

# THE INFLUENCE MODEL: USING RECIPROCITY AND EXCHANGE TO GET WHAT YOU NEED

*In organizational life, you can't always get what you want, especially from people over whom you have no authority. The Cohen-Bradford Influence model offers a practical process of reciprocity and exchange—trading what you have that the other person desires in exchange for what you need to accomplish workplace and personal goals. The authors also discuss some common currencies of exchange in organizational life and how to use them effectively.* © 2005 Allan R. Cohen & David L. Bradford

**Allan R. Cohen and David L. Bradford**

*I have done enough for you, Apollo; now it's your turn to do something for me.*

—Rough translation of inscription on a Greek statue of the god Apollo, 700–675 B.C., demonstrating ancient understanding of the concept of reciprocity.<sup>1</sup>

*It is not always evident when you are going to make a withdrawal from the favor bank of politics, . . . but it is always obvious you are making a deposit.*

—From “Giuliani Plays Major Role on Bush Campaign Trail,” Jennifer Steinhauer, *New York Times* (August 12, 2004), p. A1, demonstrating contemporary understanding of reciprocity.

**H**ow can you influence those over whom you have no authority? The short answer is that to have influence, you need resources that other people want, so that you can trade for what you want. This key to influence is based on a principle that underlies all human interaction, the Law of Reciprocity.

## IGNORE THE LAW OF RECIPROCITY AT YOUR PERIL

*Reciprocity is the almost universal belief that people should be paid back for what they do—that one good (or bad) turn deserves another.<sup>2</sup> This*

\* \* \*

**Allan R. Cohen** is Edward A. Madden Distinguished Professor of Global Leadership and director of Corporate Entrepreneurship at Babson College in Babson Park, Massachusetts, where he specializes in leadership and transforming organizations. **David L. Bradford** is senior lecturer on organizational behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business and director of Stanford’s Executive Program in Leadership in Stanford, California. This article is reprinted from the authors’ book, *Influence without Authority, Second Edition* (Wiley, 2005), with permission of the publisher. Copyright © 2005 Allan R. Cohen & David L. Bradford.

belief about behavior, evident in primitive and not-so-primitive societies all around the world, carries over into organizational life. One form it takes in work settings is, “an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.”

*People generally expect that, over time, those people they have done things for “owe them,” and will roughly balance the ledger and repay costly acts with equally valuable ones.* This underlying belief in how things are supposed to work allows people in difficult organizational situations to gain cooperation. A classic study of prison guards found that the guards could not control prisoners, who greatly outnumbered them, by threats and punishments alone.<sup>3</sup> The guards did many favors for the prisoners, such as overlooking small rule infractions, providing cigarettes, and the like, in return for cooperation from prisoners in keeping order. All the formal authority in the world can’t keep rebellious prisoners in line; they exchange their cooperation for favors that make their confinement more tolerable, not out of respect for “the rules.”

*Although the concept of exchange in many ways is simple and straightforward, the process of exchange is more complicated.*

Even at much higher levels of organizations, little gets done without similar give and take. One manager alerts her colleague that their CEO is on a rampage and should be avoided today. Eventually, the grateful colleague repays the favor by telling the manager what he learned at a conference about a competitor’s IT strategy. Soon after, the manager hears about a potential new customer whom she refers to the colleague; when the colleague has the chance, he initiates a joint project that can cut several steps out of the billing process and save the manager considerable money. The give and take of their relationship makes organizational life better for both.

Give and take can also be negative. The trade can be a loss of a benefit for lack of cooperation, or a cost that results from an undesirable response. Negative trades can be expressed as threats about what will happen in the future, or can result in both parties losing.

## EXCHANGE: THE ART OF GIVE AND TAKE THAT PERMEATES ALL INFLUENCE TACTICS

There are numerous ways of categorizing influence behavior. You can influence people by methods such as rational persuasion, inspirational appeal, consultation, ingratiation, personal appeal, forming a coalition, or relentless pressure.<sup>4</sup>

Although it is tempting to think of each of these methods as a separate tactic, we believe that exchange—trading something valued for what you want—is actually the basis for all of them. In every form of influence, reciprocity is at work and something is being exchanged.<sup>5</sup> For example, rational persuasion works because the person persuaded sees benefits from going along with the argument; inspirational appeal works because the person gets to feel part of a cause, or that something good will result; ingratiation works because the person receives liking and closeness for willingness to be influenced, and so on. None of these tactics succeed, however, if the receiver does not perceive benefit of some kind, a payment in a valued “currency.” It is valuable to have a wide repertoire of ways of trying to influence others. You should use those tactics that will work in a given situation; *the underlying principle is giving something valued by the other(s) in return for what you want or need (or withholding something the other values—or giving them something they don’t want—if you don’t get what you need).*

This kind of reciprocity is constantly taking place in organizational life. People do things and get something in return (see **Exhibit 1**).

**Why an Influence Model?** Although the concept of exchange in many ways is simple and straightforward, the process of exchange is more complicated. When you already have a good relationship with another person, there is no need for such conscious diagnosis of the situation and thinking through the appropriate approach. You just ask, and if the colleague can respond, he or she will. This doesn’t mean that our model doesn’t apply. It does; it just means you are instinctively using it.

But there are other times when it is not so easy to influence the other person, and a more deliberate and conscious approach is needed. That is why this influence model—a careful diagnosis of the other’s interests, assessment of what resources

### **Reciprocity Naturally Takes Place in Organizational Life**

*Dr. Stanley Snyder, scientist, inventor, and entrepreneur, is an untenured senior scientist at a leading Midwestern university. As a maverick and self-described organizational outsider, Dr. Snyder learned to gain necessary influence through difficult experience. Dr. Snyder had been for a long time an adjunct member of the biology department, a natural home because he had his Ph.D. in molecular biology. In that department, he had developed several patented technologies for the university and paid his own way through royalties and grants. However, he had been a thorn in the side of the assistant provost for Research, who Dr. Snyder believed had been looking for an excuse to get rid of him for some time.*

*The anthrax scare immediately following 9/11/01 provided the precipitating excuse for a confrontation. Dr. Snyder's work had principally involved biology, but when the U.S. government had started the search for a quick test to determine the presence of anthrax, and a company approached Dr. Snyder for assistance in developing such a test, Dr. Snyder "came to the rescue." He worked with a colleague who had an anthrax strain in her research collection and had previous experience culturing these bacteria. They rather quickly came up with an inexpensive and practical detection method for anthrax. Dr. Snyder then went to the university provost to announce the good news and to help arrange a corporate license agreement, with royalties to go to the university. Instead of welcoming the news, the university administration, according to Dr. Snyder, "went ballistic," prompted by the high anxiety over anthrax. He and his colleague were subjected to a university investigation, and then were investigated by the local police and the FBI as if they were reckless scientists and criminals. They were placed on administrative leave (a very negative exchange!).*

*Dr. Snyder had liked working at the university, where he had colleagues and research collaborators. He did not wish to leave, and at first could only think of fighting the university. During this stressful period, a leading member of the physics department, Dr. Zelikoff, whom Dr. Snyder had previously helped in writing a patent application, met with him. As they were discussing Snyder's employment problem, Dr. Zelikoff offered to explore the possibility of having him join the physics department. A bit of an individualist himself, but skilled at working within the university organization, Dr. Zelikoff wanted to help both Dr. Snyder and the university resolve a difficult situation. He studied the policies and procedures and realized that he could invite Dr. Snyder (who would be self-funding anyway) to the department. Dr. Zelikoff would get a useful colleague and the department would receive a share of Dr. Snyder's royalties. Dr. Snyder would gain a degree of protection and oversight as well as laboratory and office space. Resisting the efforts of the assistant provost for Research to terminate Dr. Snyder, they worked out a deal with the provost (manager of the assistant provost) that was beneficial to Dr. Snyder, the department, and the university. Dr. Snyder is currently hard at work on applied research and new inventions.*

### **Exhibit 1. Examples of Reciprocity at Work**

#### **YOU GIVE**

- Work that job description calls for
- Willingness to work on weekend to complete project
- Support for a colleague's project at a key meeting
- A difficult analysis requested by colleague not in your area

#### **YOU GET**

- Standard pay and benefits
- Boss praises you, mentions extra effort to higher-ups, suggests you extend vacation
- Colleague gives you first shot at project results
- Colleague tells your boss how terrific you are

## **Exhibit 2. Conditions Requiring Conscious Use of an Influence Model**

**Use an influence model when faced with one or more of the following conditions:**

- The other person is known to be resistant.
- You don't know the other person or group and are asking for something that might be costly to them.
- You have a poor relationship (or are part of a group that has a poor relationship) with the group the other person belongs to.
- You might not get another chance.
- You have tried everything you can think of but the other person still refuses what you want.

you possess, and attention to the relationship—can be so valuable. **Exhibit 2** lists the conditions that require a more systematic way of diagnosing your influence approach.

Conscious attention to this model isn't necessary at all times, but when useful, think of the model as analogous to a pilot's checklist, which is followed routinely when undertaking a flight. Pilots know what to do, but going through the checklist makes sure they cover all the bases. Such an influence checklist is especially helpful when faced with an anxiety-provoking situation that tends to narrow your focus and constrain the alternatives considered. We have built a model of influence (see **Exhibit 3**) to guide you when you are in difficult circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Let's look at the parts of the model.

**Assume All—the Other Person or Group Are Potential Allies.** One of the greatest challenges to influence is trying to influence someone who isn't cooperating. Rather than writing that person off prematurely, assume that everyone you want to influence *could be a potential ally* if you work at it. When you need something from someone who has no formal obligation to cooperate, begin by assessing whether you could form an alliance by discovering where there might be overlapping interests. Failure to do that by assuming the other person will be an adversary rather than an ally prevents accurate understanding, leading to misperceptions, stereotypes, and miscommunication, and can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Treating the other person as an enemy produces adversarial responses. This

same mind-set of assuming the other person is a potential ally also applies to your manager; if you assume that managers are partners in the organization with subordinates, then it is also part of your responsibility, along with the manager, to figure out how to make the relationship mutually beneficial.

**Clarify Your Goals and Priorities.** Knowing what you want from the potential ally isn't always easy. The dimensions that affect the choice of how you should proceed are:

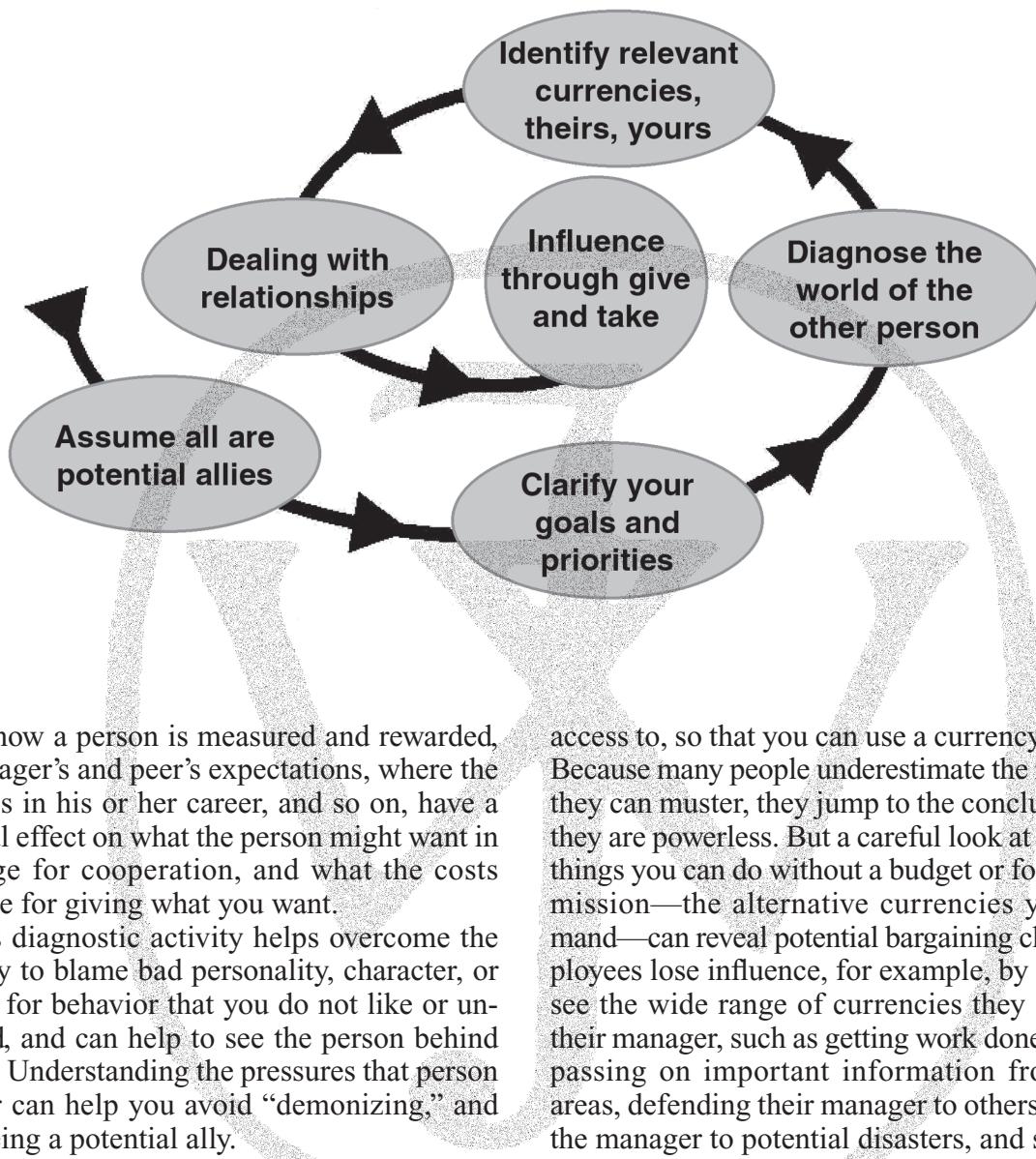
- What are your primary versus your secondary goals?
- Are they short-term or long-term objectives?
- Are they "must-have" needs or "nice-to-haves" that can be negotiated away?
- Is your priority task accomplishment or preserving/improving the relationship?

You need to think hard about your core objectives, so you won't get sidetracked into pursuing secondary goals. Just what do you require, what are your priorities among several possibilities, what are you willing to trade off to get the minimum you need? Do you want a particular form of cooperation on a specific item or would you settle for a better relationship in the future? Would a short-term victory be worth the creation of hard feelings, or is the ability to come back to the person in the future more important?

Too often, the person desiring influence does not sort personal desires from what is truly necessary on the job, and creates confusion or resistance. For example, if you are overly concerned about being right at all costs, humiliating the other person, or always having the last word, your personal concerns can become central and interfere with other more important organizational goals. Would you rather be right or effective?

**Diagnose the Ally's World: Organizational Forces Likely to Shape Goals, Concerns, and Needs.** The challenge here is to determine the organizational situation of the potential ally that drives much of what he or she cares about. These forces usually play an even greater role in shaping what is important to them than their personality. If for any reason you can't ask that person directly, examine the organizational forces that might shape goals, concerns, or needs. For ex-

**Exhibit 3. Summary of the Cohen-Bradford Model of Influence Without Authority**



ample, how a person is measured and rewarded, the manager's and peer's expectations, where the person is in his or her career, and so on, have a powerful effect on what the person might want in exchange for cooperation, and what the costs would be for giving what you want.

This diagnostic activity helps overcome the tendency to blame bad personality, character, or motives for behavior that you do not like or understand, and can help to see the person behind the role. Understanding the pressures that person is under can help you avoid "demonizing," and start seeing a potential ally.

**Identify Relevant Currencies (What Is Valued): The Ally's and Yours.** We have named the things that people care about "currencies" because that equates something of value you have that you can trade for something valuable they have. Most people care about more than one thing (e.g., prestige, money, being liked). If you can identify several applicable currencies, you will have a wider range of possibilities to offer in exchange (see **Exhibit 4**).

**Assess Your Resources Relative to the Ally's Wants.** It is not unlikely that your ally wants some things that you can't offer. Therefore, it is important to know what resources you command or have

access to, so that you can use a currency that fits. Because many people underestimate the resources they can muster, they jump to the conclusion that they are powerless. But a careful look at the many things you can do without a budget or formal permission—the alternative currencies you command—can reveal potential bargaining chips. Employees lose influence, for example, by failing to see the wide range of currencies they can offer their manager, such as getting work done on time, passing on important information from other areas, defending their manager to others, alerting the manager to potential disasters, and so on.

**Dealing with Relationships.** This has two aspects: (1) What is the nature of your relationship with that person—positive, neutral, or negative? (2) How does that person want to be related to?

You might have a prior relationship, and if it is a good one, then it will be easier to ask for what you want without having to prove your good intentions. If, however, the relationship has a history of mistrust—whether for personal reasons or because you represent departments in conflict—or there has been no prior contact, proceed with caution. You will need to pay attention to building the requisite trust and credibility.

### **Exhibit 4. Sources of Currencies**

SOURCES	EXAMPLES
Organizationally determined	Performance, how to behave, reward system
Job-determined	Meeting measures, doing required work well
Personally determined	Preferred style, reputation

Each person has preferred ways of being related to. Some like you to bring a thorough analysis before you launch into discussion with them, while others would rather hear preliminary ideas with a chance to brainstorm. Some want to see alternative solutions, whereas others want only your final conclusion. Be careful not to relate in the style you most prefer without taking into account the other person's preferences. You will have more influence if you use an approach the other person is comfortable with.

**Determine Your Trading Approach: Make Exchanges.** Once you have determined what goods or services can be exchanged, then you are ready to offer what you *have* in return for what you *want*. Your approach will be shaped by:

- The attractiveness of your resources
- The ally's needs for what you have
- Your desire for what the ally has
- Your organization's unwritten rules about how explicitly people can express what they want and need
- Your prior relationship with the potential ally, as well as the preferred style of interaction
- Your willingness to take chances to pursue what you want

This helps you plan an approach that has the best chance of being judged on its merits.

**Outcomes of Exchange: Task and Relationship Are Both Important.** In organizations, all influence attempts simultaneously contain both a task and a relationship component. There is the work at hand and the nature of the relationship: In addition, people seldom interact without past experience or knowledge of each other somehow shaping

the discussion. (In fact, it isn't even necessary for you to have actually interacted with someone to have your reputation from other interactions be a factor in how the person will deal with you.) Furthermore, ideas about the results for the relationship in the future are likely also to affect the discussion. Ignoring the future risks winning the battle but losing the war. You can choose to ignore the history, or the consequences of your exchange attempts on the relationship, but that could be a problem if you have to deal with the same party again, as usually is the case in organizations.

Trust plays an important part in achieving influence. If other people perceive you as too calculating or interested in influence for your personal benefit rather than for organizational work, they will be wary, resistant, or go underground to retaliate later. In this way, influence in organizations over time goes to those genuinely interested in the welfare of others, those who make connections and often engage in mutually profitable exchanges. Machiavellian, calculating, self-seeking behavior may work for a short time, but eventually it creates enemies, or lack of interest in being helpful, making the person who will do anything to win ineffective.

Because good relationships make it easier to gain cooperation, it pays to be generous and engage in win-win exchanges. Doing good work together, living up to what you say you will do, or just providing what is valued by the other party, improves relationships. Making successful trades tends to make people feel better about one another.

**Make Connections Early and Often.** There are times when a poor relationship makes it almost impossible to get others to make task exchanges, even when it might be in their best interest. Then time has to be spent rebuilding the relationship before any task work can be done. To prevent this, find a way to make relationships before they are needed. Suppose you want a special analysis from a colleague in order to proceed with your new product planning. If the relationship has been strained, you may first need to relieve the strain and reestablish the relationship. This will ease the conversation about the information you need and aid in finding a basis for getting the help you want.

Finally, a discussion of what you want and the quality of the relationship are always concurrent. Pay attention to the *process* of discussion about ex-

change. If you focus only on the task outcome—getting your way—you may not only harm future dealings but also lose the deal.

Making many relationships and creating a positive reputation means that your credit will be good, and you will have longer to pay back the help received. Having a good reputation is a form of saving for a rainy day, like making a goodwill deposit in a bank, so that you have the capacity for drawing on it later. Try not to mortgage the future; you never know when you will need to call in your chips.

**Exchanges Can Be Positive or Negative.** As mentioned earlier, exchanges can be positive or negative. If positive they take the form, “I do something beneficial for you and in turn you do something that is of value for me.” But you can also exchange negatives for negatives, as in, “I have little inclination to go out of my way for your requests since you won’t do that for mine.”

Note two forms of negative exchange: (1) implicit or explicit threat of what you might do, or what might happen as a consequence of the other person’s responses; and (2) negative retaliation, in which both sides end up losing. Negative payback can feel unpleasant for both the sender and the receiver, but it can be necessary if positive exchanges are eventually to occur. Lose-lose retaliatory exchanges are the least desirable, to be used only as a last resort. If the organization has developed the kind of negative culture where only self-striving gets rewarded, it suffers and declines. People who care about the organization’s objectives get disgusted and leave as soon as they can.

**You May Occasionally Need to Use Negative Exchanges.** Even offers of positive exchange, however, implicitly contain a message about the negative consequences that will result from not accepting it. If compliance will result in mutual benefit, there is always the underlying possibility that not complying will lead to negative results for both parties. You can make clear or leave unsaid how you will repay refusal with a comparable future refusal to cooperate, or a willingness to inflict something negative. “If you help me I will give you my undying gratitude,” can also mean, “If you do not help me I will not give you any gratitude (and may even be upset).” Similarly, “If you can loan me that chemical engineer, I can complete this essential project,” implies that fail-

ure to comply will stop the project and something valuable will be lost. Finally, you can use negative exchanges to gradually up the ante, making it increasingly undesirable not to cooperate.

Being overt about the possibility of a negative exchange can be useful in moving things along, putting teeth into the request. It shows seriousness and can be a powerful way to move others—if the threat is real and the other person cares about it.

*While the threat of negative consequences is a less friendly way to make exchanges, it may be necessary in difficult situations.*

While the threat of negative consequences is a less friendly way to make exchanges, it may be necessary in difficult situations. The mule may need a whack with a two-by-four to get its attention when no amount of coaxing will move it. When mentioning negative consequences, it is usually helpful to also hold out a carrot: “I don’t want to have to resort to this, I would much prefer X, but if that can’t occur, I will be forced to . . .”

A problem arises, however, when frustration with lack of cooperation—now or in the past—causes you to *open* with threats of negative exchanges, not out of careful diagnosis but out of aggravation. Feeling stymied can force people to move rapidly to negative ways of operating, relying on threats as a first resort rather than a distant last one. That may cause a negative reaction in itself, getting in the way of the possibility of making a deal.

**Have a Bias Toward Positive Exchanges.** Although negative exchanges can be powerful influencers, we encourage beginning with the positive side of exchange. There are some people who find it more difficult to get tough when necessary, but we believe that a positive emphasis will expand the influence repertoires of most people.

Taking a negative approach may create its own form of reciprocity, one in which the other person feels compelled to oppose you. You create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Threatened people often automatically start to fight fire with fire, increasing their resistance. The person becomes more difficult, reinforcing your negative opinion, which induces you to be tougher. The negativism escalates until each of you is irritated and unlikely to bend. Even worse, if you gain a reputation for the

negative, some potential allies will take a negative posture toward you *before* you do anything to them. The potential threat of your setting fires causes them to burn you first.

Another reason for accentuating the positive is that peers and superiors may be stronger; they may have at least as many resources available to retaliate as you do, which heightens the potential dangers from getting into a spitting contest. They may salivate at the chance to show who is tougher. Positive expectations, on the other hand, create an atmosphere that makes win-win outcomes more likely. Much of what transpires after you make a request depends not only on the extent to which you speak to the person's needs but also on how much the person trusts you—a product of your past actions and the extent to which the person views you as a good corporate citizen.

Furthermore, you need to think beyond the present. The pace of change in modern organizations makes it hard to know what your future relationship will be. You may one day find yourself in the position of the other person's subordinate, manager, or dependent peer. If it is at all likely that you will have to deal with anyone again, act as if you probably can find mutual objectives and outcomes. By doing that, you give them credit for being as interested in good results as you are. Should the assumption later prove to be untrue, you can fall back on other strategies and assumptions.

## SELF-CREATED BARRIERS TO INFLUENCING

We have described a straightforward model for diagnosing what to do and executing it to achieve desired influence. Over the years, we have taught many people to use this model successfully. But we have also observed many failed efforts at each stage of the model, whether or not the person was aware or conscious of using it. Either the person desiring influence manages to make things worse, gives up prematurely, or doesn't even try in frustration from anticipated failure. **Exhibit 5** lists the most common ways that people block their own effectiveness at each stage; these can serve as warning alerts to monitor yourself as you try to make things happen at work.

**Barrier: Not Assuming the Other Person Is at Least a Potential Ally.** Failure to think in a pos-

itive way about people who are difficult to influence is perhaps the deadliest of self-created traps. It usually starts with a request that is turned down. You want something that to you is clearly important, and well within the capacity of the other person to deliver. Sometimes this is followed by a second request and, if you are really determined, a third. Few people can be turned down two to three times without walking away from the interaction convinced that there is something fundamentally wrong with the other person. (Psychologists call this *attribution*).<sup>7</sup> There is a defect of character, motives, or intelligence, or the person is a "perfect representative of that miserable group of incompetents from . . . (the offending group)." The negative attribution doesn't have to be spoken out loud ("Just another empty suit from marketing." "Another engineering nerd." "A numbers-obsessed shark from finance." "A soft-headed bleeding heart from HR." "A green-eyeshade accountant who doesn't have the personality to be an actuary."), but it gets communicated anyway.

The problem is that once you even think such a thing, whether or not you verbalize it, the targets sense that you believe they are defective, and close off. Who wants to be influenced by someone with the equivalent of a red neon sign on the forehead that says, "*I think you are a jerk!*" The difficulty is that once you think the person is a jerk (or worse), it is hard to find a big enough cover for the neon sign.

Separate your frustration at the moment (which is real) from the conclusion that this per-

## Exhibit 5. Common Self-Created Barriers to Influencing

- Not assuming other person is at least a potential ally.
- Not clarifying your goals and priorities.
- Not diagnosing ally's world: Organizational forces likely to shape goals, concerns, needs.
- Not determining the ally's currencies.
- Knowing but not accepting the ally's currencies.
- Not assessing your resources relative to the ally's wants.
- Not diagnosing your relationship with the potential ally (and fixing it if necessary).
- Not figuring out how you want to make trades—and making them.

son could never be an ally. Even though he or she may think there is a rational reason for opposition, search for some common ground. Try not to write off anyone, no matter how difficult they appear. If after all efforts you fail, there is plenty of time to be dismissive.

**Barrier: Not Clarifying Your Goals and Priorities.** You may be tempted to build up a long list of what you desire, especially from someone you haven't had success with or anticipate resistance from, but that only causes overload and makes people back away. Another mistake we see often is the mixing together of personal and organizational objectives. Not only is some resource or support requested but so is personal recognition, or extra attention, or, in the case of someone who is in an organizational minority, admission that the minority person (such as a marketing expert in a technical organization, a woman in a male-dominated organization, an African American in a White-dominated organization) is truly a worthy equal. Getting good work done, over time, usually eventually brings you the personal acclaim desired; mixing it into the work-related request can cause reaction to the mixed messages and reduce the chances of getting what you most need.

Another important barrier arises when your intense *personal* needs—to win, not to lose face, to do the other in, to show how smart you are, to get ahead, and so on—get in the way of the other person being sure that you really want the cooperation to get the work done more than a victory. Is personal triumph so important that you are willing to jeopardize the task or relationship? If the answer is “yes,” that’s your right, but you should be making a conscious choice, not just acting reflexively.

**Barrier: Not Diagnosing Ally’s World—Organizational Forces Likely to Shape Goals, Concerns, and Needs.** Everyone responds to the situation they are in, especially within organizations. A major source of failed influence is that people in another department are measured for different accomplishments than you are, and they are therefore unwilling to do what is requested. Instead of trying to accommodate to what they inevitably see as very important, you just push them harder to do what you know is important to the organization, and to you.

**Barrier: Not Determining the Ally’s Currencies.** Even more fundamental is the common fail-

### *Classic Joke on the Hazards of Assuming the Worst of Someone You Want to Influence: The Story of the Jack*

*A man was driving an unfamiliar country road late at night, when his tire blew. He intended to change the tire, but discovered that he had no jack in the trunk. After fuming a while, he decided that his only choice was to walk until he found a farmhouse and borrow a jack. As he walked, he began to worry that it was late, dark, and he would be a stranger waking up the occupant in the middle of the night. But lacking any alternative and feeling cold, he kept walking. Finally, he saw a farmhouse, but as he got closer he grew more and more concerned about the likely reaction from the person he would be waking. “He’s going to be really upset, he’ll be angry, and might have a gun,” and so on. Finally he got there, knocked, and yet again imagined how upset the farmer was going to be. After a lot of knocking and a long wait, the light went on and the door opened. The traveler punched the farmer, shouting, “You can keep your damn jack!” and stomped off.*

ure to pay attention at all to what the person or group to be influenced cares about. Those desiring influence are often so excited about what they are trying to accomplish, so in love with the accomplishment they wish to bring to life, so sure that the value is self-evident, that they ignore what the other person values. We call this “missing by a mile,” and every reader has seen, if not personally committed, this self-inflicted limit. Think of the soccer enthusiast trying to sell the game to a basketball or American football fan by raving, “It’s such a subtle game of skill and tactics that there is very little scoring, and if you watch long enough, you will see how beautiful it is!” That argument hasn’t worked yet, though some keep using it.

Another common major barrier is failing to recognize the possible range of currencies that people can value, assuming that everyone likes only what you like. It isn’t only Henry Higgins of

**Example of Failing to Take into Account Organizational Forces Driving Resistant Behavior at an International Software Company**

A product manager is frustrated because the country manager in France won't push his salesforce to try an important new product. But it turns out that the country manager is measured by total country sales and it is much more work for his salesforce to explain and sell a new, low list-price product than to make a few big sales of existing ones. The new-product manager pushes, but gives up in frustration. Lack of cooperation isn't the inevitable result. One mistake is failing to diagnose this difference in objectives in advance and blindly bumping up against it, and the second is even when this difference is understood, ignoring the other things that might be attractive to the recipient. Perhaps the country manager cares about the prestige of being the first to develop a good market for the new product, or wants to be involved at an earlier stage of market planning, which the product manager could offer.

*My Fair Lady* fame who can't understand why a woman he wants to influence can't be more like a man, that is, more like him.

A variation of this problem is assuming that the other person only likes one thing, one important currency, and when you don't have any of that, you are stuck, as with the example of the product manager and the French country manager in the sidebar on organizational forces. Almost everyone has a valued portfolio of currencies, and even though some are more valued than others, trade-offs are often possible.

**Barrier: Not Accepting the Ally's Currencies.** Sometimes the influencer does understand what the other person cares about, but doesn't accept those as desirable currencies. It is one thing if what the other person wants violates deeply held values or ethical principles, but often it is just differences. A go-getter with entrepreneurial skills

can have difficulty accepting the colleague who focuses on structure and procedures, leading him to want to change the colleague instead of accommodating to what is important to him. Influence by exchange is about giving what the other person wants in return for what you need, *not* about changing what the person wants.

**Barrier: Not Assessing Your Resources Relative to the Ally's Wants.** The biggest barrier here is failing to recognize that many of the desired currencies held by others are ones that you have in abundance. You don't need anyone's permission to give recognition, show appreciation, confer status, give respect, be understanding, help the other person, and so on. If the only currency the other party will accept is a transfer of budget dollars and you do not yet have a budget for your project, you might be at a dead end, though sometimes creative horse-trading can overcome even that limitation. But most people have more at their disposal than they recognize.

**Barrier: Not Diagnosing Your Relationship with the Potential Ally (and Fixing It If Necessary).** We have already mentioned that ignoring benefits of positive relationships can block making exchanges. If you are not trusted, it can be very difficult to get a potential partner to take any risks in working together. Those desiring influence make the mistake of focusing only on the task benefits of transactions, or suddenly trying to be nice at the last minute, which comes across as phony.

Alternatively, some people desiring influence fake interest in the other person, go through the motions of making relationships, or are so ingratiating in their approaches to others at every stage of attempting influence that they are seen as manipulative, creating distrust in the process. No technique works well when the person using it is perceived as *only* self-interested. Our influence model doesn't work when it is used in a way that appears to be only about the influencer's benefit, and not at all about the organization's true needs. This problem is compounded by Machiavellian game players who cloak all requests in the "it's-good-for-the-organization" mantle, as if no one notices their self-orientation.

**Barrier: Not Figuring Out How You Want to Make Trades—And Making Them.** Again, failure to create trust is a major barrier to influence. Com-

ing across as a person who makes everything into a tit-for-tat exchange—a wheeler-dealer or a compulsive exchanger who can never rely on mutual goodwill and liking—can cause even attractive deals to get turned down. Occasionally, an influencer goes too far in the other direction, presuming that past positive exchanges and a decent relationship should cause the person being asked for cooperation to completely go against self-interest, and then gets angry at the ally who says that the request is too much. The anger then interferes with the relationship, and future as well as present influence is lost.

Another common barrier is failing to adapt your style of interacting to one preferred by the potential ally. This can be caused by interpersonal blindness, in which, for example, you don't notice that the other person likes concise solutions so you blather on about the complexities of the problem. Sometimes you might recognize the other person's preferred way of being interacted with, but stubbornly stick to your own preferences as a misguided way of "being true to yourself." By defining interaction style as a matter of personal integrity, people wipe out the rights of others to have their own preferences, and cause annoyance, if not worse.

See the example below for lessons from an otherwise competent manager failing to get what he wanted because he lacked an appropriate guiding model to help him determine action.

#### **AN ALL-TOO-COMMON EXAMPLE OF FAILED INFLUENCE—AND HOW USING THE INFLUENCE MODEL COULD HAVE HELPED**

Bill Heatton is the director of research at a \$250-million division of a large West Coast company (all names in this example are disguised, but all else is real). The division, which makes exotic telecommunications components, has many technical advancements to its credit. In the past several years, however, the division's performance has been spotty at best. Despite many efforts to become more profitable, it has racked up multimillion-dollar losses in some years. Several large contracts have been big money losers, causing each part of the division to blame the others for the problems. A major cause of the problem, Bill feels, is Roland, a program manager in marketing.

Note Bill's frustrations as he talks about his efforts to influence Ted Lowry, his peer and the division's director of marketing. Ted is the direct supervisor of Roland, who has been given the responsibility for an important new contract that marketing and research (along with production) will work on together:

Another program's about to come through. Roland, the program manager, is a nice guy, but he doesn't know squat and never will. He was responsible for our last big loss, and now he's going to be in charge again. I keep fighting with his manager, Ted Lowry, to move Roland off the program, but I'm getting nowhere. Ted doesn't argue that Roland is capable, but he sure as hell isn't trying to find someone else. Instead, he comes to me with worries about my area.

*Another common barrier is failing to adapt your style of interacting to one preferred by the potential ally.*

I'm being a team player here. I responded to their requests by changing my staffing plan, assigning the people they wanted to do the research on Roland's program. I even overruled my own staff's best judgment about who we should assign to the program. But I'm still not getting the progress reports I need from Roland, and he's never "available" for planning. I'm not hearing a lot of argument, but there's not action to correct the problems, either. That's bad, because I'm responding but not getting any response from them. There is no way to resolve this. If they disagree, that's it. I could go for a tit-for-tat strategy. I could tell them that if they don't do what I want, we'll screw them next time. But I don't know how to do that without hurting the organization. That would feel worse than the satisfaction I'd get from sticking it to Roland.

Ted, Roland's manager, is so much better than the guy he replaced that I hate to ask that he be removed as director of marketing. We could go together to our mutual manager, the general manager, but I'd really hate to do that. You've failed in a matrix organization if you have to go to your manager. I have to try hard before I throw it in his lap.

Meanwhile, I'm being forced into insisting that Ted get rid of Roland, but I'm afraid it's in a destructive way. All I want to do is yell. I don't want

to wait until the program has failed to be told I've blown it!

Bill was clearly angry about the situation and frustrated about his inability to influence Ted Lowry. He found himself behaving in ways he didn't feel good about. Bill's failure to use the Law of Reciprocity lies at the heart of his inability to influence Ted. Because Bill believed he had gone out of his way to help Ted, he expected Ted to reciprocate automatically and remove Roland from the project. When Ted did not act, Bill's anger reflected his belief that by changing his own staffing patterns, he had created an obligation in Ted. He had established a "credit" with Ted, and Ted should have honored that credit and agreed to replace Roland.

*Because he didn't know how to get what he needed from Ted, Bill was beginning to leap to dangerous conclusions about why Ted was ignoring his efforts.*

Bill was also worried about a negative exchange—being blamed unfairly for project failures when he has done his part. He had strong feelings about what credit he deserves for his efforts; to be judged harshly after extra effort would violate his sense of justice.

**Failure to See Others as Potential Allies.** Like other managers who very much want to influence someone who is not cooperating, Bill narrowed his sense of possibilities by seeing Ted, his potential ally, as an intractable enemy, attributing negative motives to Ted. Because he didn't know how to get what he needed from Ted, Bill was beginning to leap to dangerous conclusions about why Ted was ignoring his efforts.

Also, he had already written off Roland as a worthwhile ally; and he saw his manager, the general manager, only as a court of last resort rather than as a possible resource for problem solving. Thus, Bill isolated himself from potential allies and felt incapable of effecting any mutually satisfying solution.

**Failure to Clarify His Own Goals and Priorities.** Bill had a lot of trouble sorting out his goals and priorities. He wanted to get rid of Roland, but that was actually a means to a more important end: improving the project management

process and reversing the division's current slump. Bill wanted Ted to acknowledge his needs; but he focused on one particular response, not joint problem solving. He wanted revenge, but he didn't want to harm the organization. He wanted the problem resolved, but he didn't want to involve the general manager because that would look weak. No wonder Bill was unable to muster influence; he had not figured out exactly what mattered most to him. As a result, he was unable to develop a plan of action.

**Failure to Diagnose Ally's World and Resulting Currencies.** As a result of the very human tendency to focus on self-interests, Bill missed seeing the issue from his potential ally's world and point of view. For example, Bill did not think about what costs Ted would incur if he were to remove Roland from the project.

Bill could easily have determined these interests of Ted:

- Minimize project management costs.
- Utilize existing talent.
- Keep his department from feeling that he doesn't protect them from outside attacks.

Had he been thinking about diagnosis, Bill could have first asked himself the following questions about the situation:

- Does Ted have anyone better?
- Does Ted believe that he can coach Roland into a better performance on this project?
- Does Ted even agree that Roland did a poor job on the last project, or does he blame the project's failure on other departments' shortcomings?
- Is Ted trying to save face with his other subordinates?
- Does Ted fear he will set a precedent by allowing R&D to determine his staffing?

Bill was so intent on telling Ted that he should get rid of Roland that he never bothered to assess what Ted's perceptions might be or to consider how it would affect Ted to go along.

Finally, Bill never even asked Ted why he had not responded. Perhaps Ted was being measured by different criteria or pressured by the general manager in some way that made it impossible to

respond to Bill's request. Instead of fuming and dreaming of revenge, Bill might have set out on a fact-finding mission to learn what he could do to fashion an exchange worthwhile from Ted's point of view as well as from his own.

Bill might have approached Ted in a friendly, nonthreatening manner and said, "Ted, I'm really baffled. It seems to me that you are reluctant to address my concerns about Roland. Obviously, my view of him is different from yours, so help me understand where you are on this." Such a first move might have at least broken the ice. Without knowledge of the potential ally's world, it is difficult to pinpoint what would produce the desired response.

**Failure to Determine Exchange Strategy.** Bill was so frustrated that he missed many possibilities for exchange. Although he believed that he acted in good faith by juggling assignments in his own area, thereby creating an obligation in Ted, it isn't clear that Ted realized that Bill was reacting to his requests, or that Ted got something he wanted. It isn't even clear that Ted knew that Bill expected anything in return. Although Bill altered his own organization in anticipation of a comparable response from Ted, he did not make it clear to Ted how inconvenienced he was by this accommodation. As a result, Bill gave but he didn't get. What is the sound of one side exchanging? Resentment.

While Bill's values prevented him from striking out in a way that would hurt the organization, he seemed completely unaware of the resources he could muster for a positive exchange. His relationship to the general manager was a card he hated to play, but there might have been ways to do it without appearing weak and unmanagerial. Could he have used the general manager as a sounding board on how to approach Ted? Could he have suggested that the general manager meet with him and Ted, not as the final arbiter but as a problem-solving consultant?

Furthermore, Bill appeared to have only two styles of interaction: nice or nasty. When nice did not work, he thought only of turning to nasty. More moderate styles—inquisitive, calmly insistent, or speculative—did not seem to occur to him. With a scientific background, Bill probably was capable of calling on such alternative styles, but he did not look carefully enough at his behavioral options to get any use from them. Thus, he had far less impact than he could have had.

Because he had no model of how to influence, and therefore no useful way to organize a diagnosis, he could only stew in his own frustration. He didn't know what to ask Ted or how to initiate a dialogue about Roland that could guide him to a workable strategy. This is an apt illustration of social psychologist Kurt Lewin's maxim, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory"—or we might add, so impractical as the lack of a good one.

*The metaphor of currencies—which stands for something that is valued—can help you determine what you might offer a potential ally in exchange for cooperation.*

## GOODS AND SERVICES: THE CURRENCIES OF EXCHANGE

Mugger: Your money or your life.

Notorious cheapskate comedian, Jack Benny: (Silence)

Mugger: Well?

Jack Benny: I'm thinking!

The Cohen-Bradford Influence model is based on exchange and reciprocity—making trades for what you desire in return for what the other person desires. Influence is possible when you have what others want. The metaphor of currencies—which stands for something that is valued—can help you determine what you might offer a potential ally in exchange for cooperation. Because currencies represent resources that can be exchanged, they are the basis for acquiring influence. If you have no currencies in your treasury that the other person values, you have nothing to exchange. In the rest of this article, we look more closely at how currencies work, which ones are common to organizational life, and how to understand their use.

## FREQUENTLY VALUED CURRENCIES

To make trades, you need to be aware of many things people care about and all the valuables you have to offer. At least five types of currencies are at work in a variety of settings:

1. Inspiration-related
2. Task-related

### **Exhibit 6. Currencies Frequently Valued in Organizations**

#### **INSPIRATION-RELATED CURRENCIES**

Vision	Being involved in a task that has larger significance for unit, organization, customers, or society
Excellence	Having a chance to do important things really well
Moral/ethical correctness	Doing what is "right" by a higher standard than efficiency

#### **TASK-RELATED CURRENCIES**

New resources	Obtaining money, budget increases, personnel, space, and so forth
Challenge/learning	Getting to do tasks that increase skills and abilities
Assistance	Receiving help with existing projects or unwanted tasks
Organizational support	Receiving overt or subtle backing or direct assistance with implementation
Rapid response	Getting something more quickly
Information	Obtaining access to organizational or technical knowledge

#### **POSITION-RELATED CURRENCIES**

Recognition	Acknowledgment of effort, accomplishment, or abilities
Visibility	The chance to be known by higher-ups or significant others in the organization
Reputation	Being seen as competent, committed
Insiderness/importance	A sense of centrality, of belonging
Contacts	Opportunities for linking with others

#### **RELATIONSHIP-RELATED CURRENCIES**

Acceptance/inclusion	Feeling closeness and friendship
Understanding	Having concerns and issues listened to
Personal support	Receiving personal and emotional backing

#### **PERSONAL-RELATED CURRENCIES**

Gratitude	Appreciation or expression of indebtedness
Ownership/involvement	Ownership of and influence over important tasks
Self-concept	Affirmation of values, self-esteem, and identity
Comfort	Avoidance of hassles

3. Position-related
4. Relationship-related
5. Personal

Although the list is by no means comprehensive and is somewhat arbitrarily grouped for convenience, it does provide a broader view of possible currencies than many organizational members conventionally think about. Having this framework can alert you to possible currencies valued by others or available to you to offer. **Exhibit 6** summarizes our starter list of currencies.

**Inspiration-Related Currencies.** Inspiration-related currencies reflect inspirational goals that provide meaning to the work a person does. They are increasingly valued by people at all levels of organizational life.

**Vision.** Vision is perhaps the grandest of currencies. Portraying an exciting vision of the company's or department's future and imparting a sense of how the ally's cooperation will help reach it can be highly motivating. You can help overcome personal objections and inconvenience if you can inspire the potential ally to see the larger significance of your request.

**Excellence.** The opportunity to do something really well and pride in having the chance to accomplish important work with genuine excellence can be highly motivating. In this sense, craftsmanship is not dead; it is only in hiding, waiting to be tapped. There are many people who want to do high-quality, polished work, and knowing how to offer a chance to do that can be a valuable currency.

**Moral/Ethical Correctness.** Probably most members of organizations would like to act according to what they perceive to be the ethical, moral, altruistic, or correct thing to do. But they often feel that isn't possible in their job. Because they value a higher standard than efficiency or personal convenience, these people respond to requests that let them feel they are doing what is "right." Their self-image is such that they would rather be personally inconvenienced than do anything they think inappropriate. This lets them feel good about themselves, so virtue becomes its own reward.

**Task-Related Currencies.** Task-related currencies are directly connected to getting the job done. They relate to a person's ability to perform his or her assigned tasks or to the satisfactions that arise from accomplishment.

**New Resources.** For some managers, especially in organizations where resources are scarce or difficult to obtain, one of the most important currencies is the chance to obtain new resources to help them accomplish their goals. These resources may or may not be directly budgetary; they could include the loan of people, space, or equipment.

**Challenge.** The chance to work at tasks that provide a challenge or stretch is one of the most widely valued currencies in modern organizational life. Challenge is consistently among the top items in surveys of what is most important to employees about their jobs. At the extreme, some people in professional roles will do almost anything to have a chance to work on tough tasks. In many technical organizations, it is a running joke that the reward for killing yourself 80 hours a week on a tough project is that if it is successful, you get the chance to do it again on a tougher, more important project. For those people, the challenge itself is its own reward.

It is usually not difficult to figure out ways of offering challenge. Asking your potential ally to join in the problem-solving group or passing along a tough piece of your project for him or her to work on are ways you can pay in the currency of challenge (and, if the person is at all competent, probably get back more than you expected).

If your boss values challenge, it would be sensible to share information about tough issues you are facing, go to him or her with tough decisions to talk over, or suggest major issues that he or she could tackle with colleagues or higher-ups. (The

boss who hates challenge, however, will value being protected from dealing with complex issues.)

**Assistance.** Although large numbers of people desire increased responsibilities and challenge, most have tasks they need help on or would be glad to shed. Perhaps they personally dislike those tasks, are swamped by the current difficulties they face, are in unreasonably demanding jobs, or for some reason have decided to disinvest in the organization. Whatever the reason, they will respond particularly favorably to anyone who can provide relief.

---

*The chance to work at tasks that provide a challenge or stretch is one of the most widely valued currencies in modern organizational life.*

---

Another important type of assistance involves products or services provided by one department to another. These products or services can be customized to fit the needs of the recipients rather than designed for the convenience of the provider. Staff groups can create the currency of assistance by first making a sincere attempt to learn about and adjust to departmental needs before demanding compliance with a new program.

**Organizational Support.** This currency is most valued by someone who is working on a project and needs public backing or behind-the-scenes help in selling the project to others. It can also be valuable to someone who is struggling with an ongoing set of activities and who will benefit from a good word with higher-ups or other colleagues. Since most work of any significance is likely to generate some kind of opposition, the person who is trying to gain approval for a project or plan can be greatly aided by having a "friend in court." A positive word dropped at the right time to the right person can be very helpful in furthering someone's career or objectives. This kind of support is most valuable when the person receiving it is under fire and a colleague takes a public stand in support of the person or the project.

**Rapid Response.** It can be worth a great deal for a colleague or boss to know that you will respond quickly to urgent requests. Managers in charge of resources that are always needed "yesterday" soon discover that helping someone avoid the waiting line builds valuable credit that can be drawn on later. Sometimes, people in this posi-

tion get carried away and try to make it seem that they're always doing the other person a big favor, even when they have spare capacity. This tactic works only as long as those with urgent requests don't know the true backlog; a secret that is likely not to be secret for long. Be careful; overdoing your burdens not only depreciates a valuable currency but also builds mistrust.

---

***Information junkies will go out of their way to help anyone who can give them a fix of insider information, even if it does not help them with immediate tasks.***

---

**Information.** Recognizing that knowledge is power, some people value any information that may help them shape the performance of their unit. Answers to specific questions can be valuable currency, but broader information can be equally rewarding. Knowledge of industry trends, customer concerns, top management's strategic views, or other departments' agendas is valued for its contribution to planning and managing key tasks. And insider information may be even more valued. Who is getting ahead and who is in trouble? What are top management's latest concerns? What are the hottest industry trends or the newest customer developments? Information junkies will go out of their way to help anyone who can give them a fix of insider information, even if it does not help them with immediate tasks.

This hunger for information can create opportunities for anyone who has access to valuable knowledge and is willing to share it. If your boss values this kind of information, you have an extra incentive to develop wide-ranging relationships throughout the organization. In addition, keeping your ear to the ground will provide a wealth of extra-valuable currency to offer to the information-hungry boss. Paradoxically, the higher a person's position, the less likely he or she is to be aware of what is really going on in the organization and the greater the gratitude for being kept informed.

**Position-Related Currencies.** These currencies enhance a person's position in the organization and, thereby, indirectly aid the person's ability to accomplish tasks or advance a career.

**Recognition.** Many people gladly will extend themselves for a project when they believe their con-

tributions will be recognized. Yet, it is remarkable how many fail to spread recognition around or withhold it for only very special occasions. It is probably not a coincidence that virtually all the managers identified in a major research study as having successfully accomplished innovation from the middle of their organizations were very careful to share the credit and spread the glory once the innovation was in place.<sup>8</sup> They all recognized the importance of paying people off in this valuable currency.

**Visibility to Higher-Ups.** Ambitious employees realize that in a large organization, opportunities to perform for or to be recognized by powerful people can be a deciding factor in achieving future opportunities, information, or promotions. That is why, for example, task force members may fight over who will be allowed to present the group's recommendations to top decision makers.

**Reputation.** Yet another variation on recognition is the more generalized currency of reputation. A good reputation can pave the way for lots of opportunities, while a bad one can quickly shut the person out and make it difficult to perform.

A person who has good press gets invited to important meetings, is consulted about new projects, and is considered to be important to have on your side when trying to sell ideas. A talented person with bad press, even one in a nominally important position, may be ignored or not asked for opinions until it is too late to make a real difference. Note that actual ability is only partially related to reputation, at least in larger organizations, because few have direct knowledge of anyone's actual capacities. Accurate or not, however, reputation carries potent consequences. And having no reputation—being essentially invisible—means not being asked to participate even when you could be very helpful.

Often people at lower levels, who think they have very little clout, don't realize how much they can do to influence the reputation of a manager who has more formal power. Speaking well or ill of the manager can make an enormous difference in reputation and, therefore, effectiveness. Aware sales personnel go out of their way to be nice to secretaries or other support staff members. They realize that a nasty comment about them from a secretary to the boss can create a bad impression that is difficult to overcome.

*Insiderness.* For some members, being in the inner circle can be a most valued currency. One sign of this currency is having inside information, and another is being connected to important people. The chance to be included in important events, tasks, or plans can be valuable in itself. Some people gain their own sense of significance from being close to the action and extend themselves to obtain that kind of access.

*Importance.* A variation on the currency of inside knowledge and contacts is the chance to feel important. Inclusion and information are symbols of that, but just being acknowledged as an important player counts a lot for the large number of people who feel their value is under-recognized.

*Contacts.* Related to many of the previous currencies is the opportunity for making contacts, which creates a network of people who can be approached when needed for mutually helpful transactions. Some people have confidence in their capacities to build satisfactory relationships once they have access. The organization member skilled at bringing people together benefits from facilitating introductions.

**Relationship-Related Currencies.** Relationship-related currencies are more connected to strengthening the relationship with someone than directly accomplishing the organization's tasks. That in no way diminishes the importance of the tasks.

*Acceptance/Inclusion.* Some people most value the feeling that they are close to others, whether an individual or a group/department. They are receptive to those who offer warmth and liking as currencies. While they may or may not place closeness over other, more task-related currencies, at the very least they won't be able to sustain satisfactory transactions with anyone who does not preface serious task discussions with warmth and acceptance.

*Understanding/Listening/Sympathy.* Colleagues who feel beleaguered by the demands of the organization, isolated, or unsupported by the boss place an especially high value on a sympathetic ear. Almost everyone is glad at times for a chance to talk about what bugs him or her, especially when the listeners seem to have no axe to grind or are not too caught up in their own problems to pay attention. Indeed, sympathetic listening without advice is a form of action that many managers do not recognize because, by the nature

### ***A Contact-Creation Master***

*Our friend, Alice Sargent, an organizational consultant, was the world's greatest contact facilitator. Alice's address book—built through expertise; a friendly, open style; willingness to extend herself; and a profession that put her in the position of meeting many new people—was at the service of hundreds of people, including us, and she always knew someone we "should talk to" no matter what we were working on. She was selfless in her desire to be helpful; and we were always grateful for her knowledge of who was doing what, her energy in increasing her range of acquaintances, and her willingness to share them. Even on her unfairly premature deathbed, she was still searching for just the right contacts to help a friend's daughter decide whether to go to Pomona or Bryn Mawr and to help an author find an audience for his message and a company to help package the author's training program. Many consultants and organizational members benefited from her generosity and still miss her. Among the many things we learned from her is the potency inherent in helping people connect to one another.*

of their jobs and personalities, they are oriented to "doing something." They don't recognize that being listened to, in and of itself, can be a valuable currency.

*Personal Support.* For some people, at particular times, having the support of others is the currency they value most. When a colleague is feeling stressed, upset, vulnerable, or needy, he will doubly appreciate—and remember—a thoughtful gesture such as dropping by his desk to inquire how he is doing, a kind word, or a hand on the shoulder. Some people are intuitively brilliant at figuring out just the right touch with a colleague in personal stress, sensing who would appreciate flowers, who would like to be asked home to dinner, and who would respond best to a copy of a meaningful article or book. The item itself is far

less important than the gesture, no matter how awkwardly it might be expressed.

Unfortunately, such personal gestures could miss the mark or be misconstrued as signs of more intimate interest or personal friendship than might have been intended. An invitation to dinner at your home, for example, could come across as an intrusion to a very private person. Although caution is in order, genuinely kind gestures usually transcend misinterpretation.

**Personal Currencies.** These currencies could form an infinite list of idiosyncratic needs. They are valued because they enhance the individual's sense of self. They may be derived from task or interpersonal activity. We mention only a few that are common to many individuals.

**Gratitude.** While gratitude may be another form of recognition or support, it is a not-necessarily job-related one that can be valued highly by some people who make a point of being helpful to others. For their efforts, some people want appreciation from the receiver, expressed in terms of thanks or deference. This is a tricky currency because, even to those who desire it, it is easily devalued when overused. That is, expression of gratitude for the first favor may be more valued than a similar expression of gratitude for the tenth.

**Ownership/Involvement.** Another currency often valued by organizational members is the chance to feel that they are partly in control of something important or have a chance to make a major contribution. While this is akin to other currencies, for some people the chance to get their hands into something interesting is its own reward. They do not need other forms of payment.

**Self-Concept.** We referred earlier to moral and ethical correctness as a currency. Another way of thinking about currencies that are self-referencing is to include those that are consistent with a person's image of himself or herself. "Payments" do not always have to be made by someone else. They can be self-generated through action consistent with your idea of who you are and awarded to yourself to fit personal beliefs about being virtuous, benevolent, or committed to the organization's welfare. You might respond to another's request because it reinforces your cherished values, sense of identity, or feelings of self-worth. Payment is still interpersonally stimulated, generating this kind of self-payment by asking for cooperation to accom-

plish organizational goals. But the person who responds because "it is the right thing to do" and feels good about being the "kind of person who does not act out of narrow self-interest" is printing currency (virtue) that is self-satisfying.

Rosabeth Kanter, a leading researcher on change, discovered a number of innovative middle managers who had worked long and hard to make significant changes that they knew would not be rewarded.<sup>9</sup> Several had been punished by the organization for fighting through valuable changes that upset cherished beliefs or key executives. Furthermore, they had been aware that their efforts would get them in trouble, but they proceeded anyway because they saw themselves as the kind of person who would do what (they think) is needed whether or not anyone else agreed.

**Comfort.** Finally, some individuals place high value on personal comfort. Lovers of routine and haters of risk, they will do almost anything to avoid being hassled or embarrassed. The thought of having to make a public fuss, be the target of notoriety, or the recipient of anger and confrontation is enough to drive them to the ends of the earth. They are far less interested in advancement than in being allowed to do their job with a minimum of disturbance; you do them a valuable favor by protecting them from being bothered or by restricting outsiders' access to them.

**Negative Currencies.** Currencies are what people value. But it is also possible to think of negative currencies, things that people do not value and wish to avoid (see **Exhibit 7**). These are less desirable to use because they can set off

### Exhibit 7. Common Negative Currencies

#### Withholding Payments

Not giving recognition

Not offering support

Not providing challenge

Threatening to quit the situation

#### Directly Undesirable

Raising voice, yelling

Refusing to cooperate when asked

Escalating issue upwards to common boss

Going public with issue, making lack of cooperation visible

Attacking person's reputation, integrity

repercussions you don't want, but they are sometimes potent or necessary. Negative currencies come in two forms:

1. Withholding payment of a known valuable currency
2. Using directly undesirable currencies

Insofar as a currency is valuable to an ally, its absence or threatened removal can also be motivating. Because too many people think only of the possible negative effects when seeking influence, we have stressed the positive side of currency use; but it would be needlessly self-limiting to overlook the power of withholding a valuable currency you control. Refusal to give resources, recognition, challenge, or support can move an ally to cooperate. Used in the right situation, the threat of quitting—removing the benefits of your staying in the situation—can be potent.

The directly undesirable currencies are fraught with danger because they can be quite unpleasant forms of payment to the recipient. Although different people value different currencies, few want to be yelled at, have their behavior on display to the boss or others, be exposed for their behavior and attitudes, or have a colleague attacking their reputation. These negative currencies, or the threat of using one or more of them, can be exactly what is necessary for you to move the other person into action.

The danger is that the action will be retaliated—at once or in the future. You don't want to enrage a person who has more ammunition than you do or who is willing to go down in flames while dragging you along. Using negative currencies risks setting off a war or winning influence in the short term but creating an enemy who looks for chances to retaliate when you least expect it.

Therefore, it is the better part of valor, even when employing the negative variation of currency exchange, to look for a positive way to frame the currency. "I know you wouldn't want to be left out" probably will get a more positive response than "If you don't cooperate, I'll see that you're left out." In both cases, however, it is the absence or withholding of the currency that is being used as exchangeable merchandise. If you have to directly use a negative currency, try to tie it to a future, more desirable state in which the negatives won't be necessary.

## USING CURRENCIES: COMPLEXITIES AND RESTRICTIONS

Even if you do not underestimate the number of currencies you have available, there are still complex issues around implementation.

**Establishing Currency Exchange Rates: How to Equate Apples and Oranges.** If it is true that everyone expects to be paid back in one form or another, then it is important to address the question of "one form or another." What will it require to make an offer in a currency that the other person considers equivalent?

*A useful way of conceptualizing what is important to potential allies is to examine the goods and services they trade in.*

In the economic marketplace, everything is translated into monetary equivalents, which makes it easier to say what a fair payment is. Does a ton of steel equal a set of golf clubs? By translating both commodities into dollars (or their equivalent in euros, yen, or rubles), strangers can arrive at a fair deal. In the organizational marketplace, however, calculating the payback is more complicated. How do I repay your willingness to help me finish my report? Is a simple "thank you" enough? Will it be sufficient for me to say something nice about you to your boss? And what if your idea of fair repayment is very different from mine? We may place very different values on the same thing. Absent an established standard value, exchanging for influence is a complicated process.

A useful way of conceptualizing what is important to potential allies is to examine the goods and services they trade in. What do they seem to care about? What do they signal by their language? What do they talk about first when explaining why they do not want to cooperate? Does your analysis of their world and how they are measured and rewarded help? Can you ask directly—in a collaborative way, aimed at finding ways to help them so they can help you? Be careful not to load your own weights for their currencies. It isn't how you value the goods and services, it is how they do.

Occasionally, members of organizations know exactly what they want in return for favors or help at work, but more often they will settle for very

rough equivalents—provided there is reasonable goodwill. It may, therefore, be more important to identify the currency the potential ally likes to trade in and offer to pay with goods that you have translated into that currency than it is to determine the exact right amount. In other words, think about the nature (quality) of the currency in each transaction before you worry about the quantity.

*...the same currency that is successful several times with the same person or group can eventually become devalued by them, so that it no longer works.*

**Different Strokes: Few Universal Currencies.** Because interests vary from person to person, currencies are valued differently. *The value of a currency is solely in the eye of the beholder.* While one manager might consider a thank-you note a sign of appreciation, another might see it as an attempt to flatter, and a third might dismiss it as a cheap way to try to repay extensive favors and service. (And we can say from experience, don't try even friendly East Coast irony with the straightforward, nice folks from Minnesota!)

Furthermore, the same currency that is successful several times with the same person or group can eventually become devalued by them, so that it no longer works. After a while, for example, praise can sound hollow if you are giving it for constant favors that take a lot of time.<sup>10</sup>

**One Act: Multiple Currencies, Multiple Forms of Payment.** Currencies of the kind discussed here are not exact and fixed; they are also a function of perception and language:

- A particular “good,” for example, an offer to create a special analytical report, may be translatable into several different currencies. To the receiver, it may be a performance currency (“When I have the report, I’ll be able to determine which products to push.”); a political currency (“Getting the report will help me look good to my division president.”); or a personal currency (“Although getting the report certainly won’t hurt my decision making, more significant is the fact that it really shows you recognize my importance.”). The same

good may be valued for different reasons by different people—or by the same person.

- *One currency can be paid in many different forms.* For example, you can pay in appreciation by verbal thanks, praise, a public statement of support at a meeting, informal comments to peers, or a note to the person’s boss.
- *The changeable nature of the value of currency makes it even more necessary to understand as much as you can about what is important to each potential ally—not only what he or she values but also the language that reflects that valued currency.* Sometimes a different way of talking about your offer—based on what you know about the ally’s style and priorities—will make it more attractive. Don’t needlessly exaggerate; if you don’t have the right goods, hype will only offend. Nevertheless, it is worth careful thought about how to talk about goods that are available.

**Currencies Can Be Organizational, Not Just Personal.** For convenience, we have discussed currencies completely in terms of what is important to the individual you want to influence. But another, less direct, kind of currency is departmental or organizational benefit. When an employee identifies strongly with the welfare of his or her group, department, or organization, exchanges that provide a benefit to the unit rather than to the individual can be very important.

At the same time, the person gets the psychological satisfaction of “being good,” or of “doing what is right,” which are by no means trivial currencies. The sense of self as a good citizen and benevolent, loyal person is indeed a powerful currency for many. This is a potent payoff to them, even when at first glance what they must give does not appear to be in their self-interest.

In fact, in some organizations, the acquisition of a reputation for being willing to do things that are not of immediate personal benefit is precisely what develops an influential, positive reputation. These are the kinds of organizations in which altruism reigns supreme. We have watched a large number of upper middle managers at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, for example, focus on what the organization can do for members and

the uninsured and resist talk of narrowly construed self- or departmental interests. Managers who can think creatively about helping customers are listened to and valued.

In such situations, a strategy of encouraging the potential ally to cooperate for personal gain is a serious breach of etiquette. That the person's reputation will be enhanced is considered a by-product, one not to be overtly touted.

Although there may be a few situations where blunt, "I'll do this if you will do that," trades are expected, as in a tough New Jersey construction firm we know, in most organizations it is more about describing what you want in a way that appeals to your audience. Paying attention to the culture's ways is important in addition to looking at the individual. If, however, you are dealing with a maverick, a countercultural approach may be just the thing.

#### ***Reframing: Fit the Language to the Culture.***

How explicitly you position self-interest is different from organization to organization. For example, in numerous high-tech companies, members are expected to be direct about what they want from others. Employees talk freely about wheeling and dealing for resources. But at IBM, the language is expected to be far less direct, with requests couched in terms of organizational benefits, not personal gains. No one at IBM is likely to say, "If you help me on this project, your career will be advanced." Instead, they will say something like, "Your area's help will increase the value of the product, and that will aid your group's getting the recognition it deserves for its outstanding efforts." The result might be the same, but the language used to get results is different.

Sometimes a good idea can be stymied because it has been described with loaded language—words whose connotations turn off the people whose support is most needed. Inappropriate language can convert what might have been valuable to a potential ally into undesirable currency. One of the authors remembers vividly getting completely tuned out at the old, polite Hewlett-Packard for talking to human resources people about "ways to get clout." They wanted to shape managerial practice, but clout sounded far too crude. (And they were too nice to tell him until after easing him out of the program.)

***Make Long-Term Investments.*** It is all too easy to forget about the future when you are focusing on

your current job and all the ways you need more influence. But try to think longer term, anticipating future currencies of relevant colleagues (or possible future colleagues). If your job, for example, interfaces with operations and you are aware that your organization is facing cost pressures and will need to consider outsourcing some activities to India or China, you might want to learn something about the difficulties of outsourcing even though no one has asked you to. If you build knowledge in advance, you might have something valuable to the operations person who suddenly gets dumped with the problem, and you can create credit that will serve you later.

*Inappropriate language can convert what might have been valuable to a potential ally into undesirable currency.*

#### **SELF-TRAPS IN USING CURRENCIES**

While the notion of exchange seems simple, there are many ways in which people go wrong and miss by a mile (see **Exhibit 8** for a checklist for avoiding currency traps).

##### ***Underestimating What You Have to Offer.***

Start with what you know. What has your training and experience given you access to that could be valuable to others?

- Rare technical knowledge?
- Organizational information such as where expertise resides, what departments are interested in your department's activities, or who holds resources that aren't being used?
- Customer knowledge such as who a key customer is playing golf with, what problems they are having using your company's products, how they have improvised new uses for your products that might be of interest to other customers? Potential clients who are not being attended to now?
- Political information such as who is unhappy, planning to leave, on the rise, or close to key higher-ups?

What do you control that requires no permission from anyone to "spend"? As suggested earlier, sometimes people who feel impotent have been thinking too narrowly about what resources

### *Exhibit 8. Checklist for Avoiding Currency Traps*

*Don't underestimate what you have to offer. What do your training and experience give you?*

## **YOUR RESOURCES**

- Technical
  - Organization information
  - Customer knowledge
  - Political information

*What do you control that requires no permission to spend?*

- Reputation
  - Appreciation
  - Visibility
  - Gratitude
  - Recognition
  - Respect
  - Your personal help on tasks

*Pay in what the other person values, not what you value.*

- ❑ Fit with what you know about the person.
  - ❑ Fit with the way the person likes to be approached.
  - ❑ Give what the other person wants, even if you don't like it.

*Are you willing to do more than is required?*

- #### Go beyond job description.

*Don't exaggerate or lie.*

- Can you deliver what you promise?

#### **WHO WOULD VALUE THE RESOURCE?**

they command. They think only of budget dollars or promotions as relevant resources and, lacking these, assume they have nothing of value to trade. You can give gratitude, recognition, appreciation, respect, and help—many things that are valuable to others. No supervisor or higher-up has to empower anyone to write a thank-you note, publicly praise another, or rush responses to a request. Often, valuable goods or services are at your disposal if you cast your net wide enough.

***Pay in the Currency the Other Values, Not Just What You Would Value.*** This is a completely understandable trap because it is both easier to know what you like and to assume that because it is so valuable to you, everyone else must want the same. Sure, there are some universals that almost everyone wants—self-worth, recognition for good work, connection—but even for those, it is tricky. Many people like positive attention and gratitude, but some do not like the spotlight or being thanked for favors

that they consider a routine part of their job. Others just want to be left alone. But even worse, people often are so preoccupied with what they want that they don't pay close attention to or totally ignore the signals the other is sending about what matters to him or her. These signals are heard as excuses or barriers or are just plain tuned out.

We have seen many people, even at high levels, who are so certain that it would be impossible to influence their manager that they completely miss something as obvious as the manager's desire for proposals to be made in writing. For example, the subordinate wants early feedback, but she is so sure that the boss won't like her idea that she doesn't bother to put it into a concise memo and send it ahead before the meeting. Creating a memo is within the subordinate's control, but she never sees how crucial that is to her reflective and busy boss, so she fails to take a simple but effective step to gain influence.

### Nonconvertible Currencies

The founder-chairman of a high-tech company and the president he had hired five years earlier were growing more and more displeased with each other. The president, a Harvard MBA, was committed to creating maximum shareholder value—the currency most precious to him. He predicted that the company's line of exotic components would soon saturate the market, and risky major research investments would be needed to make the strategic move to end-user products. Accordingly, he concluded that the company was in a perfect position to cash in by squeezing expenses to maximize profits and then going public.

The chairman was unmoved, however, because he valued a different currency, the fun of technological challenges. An independently wealthy man, he wasn't at all interested in the \$10 million or more he would get if the company maximized profits by cutting research and selling out. He wanted a place to test his intuitive, creative hunches, not an inert cache of capital.

Their disagreements led first to bickering and then to hostility. But they were able to move beyond this, and in further exploration, they realized that they would never be able to reach accord. Their currencies just weren't convertible at an acceptable exchange rate. That understanding freed them to agree that the president should leave—on good terms—after a more compatible replacement could be found. And he did leave, moving to another company where he successfully used his skills.

Worst of all, when frustrated influencers hear what the other wants but don't like it themselves, they don't want to give any of it to the other. The colleague who craves status, for example, can set their teeth on edge, and they do everything possible to make that person be seen as small. Or, they resent ambition so they try to thwart it rather than work with it and help the ambitious colleague get ahead. Remember, reciprocity is about paying with something the other person values.

**Resenting Having to Go out of the Way.** Some people limit their influence by refusing to do what might be needed to move others in desirable ways because it isn't their job. They stand on principle: "That shouldn't have to be my job, and my colleagues should just be persuaded by the power of my arguments and what (I see) is right!" There are certainly principles not worth violating but "It's not my job" probably isn't one of them. Think of it as building a line of credit that you might want to draw on someday, or think of it just as being effective. If it is in the organization's interest for you to figure out what others need to cooperate, then eventually it will also be in your interest.

**A Word of Warning: Beware False Advertising.** As discussed, the language that you use to describe your offers can increase the chances that

those goods or services will meet the needs of the other party, that is, address its desired currency. Careful, thoughtful communication adds needed precision to the imprecise process of equating your offer with another's needs.

Nevertheless, there are dangers in the process. Having a way with words is useful in any selling activity, but avoid gilding the lily or exaggerating claims. Within your own organization, an impossible promise, a claim that proves to be false, or even too much wishful thinking can damage your credibility and get in the way of future transactions. As we have tried to make abundantly clear, your reputation is a precious commodity in organizational terms. Protect that valuable asset even as you press the boundaries to complete important exchanges.

**Last Word: Some Currencies Really Are Not Convertible.** Another warning is in order: Not everything can be converted into equivalent currencies. If two people have fundamental differences in what they value, it may not be possible to find common grounds. Open, honest exploration guarantees only that if there is any possibility of mutuality, it will be discovered and the relationship probably won't be damaged by the failure to find a deal. But sometimes, currencies do not convert. Know when to fold 'em—and do it graciously. ■

**NOTES**

1. This inscription from a statue called Mantiklos Apollo was cited by Janet Tassel in *Mighty midgets*, Harvard Magazine, May–June 1989.
2. A. Gouldner, The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement, *American Sociological Review* (1960), 25.
3. G. M. Sykes, *Society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison* (New York: Atheneum, 1969).
4. G. Yuki & J. B. Tracy, Consequences of influence tactics used with subordinates, peers, and the boss, *Journal of Applied Psychology* (1992), 77, 525–35.
5. The concept of exchange is central here. Some of the classic literature on which we draw are G. C. Homans, Social behavior as exchange, *American Journal of Sociology* (1958), 63; P. M. Blau, *Exchange and power in social life* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964); P. M. Blau, *Bureaucracy in modern society* (New York: Random House, 1956); and P. M. Blau, *The dynamics of bureaucracy*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).
6. By their very nature, models are simplified abstractions from reality, highlighting what is important and what to pay attention to. Reality is usually messier, especially when people are involved with their differing perceptions, feelings, and assumptions. In any given instance, you may have to make adjustments and inferences, but a good model helps sort things out. Our influence model takes what had previously been treated by social scientists as descriptive—the presence of reciprocity among people—and makes it prescriptive and proactive. Combined with our research in organizations, the model breaks into steps what often is just taken for granted or feels overwhelming.
7. We use our version of attribution theory. The theory was reported in H. H. Kelley, *Attribution in social interaction* (Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1971) and F. Heider, *The psychology of interpersonal relations* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1958).
8. R. Kanter, *The change masters* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).
9. Kanter, *The change masters*.
10. P. M. Blau found this in his classic study of tax collectors in *Exchange and power in social life* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964); the expert who gave help in return for thanks soon found that he got so many requests he could barely do his own work, and the “thank-yous” became devalued.