

## **Influencer**

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Reviewed by David Hanlon, The Right Mind

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*.

While 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 behavior. 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 Behaviors**

#### **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 organization’s success is in their implementation. Nonetheless, they are worthy for consideration by anyone in the change business.

1. Focus on very few vital behaviors 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 business should identify their uncommon offering). And make sure those you observe are tested with rigor.

### Help others with two vital questions

When it comes to changing behaviors 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 behavior you will be working with the “why waste the effort?” attitude.
- Second, can I do this? (if not, why try?)

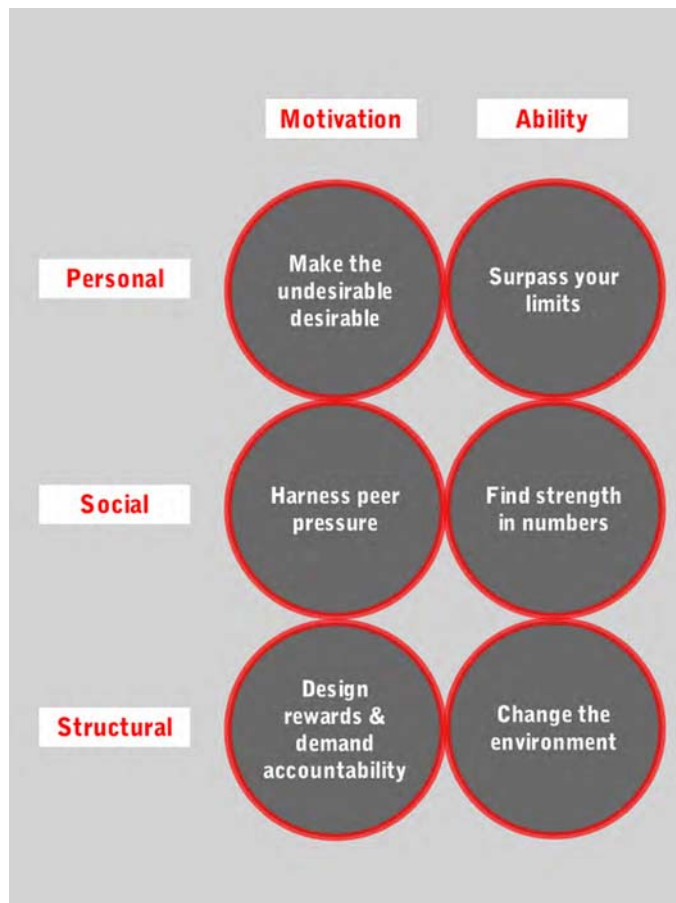
Use experience and stories as the tool. As the authors point out, telling rarely works. Most people with chronic behavioral flaws have been told endless times they need to change. You can't explain logically to people why they must change their behaviors and expect anything to happen. Peoples' behaviors 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 personalized and internalized relationships can be made, are the most powerful.**

### The influence mode: six sources of influence

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



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



## PERSONAL

### 1.a **Motivation: Makes 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 behaviors. 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 timelines become shorter and we give less consideration to our abstract values.

Furthermore, they assent moral disengagement **always** accompanies political, combative and self-centered behavior.

### **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
- Dehumanization
- Minimizing
- 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 take home small items from the office, etc. But little things can grow into big things as Enron and the Australian Wheat Board discovered. Both of the latter no doubt morally justified their actions at the time.

### **Dehumanization**

Frequently we justify behaviors 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 organization. The Challenger Space Shuttle, in which an engineer was pressured to give the okay 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.

### **Minimization**

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 imagine they are giving "shocks" to students from another college to help train them. The only bias given to the three groups is allowing the training students to "overhear" one of the following phrases:

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

**Humanizing:** "The subjects from the other school are here. They seem nice."

**Dehumanizing:** "The subjects 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 too frequently we confront an undesirable performance with logic and argument. We forget to link the current behavior with what the individual actually wants. The authors suggest that much undesirable behavior 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 behaviors.

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

Another of the more powerful findings in the book is 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 a 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 worldwide. They are there with an attentive eye and work with their teams to achieve maximum performance. Organizationally, 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. 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 (e.g. 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 behaviors. 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).

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.

#### **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 (i.e. confronting the issue every time).

### 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.

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

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

## 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 behaviors, not just results.**



Rather, they suggest the priorities are:

1. Connect vital behaviors 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 invested 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 is 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 color 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 these stories is 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, at Amazon and also in audible form at [www.audible.com](http://www.audible.com).