



EPISODE 5: THE POWER OF INFLUENCE

-[CC] Hello and welcome to episode 5 of Engagement Matters. My name is Christina Canters and I am joined by the founder of JHW, John Williams. In this episode we are talking about using influence to achieve your goals. John, can you start this off and tell us why this is important?

-[JW] Yeah, sure. Most of us have a role where we need to achieve outcomes and for most of us those outcomes need to be achieved with other people participating in decisions and in the whole process. If we need to achieve outcomes that involves other people, then we essentially have two choices: we can use authority, we can tell them “This is how it’s gonna be “, or we can use some form of influence, we can persuade them, we can sell them on the concept, we can bring them on the journey, however you want to phrase that, it’s a form of influence.

Essentially, those are the two twos we’ve got to achieve our role, if what we’re trying to do is achieve outcomes and involve other people.

-[CC] And in this discussion, we’re gonna share with listeners what those things actually look like and how to use both of them and in which circumstances which one would be the most appropriate. Because, one or the other’s not necessarily the one that you should use all the time.

-[JW] There is no right answer. And therein starts the first problem. We seem to be a little bit pre-programmed, based on our personality to default to one way or the other. If we don’t consciously think about how we’re going to achieve that outcome, some of us will automatically default down the authority line, where others sometimes automatically default down the influence line.

-[CC] So, can you tell me what does authority look like?

-[JW] Sure. Authority in a corporate world tends to come from two major sources. The first one is my position, my position authority. So, if I’m the CEO, then I have a lot of authority over my subordinates. That’s position authority. I can use that authority because I can impact on their career progression, their pay scales, their longevity in their role.

I’ve got an authority that gives me the right to, to a certain extent, order them around.

-[CC] So, you’re saying “You will do this and it’s because I’m in this position.”

-[JW] “Cause I’m the boss.”

-[CC] Yes.

-[JW] Yes, “and I say so”. So that’s one form of authority. Another form of authority or source of authority in the corporate sector is the authority of knowledge or experience or “I know more about this topic than anybody else. So, you need to default to me.” And we often refer to people as...you know, Fred’s the authority on this area, and what we mean by that is “Fred is the most knowledgeable person on that body of expertise, so we always default to his authority because none of us can question it. In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

-[CC] So, that level of authority is reached through being very knowledgeable on one thing and you gradually work your way up there. Is that correct?

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-[JW] Exactly. So, for instance, in a more practical sense, in a software implementation, the specialists in that piece of software tend to carry with them a form of authority because they're the only ones that really know what the capability of the software is. And if I wanted to cite an example where that can get misused, when we're gathering requirements about what the system needs to be able to do, the software engineers I've come across have occasionally said things like "I'm sorry, forget that idea, our software doesn't work that way."

Now, that's a way of using their authority of knowledge to defeat the requirements of their users. It's hard to argue about that when you don't understand their software, but it's a misuse of that authority that can be very damaging to the relationship and to the motivation of the entire initiative.

-[CC] Okay, now tell me about influence? What does that look like?

-[JW] Influence can come from anywhere. I may be the CEO and have an awful lot of authority, but I may choose instead to use influence. At the same time, I might be the new recruit that has just joined at the bottom of the structure of the organization, but because I've got good ideas and I present them in a constructive way, I may be able to influence people to come on the journey with me and get exactly the same or possibly better outcomes than more senior person that tries to use authority and may not succeed.

So, influence comes from anybody, it tends to require dialogue, it can take a little longer, but it's more likely to get things like buy-in, commitment, transfer of ownership and all those sorts of things that makes it stick rather than having to be policed. I often think that with authority I may get compliance "You will do what I tell you", or I may not, I might get defiance, you may decide to ignore what I tell you, or deliberately oppose what I tell you.

But I'm not gonna get buy-in, if I use authority I don't give the recipient the opportunity to buy into what they're doing, they've had no contribution to it, they have no ownership of it, they're simply complying. Whereas when I use influence, I've garnered the ideas of other people, I've given the opportunity for them to view their points, to make suggestions, to suggest alternative ways, to bring additional information to the discussion, and in that process we tend to build a sense of ownership, a sense of belonging, a sense of motivation around the result that we end up with.

-[CC] And does this work with anyone? So, for example, if you're maybe an entry level staff member or middle level manager, doesn't matter where you are, when you use influence, is it possible to influence all levels of the workplace?

-[JW] Generally speaking, yes. A lot of people respond far better to influence than what they do to an authority. But that's not to say everybody. There are circumstances where we're looking for some boundaries, some guidance, you know. If I'm new to the job, particularly if I'm reasonably junior, come into a new role, day 1 - my real objective is to get home without stuffing up. I really don't wanna block my copy debt book on day 1. So, if somebody's there prepared to tell me exactly what they want me to do, exactly where the boundaries are, I'm reasonably happy with that on day 1.

As I grow in the organization, I may not be quite so comfortable being told exactly what to do under an instructional type model and I would hope that most valuable employees want to be more em-

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powered than that, want to feel that they're there for their intellectual capability not just for a manual processing ability, and if you wanna use my mind then I've got to be involved in the discussion and feel enabled to contribute my thoughts, ideas, expertise, and value to the circumstances. That doesn't tend to come out all that well in an authoritarian model.

-[CC] All right, let's go a bit deeper into that because I think to understand how to use influence to get people on board and to achieve the outcomes you want, you really need to have an understanding of in what situations you should be using influence versus authority.

So maybe people listening already have authority in certain areas, but maybe they wanna start using influence. So can you share with us, John, how do we choose between using authority and influence?

-[JW] Yeah, yeah. we have some really robust discussions in our workshops about just this and I'd rather use their consensus, the consensus of multiple discussions along this topic than dictate my ideas. What we usually find is number 1, let's not forget there is a place for authority. There are times when we are looking for decisive action.

If the fire alarm start ringing, I can smell smoke, you know, it's getting a bit warm in here, the idea of setting up working groups to ponder our next action and then once we've got the contribution from each of those workshops, and in the fullness of consideration take each idea on its merits, we'd probably all burn to a crisp by then. I think when the bells are ringing I'd want somebody to say "Quick, get outta here, right now, just go", and take that command of the situation.

And there's other circumstances in corporate life when we are looking for a level of decisiveness and somebody's to just make a decision so that we can get on with things.

-[CC] It's just like, if you're giving a presentation, for example, and people are coming in late or having a chat, you need to use your authority to say "Everyone take a seat, we're gonna get started."

-[JW] Exactly, yeah. There are other circumstances where it's far more complicated than that and there's a lot more vested interests, and it's not quite such a straight forward, black and white decision, and people need to voice their opinions, add their inputs in order to get a decision which the majority feel is a sensible decision. So, authority works exceptionally well in what I describe as quite simplistic thoughts and ideas. So, like, there's a danger here, if we don't get out quickly we could all be at risk. It's a no-brainer. People will accept authority in that situation.

Another example is that we all accept, here in Australia, that we drive on the left hand side of the road. We do that because it's a no-brainer, it makes common sense. By driving on the left hand side of the road, we all get to our destination much quicker than if it was laissez-faire and it's safer, we have less collisions and so on.

There's also a regime of fines and authority to back that up if you don't conform with the rules. But it's not the fines that make people drive on the left hand side, it just makes common sense as a simplistic concept that we can all buy into, we can all see the outcome as sensible.

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-[CC] The fines are just a fun bonus.

-[JW] Exactly. So, in a corporate environment, when it's a clear cut thing, where safety is at risk and where people can naturally see the common sense of this outcome, authority works extremely well. Where it's more complicated that that, where there's more ambiguity involved, often authority will fall short of the requirement that we're looking for. The problem is, we often don't find out till much, much later. I can often use authority and I use it because it's quicker.

But if my children don't buy into it, they might not actually turn around and say "Get stuffed, we're not doing that", but they may not actually do it and I don't find out till later that what I thought was happening isn't happening, and the company is at risk or the project has gone off track or the initiative is at risk of failure, because what I thought was happening, what I thought might be complied to is not being complied to.

If we use authority, we tend to have to set up a regulatory police force to police the fact that people are complying, otherwise there's every danger that they won't be complying and we're going off track.

When we use authority, if we've truly got the buy in empowerment, ownership of the people involved, then there's a much stronger commitment to see that through, to achieve the outcome because we're all committed to it, we all feel ownership and involvement of that empowerment.

-[CC] But also when you have that level of authority, I imagine you've got to be very careful to not then abuse it. So, when you can use your authority and people do comply, that's an amazing gift and shouldn't be abused.

-[JW] Exactly. My observation in the corporate world is that good CEOs, they have the greatest authority in the corporate world, within the corporation, obviously, they've got everybody reporting to the big boss, but the good CEOs use far more influence than authority. So there are the ones with the greatest authority at their disposal, but they more often tend not to use it because the whole principle of leading people is to bring them on board, and you don't bring people on board by using authority.

-[CC] Let's then talk about influence, and what sort of situations should we be using influence instead of authority? 14:56

-[JW] Okay. Typically, complex situations that have an outcome or an influence or an impost on a large number of people, or any number of people, really, in situations where I don't have all the expertise, or all the inputs or all the knowledge required. So, for instance, we see corporate IT projects regularly underperform against the expectations that we had upfront. The software's got so much more potential to provide benefits than we often get at the outcome.

And a lot of the reason for that is our users have not bought into the solution, don't own the solution, and don't necessarily cooperate as much as we'd want, both through the project phase and through the user phase, the using afterwards, after we've gone live, do they have the same level of earnestness, commitment to learn all the ins and outs of the software.

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If they're not bought into it, if they weren't consulted in the first place, if they believe this is doing detriment to their expertise or how to job needs to perform, if they haven't brought on board, then there's varying levels of resistance that we might discover, because we didn't make the effort to bring them on board.

In situations where we have consulted all the people, used their expertise, demonstrated that we're listening to them, brought them on board, implemented a large number of their ideas, then, in those circumstances we're far more likely to get a cooperative user base, rather than less cooperative one.

-[CC] So, how do we do that?

-[JW] Well, it's about talking to people, it's about dialogue. I mentioned earlier, influence can take a little longer than authority, but if we take the trouble, to consult with people, give them the opportunity to input the outcomes, demonstrate that we are listening to them, then they are less likely to be resistant to the outcome than if we don't go through that.

-[CC] So, can this be done through, say, small group workshops, or one-on-one chats with them? What's the way that you recommend?

-[JW] I think small working parties or groupings of people...a group of up to about 10 people, most people in that group of 10 would be happy to contribute their ideas. If you try and do it in a room full of 150 people, there's gonna be a whole lot of those people that don't feel that they had the opportunity to contribute, they'd be too embarrassed to speak in an audience that big, they may feel overwhelmed, so even though we felt we were trying to give them the opportunity to contribute, in a group that size that's not really actually offering them the opportunity to contribute...

So I think, working groups between 4 and maybe 8, 10 people, that's the sort of size where most people can feel comfortable sharing their ideas.

And this relates to another discussion we're gonna have in another podcast, but I like the concept of learning then leading. What I mean by that is, understand from them what they'd like to see, be seen to visibly record what it is they'd like to see the outcome being able to provide for them, and then come in back later, once the decision has been made on which way we're going, let's come back later and demonstrate how that decision will implement where possible as many of the requirements that had been gathered as possible.

And I think we ought to be doing this for all of these potential users of the system. Now, often I get pushed back in the corporate....do you know how many users, we've got over a thousand users, how are we gonna get around that many people, what's gonna happen to the timelines on the project if we're trying to talk to a thousand people?

-[CC] That's a lot of time.

-[JW] Yeah. It's also the converse of that is it's also an awful lot of user resistance. If you've got a thousand users, I'd rather have those thousand on side and cooperating, than off side and resisting. So, I don't think the...if it's a one-person audience and it's worth me influencing to get them on side, then that's gonna take a relatively small amount of effort for one person, and I'm gonna get a little

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bit of cooperation.

-[CC] So, you could pick the influential people out of that thousand? Could you do that? Have discussions with them?

-[JW] You could, but if you really want a successful solution, you got to talk to all of them, you got to get...you want everybody on side, every piece of resistance is unnecessary, so I don't think it's necessarily a scale thing. For each person you bring on side you get a reward for, so, it's worth investing to get those people on board.

-[CC] Now tell me, what if you have no choice in the matter? So, what if you at a level where somewhat your boss is telling you "This is what needs to be done", they're using their authority to tell you, and then they want you to use your authority to then tell your colleagues or the people or your team that this is the way things are gonna be. Now, but what if you don't wanna use authority and you want to be seen as influencing people instead? 20:45

-[JW] Yeah. You've cited a really good case here and a lot of people are the meat in the sandwich here. My boss's told me that I've got to get this completed within the next X days, and he's put real pressure on me to do that and I know that to get successful outcome I need to spend the time influencing, gathering information and helping people buy-in, rather than imposing this solution upon them. So, I've got two stakeholder groups here, my only line of reporting and the stakeholders that are in the user population if you like.

I would always, in that circumstance, try to find the time, modify the time scales if necessary, but we need to have that and user population on side. So, it's not a case of forcing it through, this is what you must do, it's a case of "Let's get their requirements, let's understand what they would like to achieve from this change, let's have these working groups, let's outline it. We all know changes got to happen, we're looking at putting them in a new system, or a new process, or a new structure.

What would you all like to see as the improvements to your daily working life as a result of this new system. Let's be seen to be gathering that information, taking on board, and you know, the solution's already been imposed from above me, we'll resolve a number of those requirements for those people. So, let's take the trouble of going back to them afterwards and saying "Okay, you wanted A, B and C, this is how the new regime will deliver A, B and C for you.

Now, you wanted D, that isn't available right now, that may need to come in a phase 2, or might not come, but, here's the reasons why."

-[CC] People will still feel like they're being listened to...and that their opinions and ideas are being considered.

-[JW] Yeah, exactly that. And what we are doing is, we are offering our user population a solution to their requirements, not simply imposing upon them a different way of working. Okay. So, there's some reward for them, and we're working on that basis "We've listened to you, we understand what you're looking for and we're trying to provide you with the requirement, with a solution and we can't make that solution meet everybody's solution, we're not in a perfect road, but we've gone a long way to providing that." These are some of the elements actually have changed management.

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-[CC] Actually, let's talk about that. When using authority or influence to achieve an outcome, as we've been discussing, often times it does require a major change. So, your change in software and your change of doing things, maybe a restructure, and there's this widely accepted concept that people are naturally resistant to change, which is why we have change management people to help people get through it, right?

So, if you're listening, you've probably heard this concept that people are resistant to change, and John, we were having a chat before and you actually wanted to challenge this concept. Can you discuss?

-[JW] Yeah, let's look into this. People are naturally resistant to change. Well, let's look into this concept. I'm gonna try and get interactive on a podcast. I need you, the listener, to join me on this. People go through change all the time - in our personal lives, in our business lives, in our social lives, so I'd like you to think about one concept of change, one incidence of change that you faced in last 12 to 18 months.

Now, I'm suspecting most of our listeners in that time period, still reasonable fresh in the memory, we've gone through something like a job change, decided to get married or maybe decided to get divorced, we've decided to have children, we've decided to buy a house or move out of home, we've decided to move house, we've decided to change our job, career, buy a car...

-[CC] Start a podcast.

-[JW] Start a podcast, yes. We've all been through one of those major changes, quite significant changes in our life, big decisions, probably in the last 12 to 18 months, and if you're listening right now, I'm guessing you must be listening if you heard me say that - just isolate that one of those big decisions, one of those big changes in your life in the last 12 to 18 months.

-[CC] You've got 5 seconds, go!

-[JW] Okay, that particular thing that you're thinking about - I've got one question for you - did you embrace that change or did you resist that change you're thinking about right now? Okay. Now, I'm not gonna be able to hear your answer, even if you did say it out loud. We do this exercise frequently on our workshops, probably done it 50 or a 100 times.

Interestingly enough, despite the fact that people are naturally resistant to change, we usually get about 80% of the group saying "Yes, I embraced that particular change."

-[CC] So, right now I'm thinking of a change that I went through was I moved in with my partner, which is quite a big change in your life, to decide to live with someone, and I'm....I embraced that change, so I'm one of the 80% that embraced it.

-[JW] Fantastic, okay. We do, however, get around 20% that say "No, no, I resisted that change." So, for that 20%, and you, the listener, might be one of those 20%, I ask one supplementary question - the particular change that you're focused on right now, did you initiate that change or was it a change that was imposed upon you?

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Now, 99% of the people of the 20% that said they resisted initially the change then come back and tell me that the change they were particularly focused on was one that was imposed upon them. So, I actually believe that people are naturally resistant to change that is imposed upon them.

-[CC] Where someone's potentially used authority to say "This is what's happening, this is what's changing, you will accept it", and then they resist.

-[JW] Exactly. But, most people are very open to change and can be quite flexible and versatile if they are involved in the process of change. That really ought to have some impact on how we think about implementing change within our organization. If we can win that buy-in, if we can get people's contribution, if we can get them feeling empowered about the changes that we're making, we have far greater success in getting their moral, their empowerment, their commitment, their buy-in to making it work, and that is gold in most new initiatives projects or whatever.

-[CC] Fantastic. So, as you walk away from this episode, it's a good thing to think about. Think about whether you might wanna use authority or influence in the workplace, what would be the most appropriate situation. John, did you have something to add?

-[JW] Yeah, I think the other thing to....when you've consciously gone through the process of thinking "In this circumstance, should I use authority or should I use influence?", if you choose to use influence, remember that influence requires a dialogue. When you've chosen to do influence, don't go to e-mail and send out the e-mail to everybody to say "This is how we're going". That's authority, that's a one-way process.

What we need to do is get interactive with the people involved, maybe it's a face-to-face meeting, probably the best. If not, maybe it's a phone call, but you need to discuss it, you need to have the dialogue. You need to be asking questions, not making statements. That way people feel open to contribute and only when they contribute have you got a true dialogue and a true influencing regime.

-[CC] And we will be doing another podcast about how to facilitate, if that's something that you wanna be doing more of. So, getting people's feedback, getting them all in a room, 'cause there's definitely right ways and wrong ways to do effective facilitation.

-[JW] Yeah, facilitation is a great example of using influence to get to an outcome that everybody's agreed to as opposed to a presentation, which is "This is what I've decided is the right answers and let me tell you what it is."

And yes, you're right, I think the next podcast will be about facilitation.

-[CC] Right, fantastic. Thanks so much, John, this has been a really, really useful and interesting discussion, I've learned a lot in it. For detailed show notes, go to jhw.com.au/influence, that's jhw.com.au/influence, that's where you will be able to find detailed show notes of this episode that you can forward on to a colleague, or maybe your boss who you think might be better off using authority instead of influence, I don't know...But it's a great resource there, so make sure you check that out.

All right, thanks so much for tuning in today, my name is Christina Canters, and this has been Engagement Matters.