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A Growing Influence by Mike Bonem

No one will deny the importance of influence. John Maxwell is well-known for saying, “Leadership is influence. Nothing more. Nothing less.” Now you might quibble a bit with Maxwell. You can think of situations where a person exercises leadership through the power of his or her position and by fiat. Think of the general who can order troops into battle, the coach who can bench a player that doesn’t follow directions, or the CEO who makes the final decision to embark on a new strategy. Even in these situations, however, getting the best performance from the people in the organization requires more than giving orders – it requires influence.

If influence is important in these settings, it is even more important in churches. Sure, the position of senior pastor comes with a certain responsibility and authority to set direction and guide the team. But pastors live with the knowledge that most of the “team” is composed of volunteers who have plenty of options for where to worship and how to invest their time and money. Because of this reality, the positive use of influence is a vital tool for pastors. And if it’s vital for the senior pastor, it’s indispensable for those who don’t have the advantage of positional authority. If you serve as an associate pastor, business manager, communications director, minister to youth or children, or any other leadership positions, you live with this reality every day.

In *Leading from the Second Chair* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), Roger Patterson and I define a second chair leader as “a person in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization.” Many people react to the “second chair” terminology and think it means the person who is number two on the organization chart, which is often an executive or associate pastor in a local church setting. But our definition shows that a person can function as second chair leader without a second chair position. In fact, there can be more than one person who functions as a second chair leader within your church because influence is more important than title.

Deep and Wide Influence

This brings us right back to “influence.” How can you have that kind of influence? The definition offers another key insight – “add value throughout the organization.” Effective second chair leaders see beyond their specific functional responsibilities, something we refer to as the deep-wide paradox. This paradox recognizes that you have a “deep” functional responsibility – the church’s finances or communications or media or a specific ministry area. It is imperative for you to be an expert in this area and insure that the ministry is done with excellence. If others see you as highly competent and committed to doing a great job, your influence will grow. They will see you as “adding value,” which is the starting point for influence. True second chair influence, however, comes from the “wide” part of the paradox. It happens when your perspective and impact spreads “throughout the organization,” not just in your functional area. It comes from having a wide-angle lens that enables you to see the bigger picture of what is best for the entire church.

This is a paradox because it’s not easy to switch back and forth between the zoom and wide-angle lenses, between functional excellence and organizational big picture. What does it look like in practice when a ministry leader is deep and wide? A few examples will illustrate the concept:



- A worship leader who willingly releases some resources so that they can be used to strengthen the discipleship ministry which is lagging behind.
- A business manager who knows that the budgeting system is a useful tool for managing costs but also knows that God's plans aren't always in the budget.
- A youth director who initiates a family-focused collaboration with children's and adult ministries.
- A facility manager who surprised everyone with insightful contributions during ministry planning sessions.
- An IT person whose creativity earns an invitation into the worship planning process.

When peers see you as a person who cares as much for the whole as for your specific area, your influence grows. Is that how others see you? Or do they see you as protective and territorial, someone who is deeply committed to your ministry but perhaps not as committed to the church. The journey to real influence always includes a wide-angle lens.

Being Influenced

I suspect that everyone reading this article wants to be a person whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization. But did you know that you can expand your influence by allowing others to influence you? I'm not talking about following the crowd or bowing to peer pressure. Instead, it's an attitude that is open to learning and hearing different perspectives. Doing this is essential if you want to grow in your ability to see the big picture. There are three related traits that are found in people who are being influenced in this positive way: an open-minded posture, an inquisitive nature, and a listening disposition.

A person with an open-minded posture goes into every decision with a belief that he or she could be wrong. That doesn't mean that they don't have an opinion – it just means that their opinion isn't set in concrete. They realize that they may not know all the facts, and that uncovering new information could change their perspective. You know that a person's physical posture communicates volumes before they open their mouth. It's the person sitting on the edge of his chair that shows, "I'm engaged," or the woman whose facial expressions says, "I'm bored," or the teen whose rolling eyes communicate, "I can't believe that I have to listen to this." In the same way, there is a mental "posture" that we bring into every decision. If you want to be influenced, check your mental posture before you start the conversation. Are you willing to consider alternative ideas, or have you made up your mind?

Closely related to an open-minded posture is an inquisitive nature. The former is a willingness to consider new information, and the latter is the drive to dig deeper. This is characterized by the person who has become adept at asking great questions. People often rush to provide answers. After all, doing so establishes their expertise and can shorten the meeting! But when the decisions are complex or contentious, it is often better to ask questions: "Why do you see this situation that way?" "What do you think will happen if we try this approach?" "Are there other options we've not considered?" The conversations that can be started by these questions can be a great source of influence in both directions – influencing you and allowing you to influence others.

Of course, being open-minded and inquisitive is of little value if you do not have a listening disposition. James instructs his readers to be "quick to listen and slow to speak" (James 1:19), but people often reverse this. They're quick to speak and slow to listen. This is especially true in ministry settings, where "speaking" is a highly valued gift. If you want to expand your influence, listen deeply to others. You need to hear their words and the underlying emotions. You need to probe to make sure that you understand what you think you've heard. When you do this, it not



only influences you, but it creates the kind of trust and deeper relationship that will enable you to influence others.

A Picture of Influence

Sarah loved First Church and was always eager to help in any way that she could, but she was “just” a part-time IT person. Her primary role was to keep the computers and the network running, install new software, and be a resource to the rest of the staff for technology-related issues. She knew that worship attendance had been flat for several years, so she was pleased to hear Pastor John announce a new emphasis on evangelism. At the monthly all-staff meeting, he remarked, “We need to raise the evangelistic temperature of the entire congregation, and that needs to start with us. When that happens, I think we’ll see a lot more people coming through the doors. But that’s not enough. In truth, we’re just not doing a very good job of following up with the visitors that we already have.”

As Sarah listened, her first reaction was, “That’s no surprise. We have a good software tool for visitor follow-up, but no one is using it.” But before she said anything, she paused and asked herself, “I wonder why?” The next day, she asked Pastor John if she could visit with him for a few minutes. She was normally reluctant to interrupt his busy schedule, but she couldn’t stop thinking about the follow-up issue. She explained to him, “Our current software includes a module for tracking visitors. I’d like to figure out why it’s not working and how we can use it better.” Sarah listened closely as Pastor John proceeded to tell her about his personal frustrations with the system. From a technical perspective, the system worked fine, but she refrained from saying this. Instead, she asked a simple question: “When you gather the ministry staff to work on this issue, can I attend the meeting?”

In the weeks that followed, Sarah analyzed historical data and found that a low percentage of visitors were being contacted and that few returned to worship a second time. She listened to other staff members and consistently heard that the system was not user friendly. Even though they agreed with Pastor John’s emphasis on better follow-up, they were frustrated with a cumbersome system that made it difficult to find or record information. Sarah also attended several meetings with the ministry staff and discovered that she was able to make a significant contribution simply by asking questions. In one meeting, she asked, “How will we know if we’ve been ‘successful’?” That question touched off an hour-long conversation that brought great clarity to the conversation about follow-up and the broader emphasis on evangelism.

Ultimately, Sarah made several modifications to the software to address the concerns of the staff. Then she conducted a training session so they would understand how to use it. There was an immediate impact in the number of visitors contacted and the percentage who came back. During one follow-up meeting, the associate pastor turned to Sarah and said, “Thanks for taking ownership of this. I’ll never again think of you as ‘just’ an IT person.”

Sarah was a person whose influence with others added value throughout First Church. Rather than staying in a narrowly defined IT box or thinking that she already knew the answer, she opened herself up to being influenced as she explored the issue. This in turn enabled her to have a much greater influence.

Everyone reading this article has influence, but not everyone has the kind of broad influence that Sarah gained. Do you want to be a person whose influence adds value throughout your church or ministry? What can you do to show that you are willing to be influenced and that you are just as concerned about the “wide” as the “deep”? Don’t do it as someone who is power hungry, but as a simple servant who cares about others and about the whole church. When you do this, you may be surprised at how quickly your influence grows.