

# 5 influencing styles—and how to use them effectively

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## The psychology of influence

The ability to positively influence others is an essential skill for advisors. It's central in guiding clients toward wise financial decisions. Influencing skills are also valuable for making connections with new prospects and building stronger relationships with partners and employees.

While influential people may seem like they possess an innate gift, motivating others is something that can be learned. In their research, Chris Musselwhite, founder of Discovery Learning Inc., and Tammie Plouffe, managing partner of Innovative Pathways, have found that you can improve your power of influence once you learn to identify and navigate what they call the five distinct influencing styles.<sup>1</sup>

But it takes work. When encountering people with a different influencing style from our own, Musselwhite and Plouffe warn our tendency is to intensify our influencing style instead of being flexible and adjusting our approach to better work with others. "The tactics we default to are also the ones which we are most receptive to," the pair wrote in *Harvard Business Review*.<sup>2</sup> In other words, we often influence the way we like to be influenced. That's why it's important to recognize the influencing style of the person you're speaking to and then match it.

The first step toward improving your influencing skills is to identify your own style by reflecting on your inclinations when motivating others. Increasing this awareness will also help you pick up cues from others about their default styles. This allows you to recognize when your approach isn't working and helps you

determine how to adjust your style to one that will elicit a better outcome. Explore each style to see which resonates most with you and start looking for these traits in those you encounter.

## Bridging

People who use a bridging style of influence tend to motivate by using reciprocity, consultation, and personal relationships.

Identifying this style in yourself: Are you comfortable drawing on the connections of friends and colleagues? Do you bring people together and invite relevant stakeholders into your conversations to build consensus?

Scenario for identifying and working with this style: Your succession plan rests on developing one particularly talented junior advisor. However, when you ask him to join the advisory board, he says he's hesitant to take on too much at once, citing other junior advisors who aren't participating. His referencing of peers tells you that he might be a bridging influencer.

Because bridging influencers respond well to social proof, you decide to invite his mentor to share her experience of serving on the board. After hearing about the value it offered her, he now feels more confident in pursuing the opportunity. By bringing more people into the conversation, you've used the bridging style that most resonates with the junior advisor.

## Rationalizing

People with a rationalizing influencing style tend to use logic and reasoning to try to persuade others.

Identifying this style in yourself: Are you analytical? Do you often use facts and data to support your point of view?

Scenario for identifying and working with this style: A prospective client wants to reorganize his retirement portfolio, but you feel that his specific strategy is at odds with his long-term goals. When questioned, he cites data trends and all his research, revealing that he might be a rationalizing influencer.

You shift to a rationalizing style, acknowledging the thinking that went into his strategy and asking him again what his retirement goals are. You outline the costs and benefits of several scenarios, allowing the prospect to follow the logic and conclude on his own that his strategy may not be as ideal as he thought. By appealing to your client's trust in data, you've helped open him to other options.

## Asserting

Those with an asserting influencing style tend to use authority and assurance as their way of motivating others.

Identifying this style in yourself: Are you a straight shooter? Do you use your confidence to help motivate others to act?

Scenario for identifying and working with this style: You're speaking with a professional colleague to establish a new source of referrals. When you ask about his approach to client service, he says, "We work with people who want to work with the best." From his confident and direct manner, you recognize that he has an asserting style.

Rather than go deeply into all the reasons why you'd make a good fit, you meet his asserting style by congratulating him on what he's built and stating your position succinctly: "We specialize in what your clients need. I'm certain we're your ideal partner. Let's put this in motion and get to work."

## Inspiring

Those with an inspiring influencing style use example and comradery to motivate others.

Identifying this style in yourself: Are you a compelling speaker? Do you use stories and metaphors to help people understand complex ideas, to offer encouragement, or to instill a feeling of shared purpose?

Scenario for identifying and working with this style: You're in an estate-planning session with your client and her 25-year-old son. Not long into the meeting, you notice the young man looks bored because the discussion doesn't feel relevant. He's looking for inspiration, but he's getting a dissertation.

To make the information more relatable, you shift to an inspiring style and tell a story about another young client who put properties into a trust, which opened up possibilities he hadn't considered. You explore the idea that the young man may have kids someday and may want to take them on adventures to his family's vacation properties. He becomes emotionally invested in the conversation, and you've found a way in.

## Negotiating

People with a negotiating influencing style tend to search for a middle ground as a way to motivate others.

Identifying this style in yourself: Are you a strong collaborator? Do you proactively seek ways to satisfy different interests, make room for all voices to be heard, and create consensus and harmony?

Scenario for identifying and working with this style: Your client is concerned that she's not achieving the results she wants with her current investment strategy. But you're not comfortable with the new approach she suggests. You notice that she isn't demanding as much as seeking agreement—a negotiating tactic. There

are hints she might be open to changing course incrementally and testing the waters.

Rather than try to convince her that she's making a mistake, you look for a way to satisfy her desire to explore something new while also protecting the long-term strategy. You offer a complimentary portfolio audit and a timetable for switching strategies. This way, if she doesn't see the results she's looking for, all is not lost. By taking a negotiation style and creating an approach that includes compromise, your client feels heard and is pleased with this new plan.

## Mastering the influencing styles

According to Musselwhite and Plouffe, all five influencing styles can be effective, but no single style can address every situation.<sup>3</sup> When you influence from a place of habit and lean too heavily on your primary style, you reduce your odds of being heard and limit your ability to motivate others.

Like learning a new language, mastering the influencing styles takes practice. But it can improve your ability to guide your clients to better results, turn more prospects into clients, and create meaningful connections with your peers. You can improve your ability to determine others' styles by being an active listener and taking note of how others communicate.

Here are a few tactics that can help you implement all five influencing styles in your everyday practice:

- Keep an open mind. Enter meetings without assuming you know the problems or solutions.
- Consider your body language. Just like your words, your body language is sending a message.<sup>4</sup> Keep your shoulders back and face your torso toward the other person. Avoid slouching and crossing your arms.
- Ask questions and listen carefully. Notice the tone, the body language, and the way people structure their ideas. What are their concerns? When are

they most animated? Write down or make a mental note of when people say or do something that indicates what motivated them.

- Review the evidence. Based on your observations, what has the person revealed to be their influencing style?
- Match their style. Meet them with the same communication style that they use—the one they're most comfortable with. Practice empathy and pay close attention to how your influence is received. Adapt as the conversation progresses.