



The power of influence

At a glance:



Understanding influence to drive change: Influence is the ability to produce an impact on someone or something – it is not guaranteed by your job title.



Consider the converging nature of our minds: Our emotions and moods influence the moods and emotions of others.



Uncover practical steps to positively influence the wellbeing of others: Manage your influence, self-regulate, co-regulate and prioritise actions over terminology (walk your talk).



Influence for leaders: The best leaders exert a positive influence on peoples' well-being and inspire them to deliver results.

Discovering the power of influence in the workplace

Influence at work is a big topic. Like most topics, the more you read about it, the more you discover its complexity.

We tend to associate **influence** with **power**, and might even use the words interchangeably, but a closer inspection tells us that power and influence are not the same thing.

In *Influence at Work*, Steve J. Martin explains that *"influence can be defined as the ability to exert or wield an affect or impact on someone or something."* Influence can start small and magnify out. It can happen unconsciously (we pick up thoughts and behaviours unknowingly) and can be either beneficial or pernicious (as demonstrated by Instagram influencers and their impact on beauty standards worldwide).

Power has many definitions, but what is clear is that nobody wants to be powerless and everyone wants to be empowered. One definition of power is the authority granted by a job title. Without getting too caught up in semantics, it's fair to say that if you have influence, you have some degree of power. But the converse isn't always true – a position of power (e.g. Head of Debt Products Legal) does not guarantee you will have influence.

Influence matters because without it, as a leader or a manager, you can't inspire people to realise your vision or deliver work effectively. At its core, influence produces change. Every in-house lawyer will most likely recognise that we are operating in a time where the pressure to change – to transform ways of working, embrace new technologies and provide innovative solutions – is greater than ever. So this raises the critical question: **how do we increase our influence to lead through change?**

A complete answer to that question goes beyond the scope of this toolkit, but for those interested in exploring further, three resources include:

1. *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* by Robert B. Cialdini
2. *Influence at Work* by Steve J. Martin
3. For the introverts, *Quiet Influence* by Jennifer B. Kahnweiler.

That said, there is one aspect of influence that is equally, if not more, important than convincing others to embrace AI. It is a form of influence that every in-house lawyer inherently possesses by virtue of being human – that is, **the influence each of us has on one another's well-being.**

Interpenetrating minds: Emotional contagion and mirror neurons

"If you hang around the barbershop long enough, sooner or later you'll get a haircut."

When talking about addiction, it is an accepted truth that who you surround yourself with can determine recovery or relapse. Pop psychology tells us that we become the average of the five people we spend the most time with – therefore choose your friends and, to the extent you can, your colleagues, wisely. As we know, relationships at work influence us positively or negatively and the words and behaviours of our colleagues either energise or deplete us. The tone from above can make or break a healthy culture.

Modern neuroscience explains that the mind (as distinct from the brain which exists in a single skull) exists within a complex network *that includes other minds!* **Emotional contagion** is the notion that we catch feelings and moods from others, perhaps even more easily than we catch the common cold. It has been defined as:

"The tendency to automatically mimic and synchronise expressions, vocalisations, postures and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally."^{*}

Put simply, emotional contagion means humans influence how others feel. Some of us are more susceptible to emotional contagion than others due to the sensitivity of our autonomic nervous system. That said, even the most thick-skinned among us may have experienced starting the day in a cheerful mood only to feel demoralised after a meeting with a hostile person.

Sometimes emotional contagion is more subtle; a once calm person finds themselves feeling increasingly anxious after working for a long time with an anxiety-ridden colleague. But emotional contagion cuts both ways – if you work with predominantly inspired, joyful and supportive people, you begin to feel this way too. Laughter is also infectious – one statistic suggests people are 30 times more likely to laugh together than when alone (including when alone with Instagram memes).

Taking a step further into the science, **mirror neurons** are neurons that automatically recreate the mental patterns of others. While the scientists continue to debate this topic, what is undeniable is that our minds are "interpenetrating" and, at the unconscious level, we are constantly intertwined and influencing each other. This unconscious aspect of emotional contagion explains why you might feel good or bad after spending time with someone who isn't expressing a strong emotion. It could be that you've caught that person's underlying mood. Put another way, you picked up their "vibe".

^{*}Hatfield, Cap J.T & Rapson, "Emotional Contagion".

Taking action: Steps to positively influencing well-being

So, what practical steps can you take to have a positive impact on the well-being of others at work?

1. MANAGE YOUR INFLUENCE

Ask yourself:

- Am I spreading positive or negative feelings at work?
- Are my words and actions helping people to feel good and function well, or are they having the opposite effect?

2. SELF-REGULATE

- Emotional mastery is a key to power and influence. Losing your cool at the wrong time can have dire consequences. See [The Power of the Mind webinar](#), to cultivate emotional intelligence. Note that emotional mastery is about regulation not suppression.
- As a leader, if you easily lose your temper and frequently unleash vitriol on team members, this not only harms their well-being but it impacts their ability to work effectively. Consider finding support to regulate your anger. One resource is *Living Non-Violent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg.

3. CO-REGULATE

The upside of emotional contagion is that we can soothe, support, inspire and uplift others by consciously synching up nervous systems – we can co-regulate!

In Safe and Sound, A Polyvagal Approach to Reduce Anxiety and Find Calm, Dr. Stephen Porges and Karen Onderko define co-regulation as “harmonious relationships between individuals that enables the regulation of autonomic states. Through the social engagement system, one person’s nervous system can influence another’s, prompting both emotional and physiological well-being.”

Co-regulation involves being present, compassionate and attuned to another person to help them calm their nervous system, overcome fear and feel safe. Most of us have experienced the benefits of co-regulation at some point – even if we were unaware that there was a term for it. Maybe we felt deeply upset about a mistake and an empathetic colleague spoke to us in a supportive way that helped us gain perspective and find equilibrium.

Consider:

- Listening attentively to a colleague who is stressed out or emotionally triggered and encourage them to breathe deeply or take a break.
- Talking through solutions to the problem that has caused the distress.
- Finding ways to laugh together even when something has gone wrong – a belly laugh can be the antidote to stress!

4. PRIORITISE ACTIONS OVER TERMINOLOGY (WALK YOUR TALK)

Integrating leadership and well-being is no small task. Leaders today are under enormous pressure to deliver faster and better solutions in an increasingly complex environment. Nobody gets it right all that time. That said, if a leader talks about “transformational leadership” and “psychological safety” but doesn’t demonstrate care and respect in their day-to-day actions, then these terms lose meaning. If leadership is about getting the best out of people and delivering results, it is vital that leaders manage their influence (including their emotional impact) to realise both outcomes. And that is the power of influence.