

## **INTO THE AGE OF INFLUENCE – Slowly by Kevin McKee**

“Unlike top management at Enron, exemplary leaders reward dissent. They encourage it. They understand that whatever momentary discomfort they experience as a result of being told they might be wrong, it is more than offset by the fact that the information will help them make better decisions.” Warren Bennis

Back in 1985 Professor John Kotter wrote a book called “Power and Influence”, subtitled, “Beyond Formal Authority”. Its main argument was that increasing complexity and change would force organisations away from traditional “command and control” ways of operating. Instead they would rely more on individuals to use their influencing skills to get the right things to happen for sustained business success. Nearly twenty years later does it look as if he was right?

To my mind Kotter’s predictions are coming true but more slowly than they need to. When we look at outstanding businesses and individuals over time we see positive influence very actively at work. Jim Collins’ research on successful companies in “Good to Great” used such exacting hard measures of long term over-performance that even G.E. failed to make the grade. The descriptions of how power and influence work in these exemplary organisations show what it really takes to succeed, e.g. they “engage in dialogue and debate, not coercion”.

Jay Conger and his team researched numerous organisations over twelve years to identify the skills of influence in business situations. They found a minority of individuals were consistently able to build commitment and trigger the action needed to move their organisations forward. Their best practices are a fascinating blend of logic and emotion delivered honestly over time. Contrast these with the habits of more mediocre persuaders, such as “resisting compromise”.

Look around your organisation and the ones you regularly deal with. The chances are that you will see relatively little of the brilliance described above. The average organisation is still at least half stuck in the age of command and its results and problems doubtless reflect this. (They are brutally exposed when the business environment changes.) My advice to someone seeking a successful long-term career in organisations would be to find yourself a place with a culture of dialogue and debate. (The “off platform” behaviour of senior managers is a good guide.) Then become a fantastic influencer!

“Constructive persuasion serves not only ourselves but others. The outcome is always geared to the best solution for everyone involved. It depends on listening sensitively to others, so that we can find a common ground of shared needs and perspectives” Jay A Conger