



## ***Leadership Influence & The Role Model Opportunity***

By  
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*“Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it’s the only thing”*. This almost famous but certainly memorable quote from Pulitzer Prize winner Albert Schweitzer offers an inspiring view into an often overlooked realm of leadership. Namely, the critical role that leadership influence plays in both getting employees engaged and keeping them engaged.

Several years ago, I began exploring the realm of leadership influence at the suggestion of a good friend who also happened to be one of my clients. For as long as I can remember, I have had what some might call an innate curiosity about human influence. Not just in the context of leadership or work but in the broader context of life and behavior in general.

One of my earliest recollections of observing influence and perhaps more powerfully, experiencing influence, occurred when I attended my very first live concert. Despite the fact that the ensuing years have blurred such details as the name of the band, the songs played or even the actual venue, the influence and resulting power of the bandleader remains crystal clear. Without exception, every member of the band, all 10 or so musicians were in hindsight, fully transfixed by the bandleader before and after each song. The source of this by my estimation even then was the influence that the bandleader seemed to have on each musician. I recall I was amazed that this happened with minimal verbal communication. It appeared to be a deeper level of communication that was somehow connected to the bandleader’s attitude and behavior. Beyond being a highly skilled musician, the bandleader displayed tremendous confidence not just in where he was taking the group with each song, but also in their ability to get there with ease and musical finesse.

Fast forward 30 years. When my good friend and client suggested that I explore the realm of leadership influence I had no idea where this journey would take me. At first glance, I discovered that leadership influence could be classified in two ways. One was what I came to call Productive influence and the other not surprisingly, I labeled Destructive influence. To be sure, every person that reads this article will quickly be able to build a corresponding list of characteristics or at least adjectives that fit with either categorization.

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In short, Productive influence is about a higher standard of leadership that is among other things based on respect, trust and integrity. The Destructive influence by contrast is based largely on ego, fear, control and more than likely, self-doubt at some level.

For those not familiar with my work and leadership musings, it is important to note that I am a big fan of leadership quotes. This is mainly because the meaningful quotes force us to think. One of my favorites that underscores the power of influence is by well-known leadership thinker and renowned HR executive John C. Honor who once said, “*Everything a leader does or doesn’t do impacts employee engagement and morale at some level.*” Although I heard this for the first time eight years ago, it is one of those quotes that continues to make me and other leaders think.

If everything a leader does or doesn’t do is in some way a role model behavior, does it stand to reason then that everything *anyone* does is a role model behavior? This is a question that I have pondered for a good part of the past year and one that I have asked many leaders during this time. It is also a question that has helped to expand my view of influence while also adding new meaning to the term *role model*.

As a beginning point, every one of us regardless of job title is observed by countless people each day both in and out of work. As a result, every one of us is modeling roles with particular behaviors at every juncture. The overriding question however is *what behavior are we role modeling?* Is it behavior that inspires others, builds trust, honors differences or motivates people to be their best? This overriding question is by my estimation one that we need to ask ourselves not just daily but perhaps hourly. If we as leaders are to inspire our teams and others to achieve great things, we must be ever mindful of the power of our influence through our behaviors. A stunning example of this and the range of role model behaviors we observe each day played-out in front me just recently.

Early last month I had the good fortune of delivering a full-day version of my Emotional Intelligence workshop to a group of 27 early career, high potential leaders at a local employer. Shortly before the morning break, the topic of leadership influence surfaced. Ironically, I was only a few minutes away from raising the topic as part of the workshop content.

The question posed by one of the high-caliber young professionals had to do with whether or not a leader’s influence goes beyond the boundaries of work.

Just that morning on my way to the workshop, I had stopped at a local convenience store to pick-up a cup of coffee for my 30 minute commute. I told the group that while I was in line waiting to pay for my coffee, I observed that the person in front of me was being very condescending to the cashier. As I waited for my turn and continued to observe this rude behavior toward the clerk, the thought occurred to me that this person was *in fact being a role model for others* in the store. Certainly not a positive role model but nonetheless, a role model.

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This realization convinced me that not only was I a role model here too but in truth, this role model opportunity had absolutely nothing to do with my job title or the number of employees that report to me. After sharing this story, I asked the group for their thoughts on the original question. To my pleasant surprise, all but a few of the participants agreed that not only does a leader's influence go beyond the boundaries of work, but perhaps even more importantly, everyone is a role model. The difference between being a productive role model or a destructive role model is all about *how we choose to use our influence*.

### **Five things that you can do now to affect your influence:**

1. Consider how you use your influence and what impact it has on team engagement and overall morale.
2. Initiate a conversation with your peer group about the power and reach of leadership influence and work to identify examples of productive and destructive influence.
3. Seek input from your team and other key stakeholders about the range of role model opportunities that are presented to them on a daily basis. Also identify the key behaviors that support being a positive role model in each example.
4. Invest 3 minutes to complete the free *Leadership Influence Survey* on the WorkChoice Solutions web site @ [www.workchoicesolutions.com](http://www.workchoicesolutions.com) - Key words, *Learning Resources, Leadership Assessments*.
5. Identify one personal development opportunity related to your leadership influence and map out a series of small, doable steps that you will take between now and year end to expand your leadership influence.

### **About David A. O'Brien**

David is President of CT based WorkChoice Solutions, a trusted provider of leadership and team effectiveness consulting services that was founded in 2000. He works with a wide range of corporate, non-profit and public sector clients to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational productivity. His first book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life* was released in July 2008 and is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. His 2<sup>nd</sup> book, *Tapping Your Leadership Wisdom* is expected in bookstores next year. Additionally, his articles have appeared in a wide range of local, regional and national publications. To learn more, please visit WorkChoice Solutions on line at [www.workchoicesolutions.com](http://www.workchoicesolutions.com) or contact David directly at 860.242.1070.