How To Influence People Like A Jedi

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Learn To Influence People Like A Jedi

Long, long ago, in a small town not so far from here, I fell in love with Star Wars. For years (okay, decades), it consumed my life. In my neighborhood, we all had our favorite characters. Chris liked the Stormtroopers, Mike liked Darth Vader, and Brian liked Boba Fett. All good choices, but I was an Obi-Wan Kenobi guy. Played by Sir Alec Guinness, Kenobi was a mysterious, father figure that always seemed to know a little bit more than he let on. He was cryptic and a bit of a curmudgeon, but in fifteen seconds of greatness, he cemented himself as the coolest cat in the galaxy in my eyes. With the wave of his hand and an utterance of, “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for,” Kenobi turned the Jedi Mind Trick into the stuff of cinematic (and neighborhood) legend.

For years, I tried to replicate this feat with lines like, “These aren’t the brussel sprouts that I’ll be eating” and “These aren’t the beer cans you’re looking for.” However, I could never quite get it to work (it certainly wasn’t for a lack of trying). The obvious reason is that there is no all-powerful Force that can be harnessed through concentration and careful thought. The other is that influencing people (Force or no Force) is extremely difficult.

No matter the difficulty level, the art of persuasion is one that is critical to you as a leader. Without it, nothing gets done. Worse yet, you get overworked and overwhelmed. I will teach you the ways of influence, young padawan, but before you can understand your ability to influence, it’s first important to understand what type of power you have as a leader.

"If you only knew the power of the Dark Side!"

Social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven’s *Five Forms of Power* describe the nature of leader-follower interactions and the different roles that power plays in influence relationships. Although the fate of the galaxy does not hang in the balance, it’s important to understand how these types of power impact your ability to influence others.
Types of Positional Power

- Legitimate – This comes from the belief that a person has the formal right to make demands, and to expect compliance and obedience from others (e.g., president, CEO, prime minister).
- Reward – This results from one person’s ability to compensate another for compliance.
- Coercive – This comes from the belief that a person can punish others for noncompliance.

Types of Personal Power

- Expert – This is based on a person’s superior skill and knowledge.
- Referent – This is the result of a person’s perceived attractiveness, worthiness, and right to respect from others.

Three of the five power sources (legitimate, reward, coercive) are based on the idea of “positional power.” Because you have the title, because you have the carrot, because you have the hammer, you have the power. As you can imagine, this power is incredibly dependent on circumstances outside of a leader’s control. If the money dries up or if the leader is demoted, the power is gone. Another problem with positional power is that it is prone to abuse. We’ve all played the “because I said so card” before. But some people play it all the time and take advantage of their station within the organization.

If you’re not sure whether you are using positional power too much, look in the mirror. Ask yourself, “If I took away my title, my ability to punish, and my ability to reward, would anyone do anything for me?” If the answer is “no,” you’re in trouble, and you need to shift your power base to a personal one.

Derived from both “expert” and “referent” power, personal power is the engine that powers the influence machine. In essence, it can be summed up with a simple phrase: “It’s about what you know and what you show.” It’s about being simultaneously competent and people-centered. With personal power, you have the clout to get things done by merely asking for assistance.

Sounds good. Right? So how do you get to this point where you can just ask people to do things for you? Well, it takes time. A lot of time. And if you’re not committed to putting in the work necessary to make it happen, maybe you should pursue a career as an interstellar nerf-herder (bad Star Wars humor).

“It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together.”

Exercise the principle of reciprocity. Not unlike the Force, the idea of reciprocity demonstrates that we are all tied together. More importantly, realize that everyone has the ability to help you in some capacity. But they won’t unless you help them first. So get in the habit of giving more than you receive. Write letters of recommendation. Remove something from someone’s plate. Cover for someone when something comes up. Take the heat for a co-worker. When you start doing things for people, they remember it and are more inclined to say “yes” when you ask for help on your next project.

“So you have accepted the truth?”

Be honest and accountable. If you screw up, own it. Apologize and move on. It doesn’t sound like much, but people truly appreciate a sincere apology. It helps bridge gaps and shows that your relationships are important to you. It’s also important to answer for what you’ve done. Being accountable means that you are willing to take ownership. Lord knows that we’ve all screwed up, so make a point to say “I’m sorry” and be accountable.

“Stay on target! Stay on target!”