

Lead from the Seat You Are In

“I’m just not the leader type.” Perhaps you’ve heard someone say something like this at work, on a committee, or even in your home. Maybe you’ve even said it yourself! Or perhaps you have heard or said, “I would do that, but I just don’t have the authority.”

But here’s the thing: leadership and influence don’t really come with the chair you sit in, they come from you. We are all capable of influencing others in ways great and small. What matters most about being able to influence comes from your mindset and candor, not your title. Plenty of people lead more broadly than the seat they occupy. So can you!

Ideas for Action

Let me first credit the title of this pearl to my friends at the Twin Cities United Way. Recently, I was honored to speak at their annual all-staff retreat; they had chosen this title as their theme. And it makes sense; part of creating a “leaderful” and dynamic organization is making it clear that all can lead.

Opportunities to influence others are around us all the time; you just have to grasp them. Consider this experience: I had just rushed in from a meeting, when my executive assistant, Jean, stopped me and said, “Your presentation in Duluth is tomorrow. You need to see Joe about it today – actually now would be good.”

Now, Jean could have asked me, “Do you think you should talk to Joe about tomorrow’s presentation?” Or, “Are you planning on talking to Joe now?” How wonderful that she didn’t hint! She was comfortable trying to influence me. Good assistants do this all the time. Jean knew what she and Joe needed to get ready. So, without wasting time, she just declared, “You need to...” Jean demonstrated the kind of influence that makes her such an asset to me, our clients, and our firm.

Our firm once heard from an expert on leadership dynamics, who said that in group settings, the most effective leaders do not automatically ask for “groupthink” if they already have an opinion. Instead, they first state their opinion, and then seek input.

Thus, rather than asking the group, “I am wondering what you all think about this...”, own your opinion. Say, “I believe we need to change this, and I am curious what the rest of you think.” Draw your own line in the sand.

In this case, the difference between asking a question and making a statement is subtle, yet profound. By making a statement rather than using a question to mask your own opinion you have a chance to influence and shape the conversation toward your desired outcome: a real dialogue about the topic at hand.

What does it mean to have a leaderful organization? Great leaders have an ability to influence others in powerful ways. They also expect and empower others to influence them, to make independent decisions, and to move something forward whether they have the “authority” or not. Do your team members influence others or each other freely?

In your leadership role, make sure you are providing others with the setting and opportunities to assert their influence and power. Champion constructive input and encourage forward thinking. Guard against cutting off the conversation or conveying a sense that action can only happen after checking in with you.

Even when you are not at the head of the table, you can still be a leader. Great leaders influence and lead in all directions – up, down, across, and outside. Go ahead – lead from the seat you are in!

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