

# You don't have to be a person of influence to be **influential**

*Jerry Yoshitomi* on leading with limited authority

The inspiration for this article and the workshop on which it is based came from conversations with people who had taken my *Engage Now!* workshops, yet were unsuccessful in deploying proven new methods back home. I found that they had been stymied back at the office by highly resistant Laggards or Squelchers, who were oftentimes in positions of higher authority.

My research took me to leading with limited authority in *Leadership Without Easy Answers* by Ronald Heifetz, *Leading Up* by Michael Useem, *Getting it Done: How to Lead When You're Not in Charge* by Roger Fisher and Alan Sharp and my own musings in *Is Knowledge in the Right Places?*

The literature suggests that rather than waiting for higher-ups to lead, it's the responsibility of everyone to lead, no matter where they are in the organisational chart. One-third of our time should be spent leading up, one-third spent leading horizontally – with our peers – and one-third leading down. This requires influencing others with whom we have no direct authority to change what they are

doing, as well as influencing others over whom we have authority, but often have little influence.

## **Innovation theory suggests looking first at sources of resistance to innovation**

### • **Values and previous mission; social norms of the organisation.**

Even though conditions are different today, colleagues may hold on to missions/values/norms of the past. For example, music publishing companies are slow to convert from record/CD publishers to adopting online distribution methods.

### • **Competitiveness.** Holding on to old values/norms induces a competition for limited resources. We need to put more resources into my part of the business (it's the most important thing we do), even though the number of customers is declining.

### • **Competency and capacity.** Colleagues may not have the competency or capacity to operate the new box office system, so they still maintain records in ledger books and print hard tickets.

- **Equilibrium.** A system will always default to equilibrium, however it's been in the past.
- **Confidence.** They don't know what to do nor do they have the confidence that your solution is any better than what we have done in the past.

## **At the beginning of my workshop, to encourage participants to do something differently, I quote:**

- Helen Hayes/Harry Truman: 'What really counts is what you learn after you know it all.'
- Anonymous: 'If you always do what you've always done, you'll always be what you've always been.'
- Albert Einstein: 'You can't solve a problem with the same consciousness that created it.'

## **Some ways to lead with limited authority**

- Listen to your superiors and identify the intractable problems they are concerned with, but don't seem to have many answers. How many times have we heard, 'Our audiences are greying/retiring/dying, what are we going to do to attract younger audiences?'
- Challenge the prevailing organisational wisdom.
- Identify the problem (with other sources, third parties), yet draw attention to issues without drawing too much attention to yourself. Don't make it Jerry's issue. Make it many people's issue.
- Invite/gather the guiding coalition – colleagues from up/down within the organisation – to begin creating solutions.



- Identify solutions in other places or others solving similar problems (take workshops, read about innovations in other organisations).
- Identify resources for experiments (if possible within your own control) to facilitate action.
- Create new outcome measures to evaluate programmes – ten years ago our understanding of the term ‘number of hits’ would have had a very different connotation from today’s.
- Create a dashboard to quickly and effectively communicate progress (consider an automobile dashboard or the money thermometer for a local fundraising goal).
- Understand boss’s/colleagues’ dilemma and pains of change; choose tactics accordingly. Don’t blame/attack. Look at the situation from his/her point of view. One of the primary tasks of many superiors is to maintain equilibrium.
- Remember, your position in the organisation allows for a short attention span. How long would you be allowed to speak at a meeting? Sixty seconds? Thirty seconds? Use time wisely: make interventions simple, intelligible and relevant.

The following case study by Christy Farnbauch cites several examples of how she led with limited authority.

**Think about a superior/colleague:**

- What are their values or goals?
- How might you frame your messages to gain their resources to implement some of your ideas?
- What other actions might you take?

If you’d like to send me your ideas/questions on how to lead with limited authority, feel free to respond on my blog at [www.meaningmattersnet.net](http://www.meaningmattersnet.net). ■

How long would you be allowed to speak at a meeting? Sixty seconds? Thirty seconds? Use time wisely: make interventions simple, intelligible and relevant.



**Jerry Yoshitomi**  
Chief Knowledge Officer, MeaningMatters, LLC  
w [www.meaningmattersnet.net](http://www.meaningmattersnet.net)