

Persuasive influence

Another way to get your co-workers on board

Do you know people whose influence exceeds beyond the scope of their job title? They possess this uncanny ability to gain support for their ideas while others struggle to even get their point across. These strategic influencers seem to garner support from unlikely sources even when the odds are stacked against them.

One such person is Carly (not her real name), a 30-something project engineer who works for an environmental engineering firm. All of her peers and top-level managers are males but, seemingly, this is a non-issue for her.

Having been raised with eight brothers, Carly is well-acclimated to the experience of being invisible or a novelty. Her unique upbringing has conditioned her to have a steel backbone and prepared her for the type of resistance that she would encounter operating in a male dominated industry.

While many women struggle to be seen, heard or even respected for their capabilities, Carly appears to gain approval and support quite effortlessly – or at least that’s the way it seems.

I had the opportunity to interview Carly. Surprisingly, or maybe not, when you pull the curtain back (think Wizard of Oz), you’ll see that her behind-the-scenes strategy is deliberately orchestrated and simultaneously stealth.

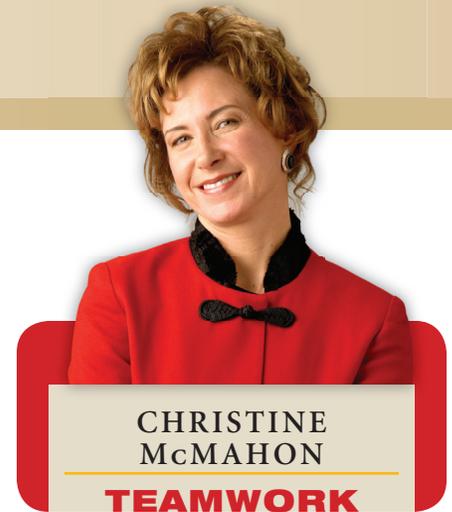
One of the many examples that Carly shared with me involved a large remediation project. Listening carefully to how the team scoped the project, mapped out the required steps and developed the cost structure, Carly thought that there might be a different, more appealing approach. At a conference that she had attended four months prior, she learned about a new technology that would reduce the project’s

timeline by at least 20 percent and save the client a substantial amount of money.

Her challenge centered around her conventionally-minded team who demonstrated a preference for proven approaches, and typically ignored anything that fell under the category of new technologies. She knew from past experience that if she presented her novel idea at a team meeting, that it would immediately get shot down.

“Truth be told, I knew that if it wasn’t their idea, they wouldn’t support it,” Carly said.

But in her heart, she knew that the customer would love the approach, or at



that this might have some application to the XYZ project? Tell me, if we did this and then that, do you think we might be able to do accomplish this outcome?”

Her intent was to make them part of the solution.

She informally met one-on-one with each of the engineers. Within three days, three of the four engineers had asked to review the materials that Carly received at the conference. The lead engineer was so intrigued, that he called the company

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the very least be appreciative of her company bringing new and different solutions to the table. And this effort would hopefully, help them win the deal.

In order to gain support for her ideas, Carly needed to meet with each of her team members individually. Using a stealth maneuver, she structured the conversation similar to an interview where she would ask them questions so they would share their unique insights and expertise. Then, at an appropriate point in the conversation, she would ask a question about the new technology, anticipating that they knew nothing about it. At that point, she would share what she learned at the conference and say, “Hey, now that I think of it, do you think

directly to gather more information about how this technology could be used on this particular site.

At the next team meeting, with Carly by his side, he presented his findings and mapped out how this technology could be applied to reduce the time and money investment. His overview of the initial facts made it impossible for the team to ignore, even though there was still one engineer who refused to buy-in to this “novel” approach. At this point, the group was responsible for engaging him in a debate – not Carly.

By the end of the meeting, it was decided that further information was required so Carly offered to help the lead

engineer gather the documentation and report out.

Mission accomplished!

Investigating Carly's approach, there are some brilliant strategies that we can all learn from if we want to increase our influential power. These include:

- 1. Trust your instincts.** When difficulty arises, take time to decide what's most important to you. For Carly, her focus was to provide the customer with the best possible solution, not about who got the credit for the great idea. In the end, she earned tremendous respect from her peers, but in the moment, that wasn't her driving force.
- 2. Leave your ego at home.** Carly knew that she had to make her team part of the solution. To gain support, she needed this to be a collective decision. Carly chose to rise above the politics and their conventional thinking. She devised a strategy that would build individual support which over-rode the group-think

process. She gained support from the group leader, who also happened to be the person with the most influential power – an added bonus.

3. Leverage Emotional Intelligence.

Carly's approach allowed her to be humble, while simultaneously, presenting real-time, real-world, real-application scenarios. By allowing the facts to speak for themselves, she created a forum where each engineer could draw his own conclusion – thus making it personal. When the lead engineer bought into the idea of exploring this technology as a viable solution, he facilitated the necessary internal debates, which eventually led to the development of a compelling proposal.

- 4. Be tenacious.** From past experience in working with this team, Carly knew that a decision didn't necessarily transfer into action steps. She knew that she needed to track the process and where possible, insert herself in such a way that she gently

advanced the process forward. She did her best to monitor ongoing communications and progress reports so they were inching closer to a positive outcome.

- 5. Be strategic.** Carly knew that she couldn't force the issue but instead needed buy in, even if it was just an agreement to keep an open mind. Small movement over time builds momentum, which can lead to big results.

From the outside, the assumption could be made that Carly's age and lack of executive title would have limited her ability to get big results. But, her brilliant, stealth approach, disarmed even the toughest critic, allowing her, to ever so gently, demonstrate her strategic thinking capabilities. She explained that she's no longer invisible and has recently been offered more complex and rewarding assignments. ■

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