

You Are The Weakest Link – Hello!

The Power and Effect of Our Secret Influence

By Steve Bernard

On occasions we complain about our lack of influence, not being listened to or not having enough control in your work area. Surprisingly, what we say and do carries much more impact than we imagine. Positive behaviours and role modelling generates an incredible effect on those around us and by the same mechanisms, when we behave inappropriately we quickly become the weakest link which others may follow. What if we all had more awareness of our role modelling influence and could make better use of it?

As a supervisor in the 90s I was fortunate enough to benefit from some excellent management training. It was there I learnt one of the best lessons, in life, *behaviour breeds behaviour!* Back then I didn't realise it was actually going to be a lifelong endeavour to make use of this wisdom. In our work today, we see people in many organisations struggling to influence & make change happen. It's usually linked to a revenue target, profit number or similar goal that is espoused as important to their organisation. If we were able to create objectivity and distance from our day to day behaviours & interactions, we'd observe that we often have much more agency and influence than we'd ever imagined. But for most, there is an associated gap in our thinking – a lack of awareness meaning we often can't see the full extent of our influence and end up, at best discounting it and at worst not believing its presence.

So what does this actually mean in our everyday lives? Whether we know it or not, we act as role models every day. What we do (vs. what we say) has a major impact on events through the subsequent behaviour of the people around us. By behaving badly or with ill intent, we send out signals that this is OK. Worse still if others see or perceive that we are rewarded for the behaviour, we set up a reinforcement loop in their behaviours too. You really are the weakest link! Any good news? The mechanisms apply equally in the opposite direction, so when we act as a positive role model (even sub consciously) we are creating a great positive ripple effect

Mark was a highly regarded Managing Director in the building trade. Having taken a photo opportunity last week with the CEO he was reviewing the photos for publication; another peer of his commented on their apparent lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Mark couldn't see the problem. In spite of a big corporate push on zero harm, he defended his behaviour stating that it would be obvious to readers that the building was safe and therefore this was an exceptional situation.

When we look more carefully, there are typically dozens of examples where we are actively influencing our environment including the people around us. We are social animals and are wired to notice people around us and respond in subtle emotional, physiological and mental ways. Until recently most of this world has been unknown.



Now the discipline of Behavioural Economics (a method of economic analysis that applies psychological insights into human behaviour to explain economic decision-making) has grown up and alongside Occupational Psychology, has helped shed light on our personal behaviours and their social impact.

So exactly what is this 'role modelling' mechanism and how does it work? "*Vicarious Reinforcement*" is a phenomenon which comes directly from Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, Ross, Ross 1960s). In simple terms it means that by *experiencing something* it creates a reinforcement of that in our own behaviours. Instead of diving in to the research here, let's see what it actually looks like in practice.

We recently worked with an HR Director in a Public Sector role. She was tasked with tackling some serious engagement problems. During the diagnostic phase, it came to light that amongst her own team, she had a poor reputation for being accessible. The irony is that her experienced team would be part of the change engine tasked with driving the culture change; instead, many were themselves demotivated and felt distant from the plans based on how they were being led. We have no doubt that the director was unaware of her impact and was therefore not open to feedback or change. In contrast, Brian, an MD in the Recruitment industry recently provided a strong positive reinforcement loop. He'd recently taken over the fastest growing division of the company. In conversations with his own team he actively listened and one of the big themes was the sense of being '*done to*' by Group.

It would have been easy for him to agree and moan about unwise group decisions. Instead he accepted the views from his team and then provided alternative stories that showed where and how group were listening to their concerns. This opened up a series of subsequent debates that were transformational as they allowed the directors to feel more confident about what they could do to change the situation (their influence).

So much of what we do (behaviours and actions) is irrational. In many instances the deep seated reason is that we have employed a defence mechanism of some sort. Let's borrow from the Behaviour Economist's guide book to explore. In research on food consumption, the analysis often present very stark statistical anomalies. For example the amount of alcohol we actually consume or the quantity of fruit and veg vs. what we 'say' we consume are often miles apart (discrepancies of up to 60% are common). So when I visit the GP and am asked about alcohol units, I say x number of units. What can actually happen here is that my answer x is trying to *defend* my mental image of myself, "I don't drink much, I'm healthy, and have no issues with alcohol".

These defence mechanisms are just as true and active at work as they are in our private lives. At work they take on a different dimension because we are typically tied to some kind of social construct that is beyond our absolute control, e.g. the team I work in, the goals of my division or the values of the company set by someone very remote. When it comes to evaluating performance or behaviour this same defensive move can apply. Here's how it works; when we are waiting on a colleague to deliver a key document and they deliver it a day late, you can naturally blame them (questions about their competence, their commitment and many other considerations come up in your mind. You don't really care about their sorry excuses; you *discount* those. Put the shoe on the other foot – when you are struggling with workload and have to turn around a similar report and can see a missed deadline looming, you explain the circumstances behind the miss; people don't appreciate how extreme the week was and the fact that you lost a few hours due to a train delay; you weren't actually to blame really and actively *inflate* the circumstances that were the real problem. This is called, *Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)*. This neat trick (and let's be honest we've all pulled it) is a form of *Projection*. We often take one of our own anxieties or vulnerabilities and project it onto someone else. Whether it's an inability to focus, not being good at listening, needing to be right, it's far easier to look at when it's not our issue!

Don't panic – these tricks of the mind and behavioural tendencies belong to us all. The real art is to develop a greater *awareness* of them over time. Our job is to encourage that awareness and see our potential more fully so that we might choose to act differently. So if we are serious about our development where do we start with this extra influence we all have?

The first thing to remember is that what we *say* is always *discounted* by ourselves and others (there is risk or expectation that it may not *all* be true); in contrast what we *do* is more noticeable and amplified that we ever imagined. Yes, exactly, actions speak louder than words!

Here are some simple ideas to increase your awareness and maximising your positive influence:

1. Turn off your inner Autopilot

Punctuate your activity and take a moment to stop and listen to yourself and look at your actions and behaviours. Tuning in to both the way you act and what you are saying will give you an insight into how others experience you. Jot some notes down and be prepared for a few surprises.

2. Create a Critical Mirror

Be open to a reflection or feedback exercise or tool. 360° Feedback is an excellent investment if you go into it with an open mind and are prepared to work on what comes out. Soliciting any kind of feedback is a great start, just be open to it.

3. Ask a friend or seek close council

With people who know you well, whom you trust you can be more demanding and ask for specific views on situations you're involved in, especially where there is a social dynamic or key relationship. If you don't have this support in place, build it. A professional coach is a good alternative.

4. Be Authentic

Remember to know yourself and be yourself; don't try to be someone you're not. Spend time thinking about your personal values, what is important to you and your personal philosophy. Spend time thinking about how to best apply your strengths and what can get in their way. Give yourself some credit. People will notice gaps where your behaviour is not consistent or congruent.

5. Do something different

By putting yourself into a new space, learning something or taking alternative approaches, we turbo charge our self-awareness. In the process not only do you learn loads, it reconnects you to your reactions and other habits and behaviours. This spotlight is incredibly useful as it gives you the opportunity to change what you don't think is helpful.

We are often tricked into believing that our greatest achievements in life are seen in what we individually achieve. In reality our strongest legacies are often the impact we have on others' lives, through our behaviours and what they foster in others. The gateway is to be more aware of our role modelling impact. By tuning in to this social powerhouse of influence we can achieve so much. Next time, before you complain about your lack of power, take a closer look at your relationships and other social interactions, where you spend the majority of your time and re-evaluate your ambitions and choices. By doing more of what we aspire to do consciously and minimising our negative influence, we retake control of lives in a very significant way.