



TRANSCRIPT

Episode # 11: The Power of A Simple Question

Hi, everyone! Today we're turning our attention to the power skill of influence. You'll remember from Episode 2 of the podcast that influence is the skill that helps you create an environment where you will be taken more seriously.

You're cultivating and strengthening your work connections and your work relationships. You're laying a foundation--a workplace where people know, like and trust you.

And you're doing all that so that when you need to propose ideas and actions at a later stage...when you have to use the power skill of persuasion...those ideas and actions will be taken seriously as well.

Now here's the thing about influence. People have all sort of misconceptions about it, and as a result, they avoid working on growing their influence. One common misconception is that growing your influence is time-consuming. The

thinking is that you have to network a lot and show up to functions and events. Or take colleagues out for drinks or lunch in a way that takes you away from work you need to do or even your personal life.

Another misconception is that to grow your influence, you have to change who you are in some way. The thinking is that you have to be calculating and target people. You have to flatter them and engage in endless small talk. You have to be inauthentic and not yourself.

Well, yuck! Of course, any sane person would avoid growing their influence if any of that was true. But the reality is none of those beliefs really are true. They're all judgments that we've made about people who often weren't growing their influence well.

Sure, networking might be effective in the hands of an extrovert who genuinely....and let me emphasize that phrase...who genuinely enjoys and is skilled at networking. But it's far from the only tactic for growing your influence. And in the hands of someone who doesn't enjoy it, networking can actually diminish your influence.

And being calculating and inauthentic never works over time. People inevitably see who you are when you use that tactic, and let me tell you, that's not a good look. The people who you're trying to impress may smile at you, but they're not dumb. They see through the manipulation.

So, the good news I like to share with people is, you can get rid of your beliefs and misconceptions about influence. It doesn't and shouldn't be time-consuming and inauthentic.

Growing your influence can be simple. The tactics you use can be a good fit for who you are, and in many cases, the interactions you have can be even fun and rewarding in the moment.

Today I want to share one of my favorite ways of growing your influence...one that's not only simple, but often enjoyable. It works for anyone, but it's an especially good fit for introverts like myself. All you have to have is genuine curiosity, the ability to ask questions, and the ability to listen.

And by the way, the use of questions is one of the most under-utilized tools we have at our disposal in the work world. You'll often hear me in this podcast

showing how the use of a question achieves so much more than the use of a statement. They're a hidden super-power that you'll want to learn to cultivate.

In this particular method, you're simply going to use a question as a means to get someone to open up and to better understand them. You're going to use a question to get the other person feeling seen and heard.

But first, before we talk about how you do this, let's explore why this works to grow your influence. Why would making others feel seen and heard result in you having greater influence?!

Here's the answer. When other people ask us a question with genuine curiosity, the research very strongly indicates that we experience that curiosity about who we are as a gift.

Isn't that interesting? And it makes sense when you think about it. Who doesn't like to explain who they are and what's important to them when someone asks with genuine and respectful curiosity?

You feel appreciated, and you feel appreciative. You're quite likely to feel continuing goodwill toward the gift giver and a sense of reciprocity.

Think about it...good will and a sense of reciprocity. That's a pretty accurate description of what others feel about us when we have influence, right?

And there are additional benefits to asking questions as well. Depending on the type of question, you might be better seen and understood.

An unexpectedly deep question is often seen as evidence of a deep and thoughtful mind, for example, and the person who you're dealing with is suddenly able to perceive a dimension of you that they might have otherwise missed.

And the content of the answers can be helpful to you as well. When you start to more fully understand a person and what motivates him or her, you're better equipped to choose good persuasion techniques down the road when you need to convince that person to support an idea that you have.

So, you can see the benefits of making someone feel seen and heard. Now let's get you skillful and effective in using the technique!

First, for this technique to have a meaningful impact, it's absolutely essential that you use quality questions.

What do I mean by that? You want questions that are unexpected (in a respectful way, of course!) and that cause the other person to stop and reflect a bit (if only for a moment.)

And because it's the work world, the questions normally should have some direct or tangential to the world of work.

Here are a few examples of quality questions just to illustrate:

- What attracted you to your profession/your role/this company?
- Who was your best mentor? Who was your best role model?
- What was the biggest challenge in your career and how did you deal with it?
- What experiences have been the most important in shaping who you are as a leader?

Notice that these are all questions that require the other person to open up and reveal aspects of their origin, their identity, their values, and their beliefs.

They are not questions about the business, activities and people of the workplace. Those might feel like perfectly appropriate questions, but the reality is they don't do much to open people up and deepen relationships. To some extent, they just

kill time, and they frequently provide you with very little return on your investment.

Quality questions, on the other hand, are much more powerful, both for you and the other person. And remember what we discussed in Episode 1 of this podcast about the Latin meaning of power.

It's the force that generates things. It makes things happen. That's what we're intending when we use the power skills. We are looking to grow the power to make things happen.

Now at this stage of the conversation with my coaching clients, some of them squirm and tell me that's awkward to ask such questions and that people would react poorly to it. And I get that.

I was a pretty shy introvert at the beginning of my career. Asking other people questions, particularly if they're more influential or higher up the food chain can make you feel pretty self-conscious.

But I came to learn this belief is just a myth. Other people genuinely like being asked questions. And you can ask quality questions of anyone so long as you pick the right time and have the right lead-in.

Here are some examples of the lead-in's I sometime use:

“I’m trying to decide what’s the next action I should take to grow myself as a leader. What were some of the actions that you took that made a difference?”

“I love asking questions about what shaped us into the people we are. I’m always learning the most interesting things. What was your biggest motivation in taking the career path you did?”

“You know that thing that just happened at work or in the news? It had me wondering about the lessons we learn from making mistakes. What was your favorite mistake and what did you learn from it?”

So, notice something else about those examples that I just gave. I generally ask things like “what was the one thing” or “what was the worst thing” or “what was the best thing.”

These are all ways of narrowing the question down so that it's more easy and more likely for the person to respond. It also makes it more easy and more likely for you to come up with follow-up questions for the person.

Also, by narrowing your question in that way, you're more likely to learn what's most meaningful to the person vs just getting a canned answer. You're making that person really stop and think.

Now of course, you don't have to use any of the questions that I've told you about in this podcast. Feel free to come up with your own. And if you need any inspiration, you'll be surprised at how many other lists of sample questions there are on the internet, as well as books with lists of questions on Amazon. Just use a search phrase like "reflective questions" or "meaningful questions," and you'll see lots of resources.

And as you get more comfortable with this approach, you'll start noticing good questions that other people are using in the workplace. You can start collecting those as well. I still am, and I've had a quite a few years of doing this!

So, let's assume you've asked your questions. What you do next is also important. You'll want to listen with genuine curiosity to the answer. Really make the person feel heard and worthy of being heard.

Don't interrupt or respond by arguing or immediately telling your own story or beliefs. You might share that a little later in the conversation, but generally the less you say about yourself, the better.

Instead draw the person out more by using phrases like, "Why do you feel/think that?" or "Tell me more about what you meant by that."

And also, take time to make the person feel validated in their beliefs and emotions. You can use phrases like, "That must have felt so challenging" or "I can see why you feel that way" or "That's a meaningful insight" or "What an important experience."

One way of "powering up" this technique and taking it to the next level is what I call "reminding someone who they are."

Our personal identity, the way in which we define ourselves, is often one of the things that we value the most in our life. But the interesting thing is we can

sometimes actually forget who we are. The pressures of the workplace and of our personal life can sometimes make us drift and lose track of what makes us special and valuable. Or we might know what makes us special but are afraid that others don't see or understand that.

In whatever answer you received to the question you asked are signals as to what that person cares about. Use those signals as an opportunity to give that person another gift, the gift of explicitly acknowledging who they are.

For example, notice an admirable quality that is important to the person in the answer they give you. Maybe it's courage or loyalty or emotional maturity.

Then you can say something like:

- I can see why people appreciate your loyalty.
- I'm really struck by the courage it took to do that.
- I really respect people who have emotional maturity. It's a trait that I'd like to grow in myself.
- Wow, you really grew from that experience or wow, you really made a difference.

Again, these are just a few examples. There are a lot of ways in which you can essentially say, “I see this thing in you, and I respect that.”

And finally, here is one more way in which you can power up this technique to the next level. When you remind the person of who they are, use a trait that will also help you down the road.

For example, is this a person who can sometimes waffle on decisions and is very risk-averse? If there’s something in their story that makes them look brave, you can comment favorably on their decisiveness or willingness to take a risk when there’s a good reason for it.

As a result, the next time you need them to be decisive, they’re more likely to be that way. They’ll be motivated to live into the version of themselves that you complimented.

Or is this a person who always tends to be oppositional and resistant to your area of the company? Comment favorably on their ability to challenge people to create better outcomes. Or mention that you appreciate their commitment to high standards.

By doing that, you are subtly steering them to see you as the person who gets them and therefore to see you as more likely to present ideas in the future that meet their standards.

I love how this approach of steering people combines integrity with strategy. You are being genuine in recognizing what they aspire to and planful in creating an aspiration in them, one that makes it more likely for them to give you a fair hearing when you need to pitch something.

So, there you have some of the most important elements of making others feel seen and heard. Now how do you put it to use?

I recommend that you do two things. The first is to start building a file of good questions.

And the second thing is this... every few weeks identify a person who you would like to build a relationship with. Then look at your file and pick an appropriate question or two that you might ask them. Wait for a good moment, and then ask them a question.

For example, when I was a junior exec in a global company, I occasionally ran into the CEO in the elevator and never knew what to say to him. I finally decided to ask him a question that was bugging me.

He was a first time CEO, and I was curious about what was the best thing and what was the worst thing about making the transition from member of the management team (with a lot of rivals for the top role) to actual CEO.

So, I thought, what the heck, the next time we're alone in the elevator with all that uncomfortable silence, I'll just ask the question. So, I did!

And when he talked, I used appreciative listening because I was genuinely interested, and I told him what I noticed and appreciated about what he said.

The conversation in the elevator ended up lasting so long that I ended up skipping my floor, getting off the elevator with him at the executive suite level, walking down the hallway to his office and spending 10 more minutes chatting.

I firmly believe that to this day that this single conversation was pivotal to my rise in the company over the next few years to the point where I was deemed to be one of the successors for that very CEO. And of course, I had to perform well

and clearly show my value over those several years. It's not as if there was any special favoritism that resulted from that interaction.

But I had become a little more known and visible. When I did something valuable, it was noticed, not taken for granted. I had established an important bit of influence and credibility through that interaction. I had given a gift by reflecting on his experience in a way that showed I understood what was important to him, and then I thanked him for the gift of sharing himself.

Isn't that great? If you spend any time with me, you'll sometimes hear me talking about "two-fers" or "three-fers." What I mean by that is taking an action or making a decision that has multiple payoffs, not just one. And using this technique is such a great example of that.

You're doing something really good for the other person, and you may also be evening the playing field for yourself. That other person is more likely to take you seriously when you have an idea or recommendation. And that's all we really want, right? Just give us a fair hearing and let our ideas get fair consideration.

So, there you have it... a simple and often gratifying way to build your influence simply by connecting a little deeper from time to time. What could be better than that?

Feel free to contact me with any questions you have, or even with your improvements on this approach. I'll be happy to share those in a later podcast and give you a shoutout.

Just send me an email at info@significagroup.com. You can find that email address in the show notes as well.

Alright my friends, here's to an awesome week ahead for you, and I'll see you in our next episode.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Mastering The Power Skills. If you like what was offered in today's show and want more insights and resources from Kathy, check us out at www.significagroup.com.

