

[the art of] power and



The key tools of management are now persuasion and consensus-building rather than command and control, according to the latest book in the AIM Management Today series, *Understanding Influence for Leaders at All Levels**. Derek Parker reports.

The eight essays in this book emphasise that an understanding of how to exert influence is an issue not just for those in the corner office, but extending to anyone with a leadership role. Not only that, but the nature of the communications skills that are required is changing, towards emotional engagement and away from technical matters.

"For too long, the symbolic aspects of managing people have been seen as an optional extra for the eccentric, and the 'soft' skills as the prerogative of HR departments," says Caroline Hatcher, MBA Director of the QUT's Graduate School of Business, in relation to her essay on persuasion. "Managers must recognise the social and cultural shifts that have occurred. Managers who are rhetorically sophisticated have the all-important capacity to manage the meaning that is occurring in an organisation.

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A problem for many managers (and would-be managers) is that words such as 'influence', 'power', and 'manipulation' have strong negative connotations. In his essay, academic Nick Forster acknowledges the problem but argues that many managers have simply never consciously considered

the issues. There is nothing new about the dilemma of power, he says; Aristotle wrote one of the first – and still one of the best – analyses of it. But understanding the dynamic of power, and how it is used most effectively when shared with others, is the best way to guard against the corruption of it. Forster describes the methods of developing power bases within an organisation as mainly personal and expert, but including legitimate, reward and coercive.

This provides a useful framework for most of the following essays, especially Desmond Guilfoyle's examination of charisma. He is interested in the question of why so many "crooks in dark suits" are charismatic while so many honourable players are not. Charisma, he notes, can be learned: it is essentially a set of tools for communication. He provides some useful tips, highlighting the point that this sort of personal power can only

be sustained when linked to an ethical approach, based on a clear appraisal of the purposes of the manipulation.

Similar questions arise in the essay on "positive spin" by Thomas Murrell, a specialist in media relations. Communication with stakeholders is a key function of senior managers, says Murrell, and in this the media can be an opportunity as much as a threat. Understanding the audience is an essential first step, and building good relationships with stakeholders and media provides a strong foundation. The same sort of techniques can be used to manage crises.

In speaking to *Management Today* about his essay, Murrell nominated Virgin Blue as a company that uses "spin" effectively.

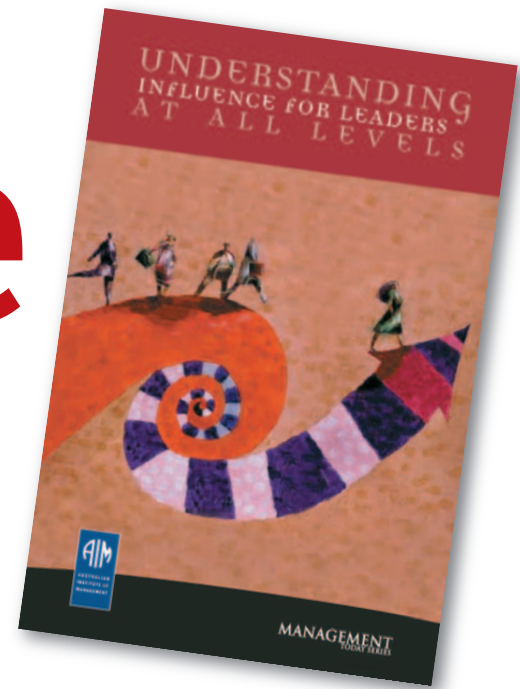
"The key is the alignment of the values of the company and the customer," he says. "Virgin Blue has presented itself as a fresh face, willing to have a go and break



Phil Harker
Phil Harker & Associates

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influence



some traditions. That plays very well with the Australian community. Australians are great storytellers, and they love a good story themselves. You have to be able to connect with that."

He admits that a focus on the most favourable aspects of a story can easily slip into rationalisation and dishonesty.

"There are some useful tests that can help to draw the line," Murrell says. "The first is the 'light of day' test – would you be happy to see what you are saying on the front page of the newspaper?"

"The second is the 'greater good' test – are there broad benefits, or is it just self-serving? A part of this is to ensure there is a wide range of opinions, to avoid the trap of being told what you want to hear.

"The final test is the 'golden rule' – is this how you would want others to treat you, or talk to you? If your 'spin' can pass these tests, you're likely to be heading in the right direction."

Similar issues are addressed by applied psychologist and management consultant Phil Harker in his essay on organisational change. Harker calls for leaders and managers to develop personal methods to examine their own assumptions and motivations. He admits that this process can be difficult, even painful, but it is necessary for positive, long-term change.

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Caroline Hatcher QUT

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and many companies have done a lot of good work at clarifying their values," he says. "That's important, but there is still a long way to go. There has to be a questioning of basic assumptions and motivations, from the top to the bottom of an organisation. This is the only way to truly change a company, to move from a system of control to the management of opportunity.

"A successful manager cannot let their ego get in the way of their thinking. Neither can they expect to do it all themselves. They need support from those around them, so that the willingness to change and learn will spread. If the leaders themselves demonstrate the values of the organisation, there will be little need to force-feed employees by constant preaching."

Perhaps this is the fundamental message of the book: that influencing, persuading, and organising others – leadership, in a

word – should stem from self-awareness, and from a sense of hope. Although the essays in *Understanding Influence for Leaders at All Levels* cover a great deal of territory and offer a range of useful tools, the unifying theme is that power and influence must be used in conjunction with a considered sense of social ethics and personal responsibility.

Essays were also contributed by knowledge management specialist Alastair Rylatt (*The Power of Knowledge*), former Wallaby and now business consultant John Eales and his colleague Liza Spence (*Influencing Behaviour in Organisations*), and networking guru Robyn Henderson (*The Power of Networking*). Mt

Understanding Influence for Leaders at All Levels, Series Editors: Carolyn Barker and Robyn Coy, McGraw-Hill Australia, 2004. Order online at www.aim.com.au.

Derek Parker is a Melbourne-based business writer and book reviewer.