

# Influencer

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Reviewed by David Hanlon.

This is the latest book from the team that gave us *Crucial Conversations*. Once read, it is not surprising that it became a New York Times Bestseller. As Stephen Covey says on the back cover, 'An instant classic: whether you're leading change or changing your life, this book delivers.' Indeed I agree. It is the change management equivalent to Jim Collins *Good to Great*.

Whilst many books about influence focus on pop psychology and recipes that are more frequently manipulative and shallow, this book provides specific steps, good case studies and backup research. So don't be put off by the catchy chapter headings.

In essence, the book provides a sound understanding of the many forces which influence behaviour. As with *Good to Great*, they do this through the study of successful changes in a wide variety of situations. These case studies themselves are fascinating. Perhaps, more interesting is how they take these examples and then put together a very logical model that helps focus efforts to influence change.

## The structure of the book

The book is written in two parts

### Part 1: The power to change anything

1. You're an influencer
2. Find vital behaviors
3. Change the way you change minds

### Part 2: Make change inevitable

4. Make the undesirable desirable
5. Surpass your limits
6. Harness peer pressure
7. Never go it alone
8. Design rewards and demand accountability
9. Change the environment
10. Become an influencer

## Vital behaviours

### Have simple yet clear rules

The Delancey Street Foundation case study is one of the most powerful in San Francisco with an amazing record of turning people with extensive criminal records and a history of drug use into productive and valuable citizens. Founder and President, Dr Mimi Silbert, has a refreshingly simple and short set of rules. No doubt the organizations success is in their implementation. None-the-less they are worthy for consideration by anyone in the change business.

1. Focus on very few vital behaviours you want to change (too many and you dilute the effort)
2. Have everyone be responsible for someone's success
3. Have everyone confront everyone else about every single violation

## Look for positive deviance

Rather than focusing on what didn't work, look for what **does** work. (Entrepreneur and business advisor, Robert Bloom<sup>1</sup> takes this a step further when he says businesses should identify their **uncommon offering**). And make sure those you observe are tested with rigour.

## Help others with two vital questions

When it comes to changing behaviours there are two vital questions that we need to work with.

- First, is the change worth it? If the individual cannot see any benefit in making a change of behaviour you will be working with the (why waste the effort attitude).
- Second, can I do this? (if not, why try?)

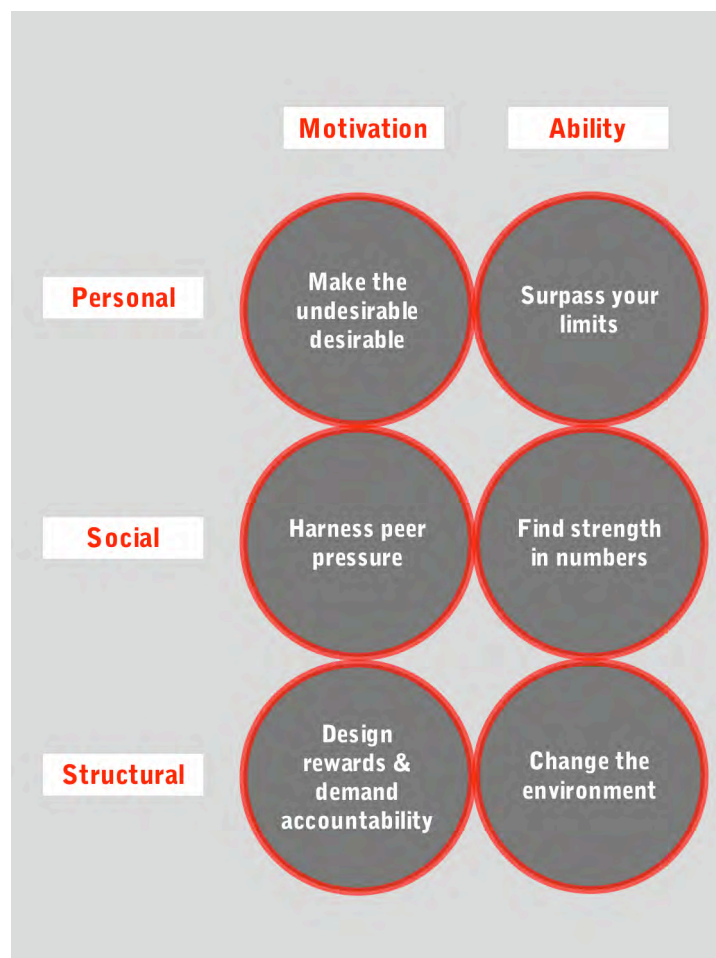
Use experience and stories as the tool. As the authors point out telling rarely works. Most people with chronic behavioural flaws have been told endless times they need to change. . You can't explain logically to people why they must change their behaviors and expect anything to happen. Peoples' behaviors are tuned to what they believe is in their best self interests. Unless you can change that belief, you have little chance of changing their behaviors.

Many of us try reward or punishment to change behavior. Rewards tend to be external to the behavior and tend to be given for results rather than behavior.

Experiences of others and their stories to which personalised and internalised relationships can be made are the most powerful.

## The influence model: six sources of influence

The bulk of the book contains tools for how to change these behaviours based on a model developed by the authors.



<sup>1</sup> The Inside Advantage (2007).

## 1. Personal

### 1.a Motivation: Make the Undesirable Desirable

For me of one of the best take homes come from this section. The authors assert that it is the **lack of thought, not the presence of thought** that creates bad behaviours. We don't pause to consider how our immediate choices (frequently the mundane, the emotional) **connect** to our values, morals and personal standards.

**Connect to a person's sense of Self**

This is more so when we feel threatened or challenged. Under stress, when our emotions kick in, our time lines become shorter and we give less consideration to our abstract values.

Furthermore they asset moral disengagement **always** accompanies political, combative and self-centred behaviour.

### Connecting actions to values or beliefs

The authors draw on some fascinating research by Albert Bandura, one of the world's leading psychologists. Bandura asserts that four processes disconnect us from our higher values. These are:

- Moral justification
- Dehumanisation
- Minimising
- Displacing responsibility

### Moral justification

Most of us do this in some way most days. That is, we will do something for immediate convenience when we know that the longer term consequences are undesirable. For example, we will show up late for work, we will do take home small items from the office, etc. But little things can grow into big things as Eron and the Australian Wheat Board discovered. Both of the latter no doubt morally justified their actions at the time.

### Dehumanisation

Frequently we justify behaviours on the basis of numbers (transforming the event, possible outcomes into data). Many executives become out of touch with the experiences encountered as a result of streams of data and immediate pressures on the organisation. The Challenger space shuttle, in which an engineer was pressured in giving the OK on an O-ring that had not been tested at the extremely low temperatures it would be subjected to... ..the rest, as they say, is history.

### Minimisation

When we see less of the humanity of another person or when we disrespect a person, it becomes easy for us to dismiss our actions towards them. The authors cite an experiment by Bandura where he has students imaging they are giving 'shocks' to students from another college to help train them. The only bias given to the three groups is by allowing the training students to 'overhear' one of the following phrases:

*Neutral:* The subjects from the other school are here.

*Humanising:* The subject from the other school are here. They seem *nice*.

*Dehumanising:* The subject from the other school are here. They seem like *animals*.

You don't have to be Einstein to guess the results. The training students administered significantly higher shocks to those labeled animals.

## Displacing responsibility

All so frequently we confront an undesirable performance with logic and argument. We forget to link the current behaviour with what the individual actually wants. The authors suggest that much undesirable behaviour is because the individuals are purposefully disengaged from their own moral compass.

## 1.b Ability: Surpass Your Limits

Fundamental to successful change is development of the **ability** to change. It is well documented that change efforts fail at the rate of **2 in every 3**. The buzz of a change management or culture change workshop fails because businesses so frequently underestimate the need to **learn** and actually **practice** the desired behaviours.

**Knowing leadership content and doing it are not the same.**

Another of the more powerful findings in the book are built on the concept that will is a skill and much of our prowess is practice.

## Will is a skill

Drawing on the work of Professor Walter Mischel of Stanford University, the authors point out that people who demonstrate low levels of self-control show higher levels of aggression, delinquency, health problems and so on.

**Will is a skill. and Competence is deliberate practice.**

Mischel concluded that delayers **applied specific learnable** techniques to keep their attention off what would be merely short-term gratification and on their long-term goal.

## Prowess is *deliberate practice*

Not all practice is good practice. This is a well known mantra of successful sports coaches world wide. They are there with an attentive eye and work with their teams to achieve maximum performance. Organisationally, this is far more blurred. We accept less than optimum performance when we see it before our very eyes – at best it comes up in monthly meetings or annual performance reviews, by which time the impact is largely lost: replaced in the mind of the team member by some other pressing matter.

## Build social skills

Learning the skills based on emotional intelligence is one the key strategies suggested. They simply the HOW we respond depends on whether we have a 'hot or go' system versus a 'cool or know' system.

1. **Hot or go.** This is where there is the amygdala (that small, reptilian part of our brain) kicks in. The blood flows out of our brain towards our arms and legs, our heart rate increases and cholesterol production increases (just in case we feel a blunt trauma). We no longer think in a rational manner.
2. **Cool or know.** This is where we do our higher level cognitive processing. Running off the frontal lobe, in this state we are far more productive.

**Once you change where you think, You change how you think, which changes what you think.**

The important question is HOW to do this. The authors suggest practice calling up complex problems when confronting a hot or go situation. They suggest by arguing with your emotions (eg. your negative/angry feelings about something/someone). Introduce an alternate argument. For example, rather than feeling "this person drives me nuts", set the scene before meeting with them that you will be curious about how they respond to your questions. Keep setting alternatives to your predictive instinctive behaviours. And reset often.

In the words of the authors, keep the hot at bay by making:

- the difficult easy
- the adverse pleasant
- the boring interesting

## 2. Social

### 2.a Motivation: Harness Peer Pressure

The power of one

Research by Yale University psychologist, Dr Stanley Milgram is a haunting reminder of the Power of One. Milgram was seeking answers as to how people like Hitler could convince millions of decent citizens to do repugnant things. His experiment is fascinating reading, but extremely conclusive just ordinary people will follow respected people.

The power of the Right One

Working with the opinion makers rather than side-stepping them is the first priority. They are engaged whether you like it or not. And they are leaders for two reasons:

- First, they are viewed as knowledgeable about the subject
- Second, their opinions are trusted (they are viewed as not just having a great deal of knowledge about a subject, they have other peoples - not just their own – interests at heart).

**We are far more likely to succeed in anything if we share our commitment with genuine**

Our job is to find respected leaders among the staff to help change the vital behaviors of the rank and file. It is also our job to become a respected opinion maker ourselves.

**Create an environment where formal and informal leaders relentlessly encourage vital behaviours and skillfully confront negative**

Make the undiscussable, discussable

One of the problems frequently encountered in shifting culture, is people either won't talk about the real issues (a boss who is aggressive or domineering, a poor performing employee or team member) or they won't establish clear paths to remedy the situation (ie. confronting the issue everytime).

### 2.b Ability: Find Strength in Numbers

People can more easily make changes in their behavior when they are not alone. Unfortunately, many corporate organizations promote individual achievement rather than group achievement. In a corporate change situation, implementing topic-based documentation requires teamwork. Each player on the team is vital to the success of the project. The members on the team are responsible for each other's success. The rewards of success or failure are shared by the team. As a manager, it is important to promote teamwork in your department, ideally with co-located people, while at the same time avoiding the development of cliques that can be destructive.

## 3. Structural

### 3.a Motivation: Design Rewards and Demand Accountability

Be wary of extrinsic rewards

One of the traps we can easily fall into is offering a reward to get something done. The danger is a phenomenon called the 'over justification hypothesis'.

**Reward vital behaviours not just results.**

Rather, they suggest the priorities are:

1. Connect vital behaviours to intrinsic satisfaction
2. Line the social support
3. Then reward

Punishment has its place, and the authors suggest placing a 'shot across the bow!' They cite a telling example of the Crime Branch of the North Carolina Police Force. Rather than taking the usual procedures of warnings and lectures on just how bad jail is, they have an offender notification program, where family and friends of the people they are about to arrest are invited to an offender notification forum. The first part is quite standard – explaining the consequences etc of getting and what might be done to stay straight. The second part is the unusual: the offenders are taken to a special room with posters of them all, each showing them committing a crime. Under each poster is their personal history file detailing all their crimes. Next they are required to sit and watch a video where they are required to raise their hand when they see themselves committing a crime. And the police never bluff. The result a substantive drop in drug crime in the district.

### **3.b Ability: Change the Environment**

The key message of this section is our final plank in building success is the extent to which we:

1. Think about *things*
2. Are able to come up with theories of how changing *things* will change behavior

One of the key messages in this section, is to make the invisible, visible. For example, leaving lights on or using colour photocopy paper can be solved by putting the price of each option in a highly visible spot.

### **In summary**

Influencer is a book with many case studies covering an extremely wide range of topics: criminals, hospitals, developing country cultural and social shifts, agricultural extension and many more. Each of the stories are themselves a fascinating read.

More importantly, the authors link these stories and case studies with a wealth of academic research to back up their own model to give us their story: it is a powerful one.

*Influencer* is available in good bookstores, Amazon and also in audible form ([www.audible.com](http://www.audible.com)).