

Leading matters

Christy Farnbauch discusses the day-to-day challenges of leading with limited authority

In September 2004, I became the coordinator of business and community partnerships for Hilliard City Schools (HCS). HCS is the ninth largest school district in Ohio with 15,000 students, 22 buildings and 1,700 staff. This position has proven to be challenging on both professional and personal levels. Since 1991, I had worked at the Ohio Arts Council, an agency of 40 staff members, as the community development director and chief knowledge officer for a major change initiative. During the first several months of transition, the enormity of the school district was almost more than I could comprehend. How could

I chart a course that would be personally and professionally meaningful to me, while helping to improve the organisation?

I used several resources and have developed strategies for contributing to the success of the district, while validating the importance of partnership building.

1. The rule of reciprocity

I spent the first few months in this position getting to know the administrative team. I made appointments with all 22 principals to spend some time getting to know them, their building culture, as well as their hopes, dreams and aspirations for their work. I always ended those conversations by offering to help them find support, funding or solutions for their goals and

challenges. Robert Cialdini discusses the rule of reciprocity in his book, *Influence*.¹ The rule says that people will try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided to them. Slowly, one by one, the principals would call with projects they needed assistance with. After working with them to find possible solutions, they would recommend me to their peers as a resource, further validating the work, and completing the circle of reciprocity. I am deliberate about under-promising and over-delivering on each project, while creating relationships built on trust and confidence. In addition, having others endorse and validate my work is more effective than trying to 'sell' myself.





2. Determine your circle of influence

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*,² Steven Covey discusses the need to be proactive. Proactive people focus their efforts on their ‘circle of influence’. I have to stay proactive and address the challenges I can do something about, like securing additional financial resources for classroom teachers. In the early months of this position, I focused on the part of my job that felt most comfortable – helping staff members write grants. As a seasoned grant funder, reviewer and writer, I felt confident from the beginning about guiding teachers through the proposal-writing process and I was able to build my leadership authority, initially on a small scale, with individual teachers, which felt comfortable to me. The result of that work has been increasingly positive energy that continues to enlarge and magnify my circle of influence.

3. Link your work to larger organisational goals

The most important, overarching goal for the school district is to improve student achievement through relationships that foster rigorous and relevant learning environments. I link the work I do with the district’s goal at every opportunity. The core message for my department is that meaningful relationships with businesses and community organisations support rigorous and relevant learning experiences. I attend meetings and workshops with content that, as a non-educator (my degrees are in music and business), I don’t fully understand, but I then strive to describe my work in

language that aligns with the language of the teachers and administrators in the district.

4. Beware of the curse of knowledge

Chip and Dan Heath outline their theory of the ‘curse of knowledge’ in the book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*.³ The curse of knowledge says that once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. This makes it difficult for us to share knowledge with others, because we cannot readily re-create the listener’s state of mind. In order to effectively lead with limited authority, we must speak in terms that our co-workers or boss will understand and get enthusiastic about. The Heath brothers offer a six-point framework for avoiding this challenge which begins with distilling your ideas down to the core, most critical elements. By taking the time to do this, you will help those you are trying to lead focus on the key task or decision to be made.

Every day continues to be an exciting challenge on my journey of leading with limited authority. I sincerely hope these strategies will help you to successfully do the same. ■



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1. Cialdini, Robert B. *Influence: Science and Practice*. 4th ed. Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 2001.
2. Covey, Steven R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Free Press, 1989 and 2004.
3. Heath, Chip, and Dan Heath. *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. New York: Random House, 2007.