

## Empathy and trust key to winning influence

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If HR and business leaders want to influence and win over employees and executives, they must first get into their minds and build trust, according to a leadership expert.

Influencing is a skill, says leadership specialist **Bryan Whitefield**, particularly when facing development and workplace issues. But it does not occur without first building trust, he writes in his new book, [Winning Conversations](#), which explores the art of persuasion and influence in business settings.

"If you provide consistently valuable advice over time, you will become known as an authority and staff will seek you out. As an adviser, your main goal is to become trusted, to be seen as someone whose advice has proved invaluable and is sought out again and again."

To become a successful advisor and persuade others, Whitefield proposes his so-called 'pathway model', the first step of which is "to stand in the shoes of the person you wish to influence".

Spending time researching how a person ticks, including their personal and business goals, is crucial here, he stresses.

"I usually start by finding out their likes, first in their personal life," Whitefield says. "Then I move on to their likes in the business world. Are they chatty and relaxed at work or are they fixated on time and efficiency?"

"[This] helps you not only to understand them but to empathise with them; to be 'in the moment' with them and to provide advice and design processes and systems that are fit for purpose."

He calls this "blue ribbon not red tape".

The second step is to "paint a picture", which can include diagrams, simple drawings, photos, videos or virtual reality to visualise the points being made.

Pictures help staff "understand you and your advice, rectify any mistaken mental images they may have, create powerful emotions to influence their decision making, and give their memory 'something to hang their hat on'", Whitefield says.

The next step involves telling a story, he says. "Storytelling works by engaging an audience and driving emotion. When you watch the faces of people listening to a story, you can see clearly how engaged with the storyteller they become."

The final step is to make people "believe", Whitefield says. "Those you wish to influence need to believe you."

This speaks to the advisor's own credibility, he says, which is coupled with a growth mindset and willingness for constant improvement.

"There are many personal attributes that people associate with credibility, all of which can be boiled down to just three: trust, adaptability and expertise."

## Influence and persuasion in HR

To illustrate his points, Whitefield recalls a client that did a fantastic job in recruiting new staff, but lacked the same focus on its onboarding process, which led to problems with staff retention.

To highlight those issues to the leadership team, they used the pathway model to paint a picture and tell a story with two different scenarios: one where onboarding was problematic, and another where the whole process was seamless.

Through this process, Whitefield tells HR Daily, the HR team was able to illustrate and convince the organisation that the problem was not at the recruitment level. They were then able to persuade the organisation to invest more time and resources in the onboarding process, which led to better staff experience and ultimately improved staff retention.

In another example, the pathway model allowed a manager to think differently about her leadership style after some issues arose with employees. In that situation, Whitefield explains, the leader thought the problems were the fault of her staff.

The HR team developed a ladder model to illustrate key leadership descriptions, and asked the manager to identify her skills in those areas.

"They went back to her and asked her what she saw as her key attributes, and what she was seeing was a result from her and what was a result from her team," Whitefield says. "And she actually self-identified where she was on the ladder, which was much lower than she probably thought she was".

By building a simple ladder model and describing the stages of a leader, he says, she was able to identify and change her behaviour, rather than needing HR to confront her by saying: "we have a problem".

## Making HR more 'human'

**Meanwhile**, building a stronger 'HR identity' helps create more buy-in among the rest of the organisation, according to **Jen Jackson**, co-author of the book [How to speak human](#).

"Speaking human and building those deeper connections and human relationships with people are the foundation for pretty much everything," she says.

For HR departments, this can start with assessing, "do you have a strong sense of identity, as your place in your work environment? Do you have a clear vision as a department that everybody on your team is aligned to? When you start from there and have a strong brand and sense of self, it's easier to support people in the best way. It's creating opportunities to connect with people in a human way".

Creating more social opportunities and having more face-to-face conversations helps give HR a more 'human' face, Jackson says.

"What are the good news stories you want to share with people, how could you let others know about the individuals that make up your team? The more you can brand yourself internally the more you'll actually be getting the work you want to be doing."

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