Influencing through people with influence

Power plays an important part in all business. You need to understand who has power – who is the right person to influence.

> *It's very challenging actually to identify who has influence in the room, who is advising the boss. It's not obvious. Everybody looks equal but they are not. In this group there are one or two who give the boss very strong advice and you can be sure he listens to them.*
>
> Thomas Ruckdäschel (Germany), T-Systems, Germany, talking about working in the Middle East

Mindful international managers are aware that influence in an organisation cannot only be achieved by doing a good job and hoping this will bring the influence they want. They are sensitive to where 'political' power lies – especially in relationship-oriented and in hierarchical cultures. They learn how to identify who the key influencers are.

The person with influence and the power to decide is often protected by informal 'gate-keepers' – personal assistants and other staff who do not themselves have the power to decide. However, a key way to reach the person with power is to build relationships with these staff. They will open doors for you if they like and respect you. If you are used to working in a very task-oriented culture, this may be difficult to adapt to. Maybe you feel you should be able to talk to the person who can get things done. However, in cultures which place greater emphasis on relationships, you may only be listened to if you are liked or trusted.

Key competence
## Influencing through sensitivity to context[4]

Effective international managers understand where 'political' power lies in companies. They give time and energy to identifying who holds this power and how to get access to them. They understand the contexts in which decisions are made and how to influence decision-makers in order to exert the influence they are aiming at.

The role of the connecter | 6.5

Bringing people together across all kinds of cultures – acting as a connecter – is a key role of international managers. In this role, they can help to break down the silo mentality.

Silo mentality
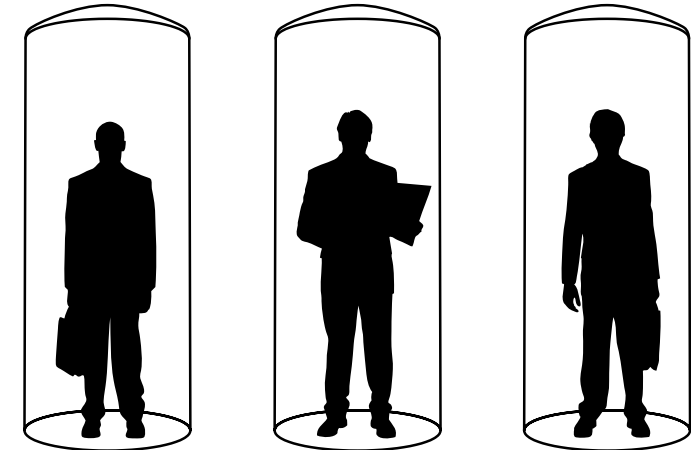
In organisational cultures, the silo mentality grows as a result of over-structuring the organisation, which may amount to putting people into boxes. These boxes, or departments, can become highly effective centres of expertise. But they may equally well turn into little kingdoms which their heads jealously guard and which are insulated from positive outside influences.

In national cultures, this closed mentality can be seen when we compare majority and minority cultures. A majority culture is one which dominates or is very powerful globally. The United States has been the world's main majority culture for the last sixty years. In the nineteenth century, Britain and France with their extensive empires, were majority cultures. A majority culture tends to look inward and to find many of the answers it needs within its own culture. It may assume that the outside world wants to imitate its own culture.

In Europe, a Scandinavian country such as Norway is a good example of a minority culture. People living in minority cultures tend to look outwards for trade, jobs, education and other things. As a result, the culture is more outward-looking and open to the influence of other cultures.

International managers need to build a strong working culture with shared values and expectations. However, they need to make sure at the same time that this culture is open and curious about other cultures. This can start with international managers themselves being open to new ideas, behaviours and people from different cultures.

Key competence
Openness through new thinking[4]

Being receptive to ideas which are different from those common in their own culture is a quality of effective international managers. They are curious and try to extend their understanding of different professional areas, different organisations and different cultures. They put themselves in the position of people who are very different from themselves and they try to see things from other people's standpoints.

From a functional point of view, this aim of creating openness means building cross-functional teams and networks. The manager needs to take on the role of the connecter. Managers need to take every opportunity to bring functions together. For example, training courses can provide a chance for people from technical fields to develop more understanding of their colleagues in the commercial area, and vice versa.

Knowledge transfer sessions can be built into weekly or monthly team meetings so that expertise in a particular area does not remain just in the heads of certain individuals. Other communication channels can be used such as annual workshops, newsletters and video-conferences to build stronger cross-functional networks. Connecting can go even further. Cultures which value expert knowledge less may enable people to move across functions in their career – for example from production into marketing.

Best practice
Defining roles | 6.6

Role definition and expectations are critical both inside and outside a team. International managers will probably need to fulfil a wider range of roles than at home. Depending on the cultures with which they are working and the tasks they are performing, they may well need to be able to reflect upon what role is most critical and flexibly adapt to the requirements of the situation.

In international projects, you are not usually able to observe team members perform their work. You only see the results of their work. So everybody in the team needs a clear understanding of what is expected of him or her. This is also critical to how the team is seen from outside, especially by local management. Team members need to know what the role involves and why it is important. Otherwise, they will soon think it is not as important as their local work.

Defining roles in an international team

Activity	Questions to be answered
Communicating	Who do you communicate with and how?
Managing information	What information do you need? What information do you produce and who else needs it?
Monitoring and reporting	Whose work do you monitor? Who monitors your work? When and how?
Decision-making	What do you decide? Who else decides what else?
Budgeting and controlling	Who has budget responsibility?
Producing things	What are the project targets and milestones? What responsibilities for targets and milestones do you have? Who has overall responsibility for targets?
Creating and developing things	How innovative are you expected to be and in what areas?
Assuring quality	How is it measured and by whom?
Developing yourself and others	How can this be done? What opportunities are there for your career and promotion?

Notes

1
See, for example, Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (2001).

2
See, for example, Blanchard, Zigarmi and Zigarmi (1985), Hersey (1985) and Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (2001).

3
See Laurent (1986).

4
One of the Worldwork international competency set.