

3 ways to build influence at work

Consider these practical strategies to earn trust and shape decisions — even if no one reports to you

By Lisa Robbins, ASU News
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Story by May Busch

Many professionals assume influence belongs to the people with the biggest titles.

But over the course of my career, I've found the opposite is often true. Some of the most influential people at work are not managers at all. They are the people others trust, seek out and want to collaborate with.

That's because influence has less to do with your title than most people think. In many situations, that influence is actually a more powerful tool to get things done.

People may comply because of authority. But influence is what gets people genuinely on board.

Over my years in corporate leadership and now as an executive coach, I've found there are three practical ways to build influence at work, even if nobody reports to you.

Tip No. 1: Start with the influence you already have

Many people underestimate the influence they have. You may not control budgets or promotions, but you likely have other assets that people value.

For some, it could be expertise and credibility in your field. For others, it's the ability to stay calm under pressure. There's real power in being someone your co-workers can rely on for steady guidance when questions come up or pressure builds.

When I was transferred to London earlier in my banking career, one of my biggest assets was my knowledge of the U.S. bond market at a time when the European market was rapidly evolving toward something similar. That expertise gave me influence long before I had seniority.

Ask yourself: What do people already come to me for? The answer often reveals the foundation of your influence.

Tip No. 2: Find your most receptive entry points

Influence is rarely attained in a single, big conversation. More often, it's in a series of smaller ones — especially in large organizations where decisions are shaped informally long before they become official.

I learned this firsthand after making a classic mistake: trying to convince people who were never likely to agree in the first place before building broader support. I tried going straight to a department head with my suggestion for changing a policy — only to have it shot down. I know now I would have gotten a better result if I had socialized it with a few allies first.

The key is to look for where momentum is most possible. Who is already open to the idea? Which teams are most affected? Where could early progress create a ripple effect?

Ask yourself: Who are the decision-makers? Who do they listen to? Which of these people are already onside? And which are the lowest risk to start with?

Read more

Get May's book: "Visible: How to Advance Your Career Without Playing Politics, Selling Your Soul, or Working Yourself Into the Ground" at thevisiblebook.com.

Tip No. 3: Build relationships before you need them

Influence grows through trust, credibility and repeated interactions over time. Yet most people wait until they need help or approval before investing in relationships.

Whenever I step into a new role, one of the first things I do is meet individually with as many people as possible — not to ask for anything, but to listen and learn. The best time to build influence with your colleagues is before you urgently need it.

I learned this firsthand while leading a cross-divisional initiative involving groups that were actively competing with one another. I had no formal authority. What worked was meeting people individually, listening to their concerns and helping them see a shared goal. Once they saw the broader mission, support followed — not because I outranked anyone, but because I'd taken the time to understand what mattered to them.

Ask yourself: Who are the stakeholders most important to what we're trying to accomplish? Which relationships will be important to fulfill our goals in the future?

Influence is a leadership skill whether or not you have the title yet. And often, building it is exactly what earns you the title later.

About the author

[May Busch](#) is a former COO of Morgan Stanley Europe, who is now an executive coach, speaker, advisor, author and executive-in-residence in ASU's Office of the President.

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"Too often, talented professionals stay stuck in the shadows.
Visible is a masterclass in stepping forward confidently
- without selling out or burning out."
- Dorie Clark, Wall Street Journal bestselling author of *The Long Game*



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