

When does influence or persuasion become manipulation?

How good an influencer are you? What are the skills of influencing that are worth developing? When does influencing become persuading? Where does influencing tip into manipulating? Judging how to influence and persuade effectively without being tainted with the criticism of manipulation is one of the key skills of the leader, suggests **Peter Shaw**

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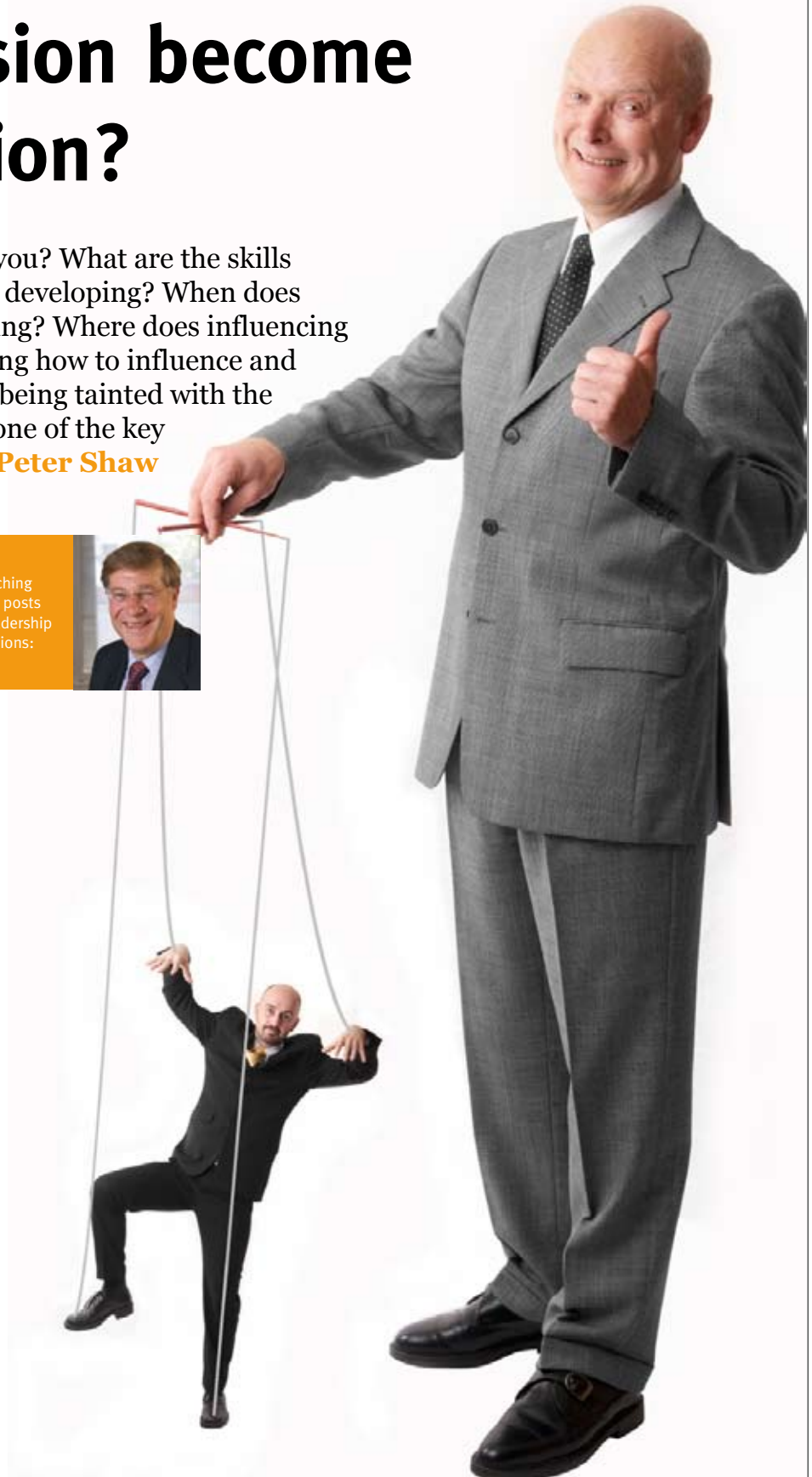
Influencing

Who has influenced you most in your working life and why were they able to do that effectively? Often the influence has come through the use of key facts, the quality of the relationship, a track record of wise advice, a genuine concern for your wellbeing and the ability to challenge your thinking in a non-threatening way.

Key practical steps to enhance your influencing skills might include:

- try to understand where the other person is coming from
- give the person your sole undivided attention
- identify what might be the win-win situation in terms of success for both you and them
- try to find shared values and base the conversation around the shared values
- show you have credibility and insight in the areas of particular interest to the individual

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Successful influencing will involve the long game of:

- building respect in others for your experience and creating a trust in shared values
- building examples of where previous conversations have been productive
- not expecting instant changes of views or behaviours
- judging success in terms of outcomes over the longer term

Some of the risks when trying to influence are:

- being so nice to someone that you lose the focus on the outcome sought
- becoming frustrated by the lack of immediate success
- getting the timing wrong. There will be moments when an individual is ready to change their perspective: it is not straightforward judging when this right moment appears

Persuading

When has someone persuaded you convincingly? Often this is when there have been financial or time pressures which have necessitated a clear decision. Some of the requirements for effective persuading are similar to good influencing, namely key facts and the quality of the relationship. But there is more of a win-lose outcome when persuading with greater risks about an individual's self esteem.

Key practical steps to grow your persuasional skills might include:

- structure your arguments clearly and know what your "killer facts" are
- be explicit about the negative consequences if your viewpoint does not prevail
- be ready to respond factually and directly to the views of sceptics
- build both support for and acquiescence in your ideas with colleagues and stakeholders

Successful persuasion will involve pacing your interventions: i.e.

- prepare the way to avoid someone being taken by surprise who therefore

withdraws, becomes cross or close-minded

- allow someone in a discussion or debate to "dig a hole for themselves" or to "contradict themselves"
- watch the observations of others sensing when to bring them in as allies
- allow an individual time to reflect and change their mind in a way which does not humiliate them.

The good persuader will never humiliate their interlocutor when they win and will be generous in victory. When the argument is lost the good persuader will be courteous with those whose view has prevailed to help avoid a build up of resentment. They will be clinical in understanding what went wrong and will be building a clear prospectus for the future.

Some of the risks when trying to persuade are:

- believing in your own arguments so much that you are blind to new facts
- overstating your case so that it can be undermined with relative ease
- enjoying the debate so much that you lose sight of the outcome you want
- being so competitive that you do not appreciate the long term damage to a relationship if you "beat someone down into submission"

Manipulating

A damaging criticism is that you have been manipulating the facts. Even more damaging is the accusation that you have been manipulating people. We may say we never manipulate the facts, but we will often want to tell a story in a way which picks out particular aspects. We may chose to disclose facts which will interest our hearers. When does the genuine summarising of the facts become manipulation of the truth? To win an argument we may focus on different facts with different people. This may be successful in the long run, but a reputation for duplicity is one of the most damaging stigmas to carry.

A reputation for manipulating people is even more damaging. The reputation is easily gained and takes lots of time to lose. If

we treat people inconsistently or harshly, or are seen to manoeuvre them or misrepresent them, we can so easily gain a reputation for manipulating them. Not consulting key people is often seen as manipulating round them. Pressing on an individual's more sensitive emotions to anger them or depress them may be done subconsciously under a veneer of geniality, and be the most insidious form of manipulation.

How do we avoid criticism of manipulating facts?

- agree in advance the data to be collected
- be clear what the data does or does not tell you and test the assumptions with others
- allow others to interrogate the facts and share your interpretations of them

How is the accusation of manipulating people best avoided?

- build and demonstrate trust
- always be clear about your motives
- recognise when an action can be misinterpreted as manipulation and talk through why you are taking your favoured approach
- explain your reasoning when you understand why someone has felt that you have been trying to manipulate them, and apologise if necessary
- don't tell half truths.

What type of actions are legitimate, which some may regard as manipulation?

- looking at radical options in a confidential environment initially
- setting the boundaries for a debate or piece of action
- managing an individual's foibles or prejudices
- creating a supportive environment over a period for a new initiative you want to take
- identifying shared interests so that working together can be introduced and common goals achieved

In all these steps the potential criticism of manipulation is best avoided, through careful explanation of why the action has been taken.

It may sometimes, be convenient for your critics to describe you as manipulative and being thick skinned enough to accept that criticism is important. What is key is being honest with ourselves about whether the charge of being manipulative is fair and whether we are self aware enough to know when we have been manipulative. When the criticism is unfair, going into rage and resentment rarely works. Changing the perspective of others comes through that clear, persistent telling of the truth, being clear about our motives and challenging people courteously and firmly when we have been misrepresented.

Building a reputation as a good influencer untainted by manipulation

Key steps are the clarity of your own thinking and objectives, building trust over time, being clear about your motives, recognising and listening to the point of view of others and choosing the right time to press your points. Above all be self aware enough to know when you might be pushing the facts or emotions unfairly, and be aware what are your own personal values.

Perhaps most important of all is consistency. The individual who has built a reputation for manipulation will always be at risk of being regarded as manipulative whatever they do. Much better to build a reputation for building trust as a foundation for influencing or persuading.

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