to choose from. You have fewer limits on how you deal with people or how you respond to situations.

Thus, by developing high PBF, you optimize your ability to project influence. Because you are able to adapt yourself so naturally to each individual's communication and motivational style, your flexibility allows you to build trust and rapport deeply, more quickly. You foster a greater connection with people around you.

Developmental Priorities

To use PBF to exert strategic influence, however, demands two developmental priorities. First, is the skill of behavioral flexibility itself. Few of us were taught high PBF skills growing up. Instead, we learned a very narrow range of acceptable responses to people and circumstances. Adulthood then finds us in something of a behavioral straight jacket.

Second, we must be perpetual students of human behavior, not just to understand ourselves, but more importantly (from the standpoint of strategic influence), to understand others. It's not enough to have behavioral flexibility. We must also have the insight and wisdom to apply the appropriate behavior in the appropriate circumstance in order to maximize our impact.

One of the most valuable services I provide my coaching and leadership development clients, I believe, is helping them expand their PBF and enrich their understanding of other people's behavior. I must confess, however, that I sometimes get a "push back" on both of these.

Executives whose career paths have been in engineering, technical specialties, and financial audits, analysis, and control are especially prone to pushing back. More than likely they chose their particular career paths because they are more interested in working with things and data than in working with people. For them spending a lot of time studying the deeper dynamics of personal behavior has little appeal.

But if we aspire to positions of strategic leadership, the skills that undergird strategic influence are essential. If being a student of personal behavior does not appeal to us, that's one of the first places we need to start developing more behavioral flexibility. We need to find ways to motivate ourselves to learn how to "read others like a book," while also mastering the PBF to respond in ways that maximize our influence-building potential.

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