



"V-FLUENCING": Virtual Influencing When You Can't Be There In Person



LEE E. MILLER, Managing Director of NegotiationPlus.com, is an expert in the area of Influencing and Negotiating and the author of the highly acclaimed UP: Influence Power and the U Perspective—The Art of Getting What you Want (2007).

Today we can communicate with almost anyone, anywhere, at any time of the day or night via cell phones, BlackBerries, e-mail, text messaging, teleconferencing, videoconferencing and other manners of new technology. The conference call, the Internet and virtual meetings have replaced the conference room as the tools used by most business people to get their work done. Converged communications technology even enables you to determine when participating colleagues and customers are "available" to contact by syncing into their calendars, telephones and computers, thus allowing you to know what the best way to reach someone is at any given moment.

Just because we can more easily get in touch with someone however, doesn't mean that we are automatically better able to influence them. While many of the same influencing principles apply whether you are dealing with a person face-

to-face or communicating with them from a distance, those principles sometimes need to be applied in different ways. In other instances a whole different dynamic needs to be taken into account. To be an effective influencer you need to understand how virtual influencing, or as I refer to it, "V-Fluencing," differs from exerting influence in person. The twin pillars of influencing are relationships and information. Building a relationship with people will greatly enhance your ability to influence them. The more important a relationship is, the more open an individual will be to being influenced by the person with whom they have the relationship. Hence, the more information you can gather, the better you are able to exert influence. Particularly important is your ability to discern someone's "U Perspective"—what they care about.

So how do you go about developing a relationship with an individual that you have never met? Start by taking the time to get to know them. Whether by telephone, by e-mail or by employing other technologies, spend time communicating with them. Take advantage of all the different communication mediums available to you. Find reasons to stay in touch. People love it when you call or e-mail them just to see how they are doing. Most are pleasantly surprised when they find out you are not asking them for anything. If the relationship is important enough it may even be worth the time and

expense to meet the person face-to-face. Kay Ann Hoogland, formerly the Vice President, Global Diversity & Compliance for Motorola in Schaumburg, Illinois described how she tried to build relationships with the Motorola executives she dealt with overseas. She always scheduled her introductory phone call at a time that was convenient for the other party. When that individual was in Asia, because of the time difference, that usually meant the middle of the night for her. Since most executives from the US headquarters make calls during their normal business hours, which would be the late evening in Asia, Hoogland's thoughtful behaviour was recognised and appreciated. It allowed her to start off her relationships with these executives on a very positive note.

It helps not only to show an interest in those you seek to influence, but also to be an interesting person. Jeanette Chang, International Publishing Director at Hearst Magazine International, credits her success to the relationships she has developed over the years. The more interesting you are, the more people will want to spend time with you. It will give you something to talk to them about and make people want to get to know you better. As an added benefit, being more interesting will increase your ability to influence others.

Gathering and sharing information is also more difficult when you have to do it virtually. One of the major problems with influencing from a distance is that it is harder to determine what will motivate someone to want to help you. Once you develop a relationship, this becomes easier but it still requires effective listening and the ability to read people, skills that are made more difficult virtually because of the inability to read a person's body language.

Different techniques are required to both gather information and to convey your message, depending on the specific virtual medium that you are using. While new technology can help you connect with people despite being separated by a great distance, to do so one must understand how using that technology differs from engaging with someone in person. Regardless of the technology being used,

always bear in mind that the person you are interacting with is not there with you. That means either they can't see you or, even when they can, (i.e. when using videoconferencing) the visual cues they receive are not the same as when you are in their presence. As a result it is critical to keep your audience's attention at all times. People that you are communicating with virtually are easily distracted.

Too often we are unsuccessful in our efforts to influence people virtually because we simply impart information using the

available technology without really engaging our intended audience. To truly connect with someone requires a two-way interaction. Often the best way to achieve that result is to "force" your audience to interact with you and with each other. No matter what the virtual medium you use, ask lots of questions and engage the audience. For example, while videoconferencing use polls or otherwise seek input from the participants. Visually focus on the content more than on the speaker because we quickly get bored looking at a "talking head." Keep the audience focused on the content by using visual aids such as slides and whiteboards. Use demonstrations whenever possible. Highlight and underline information on slides and write or draw on whiteboards. When the camera is on you, look directly into the lens to simulate eye contact and

don't move around too much because it is distracting.

Technology allows us to extend our sphere of influence, reaching out to anyone no matter where they are physically located. Ultimately, however, that technology is of little avail if we don't understand how to apply influencing principles virtually. The 3 Cs- **Convince**, **Collaborate** and **Create**-Influencing Method, the U Perspective, relationships building and information gathering are equally important whether you seek to influence virtually or face-to-face. However, the manner in which those principles are brought into play needs to take into account both the strengths, and the limitations, of the particular technology that you are using.

