Your Launch Pad: Building Influence When You're New — Establishing Credibility in Unfamiliar Environments

Career Development

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It may be intimidating to arrive at a new team or company and not only try to get everyone to like you, but to get them to do something different than what they're used to doing.

It's a common misconception that influence is all about saying things in a persuasive enough way to get people to change their minds, but influence is actually more about treating people in a way that will increase their respect and open-mindedness towards you.

It may be obvious that one of the first things to do in a new role or environment is to get to know all the new people you'll be working with. The key to success is in the *way* you approach and conduct yourself in those meetings that can open or close opportunities for influence.

Please allow me to use a personal example as a case study:

In my late 20s, I got my dream job as a career counselor for the liberal arts majors at my alma mater. This is similar to an in-house counsel role in that I was preparing internal people

(students/staff/faculty) for success with external people (employers and graduate schools). The scope of my work was daunting. I was over 7000 students between 17 departments. As a career coach who specializes in personal branding, I was inspired to go on a “Listening Tour” to establish and promote my brand.

Personal Branding: a concise, compelling way of communicating who you are and what you have to offer to your target audiences.

1. Meet with your manager

1. **Get clear on their expectations.** Make sure you are both on the same page about what the ideal vision is for your role.

2. **Ask about your predecessor’s influence**. How effective were they? What could be improved? Understanding past context will help you be sensitive to what others’ expectations will be of you in your new role so you can be better prepared to exceed them.

In my case, I learned that my predecessors had very limited reaches to those 17 departments. So the bar was low for me, and I was prepared to clear it by bounds.

2. Create a support team

1. **Find allies.** Look for and connect with other newbies who are also learning the ropes and trying to establish influence. Share insights and tips on what you learn about your colleagues and the company/team culture. Celebrate each others’ successes and help each other learn from foibles rather than be discouraged by them.

2. **Find a mentor.** Schedule a meeting with a couple of more experienced and highly influential people in the company until you find one you jive with. Ask them for advice, try out their advice, and follow up. You may be hesitant to do this because you don’t want to be a hassle but those who are not interested will self-deselect and those who are will find it flattering and rewarding to mentor you.

In my case, I banded with the other two new career counselors and I found another highly charismatic career counselor to mentor me.

3. Meet with your target audiences

1. **Listen first**. This is really the core of this entire article, and it's based on three well-known and well-proven quotes by three highly influential leaders:

- "Seek to understand, then to be understood." Habit 5 in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) by Stephen R. Covey
- "To be interesting, be interested." in *How to Win Friends & Influence People* (1936) by Dale Carnegie
- "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care." by President Theodore Roosevelt

It's all about putting others first — using empathy as a diplomacy tool. Give a short intro of your role and background, but spend most of the time listening to people's needs, pain points, and wishes in relation to your role. Ask them what they would like help. Take careful notes and ask clarifying questions to show your genuine intent to understand their context.

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Enrollment deadline: October 31.

In my case, I met with the chairs of each department and invited them to bring any other relevant staff (i.e. internship coordinators), so it became a much more efficient way of meeting my target audiences. I learned that most departments were offering limited career preparation and some of them had never heard of or met with my predecessor(s).

2. **Offer yourself as a resource.** Based on the unmet needs you discovered, share the resources/services you could offer to alleviate their burdens. Brainstorm with them about the ways you could support their work. People are much more receptive to doing new things if you ask, don't tell.

In my case, I told them about a new online platform the university had adopted as a one-stop shop for jobs, internships, online interviews and career fairs, and communicating with recruiters. I showed them a list of topics I could present on in their classes about career preparation. They were all surprised and grateful for what I shared.

3. **Follow through and follow up promptly**. Create an action plan with a timeline at the end of your meeting. Say what you will do by when, and make sure you follow through. Then email them about the results and ask for feedback. This will do wonders for establishing trust in you and your expertise.

4. Be patient and manage your expectations

It's unlikely that you'll achieve all your objectives in the first six months or even a year. People are busy with their own goals and responsibilities. Check in with them a month or two after you complete your initial action plan to see how you could be of further support.

How effective was my Listening Tour? I was only in that role for two years before personal circumstances forced me to leave but my managers were astonished at the level of outreach and impact I was able to achieve in my role, which opened doors for my successor that my predecessor never had access to. Six years later, I still have professors who ask me to speak in their classes (via Zoom) and advisors who refer students to me about my specialty in personal branding.

You can achieve this kind of success too. Follow the steps above to build influence and establish credibility in your new role and environment.

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