

How to Be a C-Suite Influencer

From building a solid reputation to utilizing the power of persuasion, learn the five key competencies of the most influential HR leaders.

By Joel Garfinkle

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It's not always easy to prove your worth, is it? You manage a part of the enterprise that utilizes a significant amount of corporate assets. Yet your impact on the bottom line may not be easy to quantify. Added to that, your CEO expects you to be innovative, visionary, proactive and forceful in managing your area of responsibility.

It all comes down to this: You must rely on the power of influential leadership and prove your worth by inspiring positive change in your organization.

As an HR professional, you rely on the power of your influence to drive change, improve situations and produce game-changing results. There are five specific traits all influential people have developed to a significantly higher degree than their peers.

These competencies will help you as an executive to increase HR's impact in top-level decisions and gain an influential seat at the table.

1. **Build a solid reputation.** Companies hire reputation management firms to polish their profiles in the public's eye. You, however, must become your own reputation manager. Reputations take time to build. As you build, your accomplishments will begin proving your worth to the company.

Due to your consistently helpful and effective behavior, others will start to view you as reliable and come to both know and respect you. They will find your character trustworthy and know that your actions will be consistent. They will value because they know you will get the job done.

Example: Jenna, head of HR for a mid-west insurance company, was tasked with developing a diversity program for her institution. Normally Jenna would start with Internet research and then integrate her findings with programs she was already familiar with in her immediate circle of influence. Instead, she took the time to reach out in person to her peers nationwide, learning what was working and what wasn't. End result? Through those contacts, Jenna ended up creating a roundtable of HR executives across the country that now meets twice a year to share best diversity practices. Jenna's CEO now knows that he can challenge her with unusual responsibilities and she will come through.

2. **Enhance your skill-set.** Having an enhanced skill set means knowing how to do all aspects of your job exceedingly well. You need to be both a thoughtful, strategic thinker and someone who has great relationships up, down, and cross-functionally. Not everyone performs at the top of their game in both areas. You want people throughout the company to recognize and know you as someone who consistently does both.

In order to develop these skills, you need to use both the right and left sides of your brain. Strategic thinkers are both visionary and deliberate. They can see the big picture and visualize the future, but they take the time to develop plan

details that make sense. Then they reach out to others, clearly communicating their vision and enrolling others in supporting their plan. This is not easy to do. According to research by Sandler Training, close to 80 percent of working Americans think that they need to be better at selling themselves and their ideas. Yet, according to a *Forbes* report, two-thirds of them (63 percent) say they spend less than an hour a day doing so. Obviously, you can do better.

Example: Carlo, an HR executive with an international IT firm, had no trouble coming up with great strategies to enhance his department's effectiveness. He did have trouble selling his ideas within the company and putting his plans into action. After some serious research, bolstered by conversations with a couple of his mentors, he realized that he needed his own personal selling strategy. Rather than trying to get people to take an interest in his ideas, he started demonstrating a profound interest in the ideas of his co-workers and superiors. He kept in touch with their pet projects, spoke openly about their successes, even took an interest in their leisure activities. Result? When Carlo had a new idea to present, he had a built-in band of champions, ready to get involved and help him promote his plans throughout the company.

3. **Project executive presence.** Think Virgin's Richard Branson, GE's Jack Welch and Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg. These people command a room. Study them and others at their level, and you immediately recognize that executive presence is about having a powerful and confident persona. You don't hesitate. You are decisive and confident with your choices and in your speaking. People trust in your leadership, and feed off of your assured sense of self.

You develop this sense of self by watching your language—both your verbal communication and your body language. Whether you're speaking to your staff in the weekly meeting, or you're pitching new ideas to a roomful of stockholders you avoid self-deprecating phrases, such as "I think we can get this done," or "I hope to accomplish these goals."

Example: Lauren was by nature an introvert, comfortable developing staffing flow charts, succession plans, and hiring policies. She realized, however, that people tended to talk over her in meetings, often moving right past her proposals and new ideas. She badly needed a dose of executive presence. Her first step was to enroll in an acting class at the local community theater. But she knew she needed more. She started watching for people who projected the presence she sought. She spotted two individuals—one in her own company and one in a professional organization. She asked both them to mentor her in developing her self-confidence and decisiveness. Within six months she was projecting her new-found self-assurance, poise and charisma in every meeting and presentation at work.

4. **Be likeable.** Likeability means you have a solid internal comfort level interacting with others, whether they are your own team members or someone from top management. You share information about yourself and ask open-ended questions that encourage others to open up about themselves.

This sometimes demands that you implement a total shift in consciousness about the way you relate to other people. No longer will you focus on how you're coming across in a conversation, on what the other person thinks of you. Instead, concentrate on them—their idea, their immediate need. Rule of thumb: in any conversation, listen 70 percent of the time and talk 30 percent. But this is not easy when you're the person in charge.

Example: Marshall ran his HR department like a well-oiled machine. He sent out directives, and they were followed. He issued new policies and they were implemented. He was effective, but Marshall knew he wasn't particularly likeable. Marshall was focused on results, not on relationships. So he decided to spend 30 days living by the 70/30 rule. He even developed individual files on staff members and others with whom he interacted frequently, so he could know them and their ideas better. Instead of responding to their ideas with a critique or an off-the-cuff remark, he took time to ask questions and to compliment them when they did well. Did Marshall change his likeability factor overnight? No, and not in 30 days either. But once the pattern was established, it became easier to demonstrate his likeability factor on a regular basis. People began to seek him out, ask his opinion and request his input on key projects.

5. **Utilize your power of persuasion.** When you're persuasive, you sway others to your side and win them over. They follow your direction and adopt your aspirations. Being able to persuade others requires that you compel them to believe in you and to feel as though you have their best interests at heart. They trust the integrity you bring to a given situation, and recognize sound reasoning in your ideas.

To become a master persuader, you must first understand your audience. Who are the people you are trying to influence and what kind of communication do they best respond to? Communication falls in one of three main style categories: visual, auditory, or feeling stimulation. When you are able to quickly adjust your style to that of your listeners, you will naturally become more persuasive by plugging into their particular style.

Example: Nicole, head of HR for a large manufacturing firm, was an expert at relating to people. She was tuned in to their needs, feelings, and emotions and of course, her staff loved her and happily followed her lead in implementing the strategies and tactics she developed. Over time, however, Nicole realized that her fellow C-level executives were not often persuaded by her feeling approach. So she made the switch to visual mode. Her staff meetings were followed with written reports of decisions and action items. Her presentations to management began to rely consistently on Power Point and other visuals, along with handouts and written summaries. By studying the styles of those around her, Nicole became a master persuader.

You will be perceived as a leader by your C-level executives and others in the company when you learn to consistently lead with influence. So here's how to become an influencer in just five weeks: Pick one of the five components of influence we've described and devote one week to implementing it on the job. It doesn't matter where you start—just do one a week for five weeks.

And enlist a mentor to help you strategize ideas and monitor your progress.

Leaders with influence stand out in any organization. People follow influential leaders, not because they have to but because they want to. Develop these five traits and you will become that leader.

Joel Garfinkle is a San Francisco-based executive coach and author of Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level.

