Successful organizations understand the importance of investing in leadership development. The collective skills and expertise of the wider employee base is only effective to the extent that leadership manages and directs employee effort, as well as aligns on-the-job performance to business goals. In essence, leadership development is key to affecting workforce behavior and, as a result, directing and channeling that behavior toward business objectives.

Between 2015 and 2016, Training Industry, Inc. and The Center for Leadership Studies released two research reports related to leadership development and the form and function of leaders’ ability to influence employees. This series of research projects assessed the relationship between organizations’ leadership development effectiveness, common practices when training leaders on influence, and how employees react to both their leaders’ and their peers’ attempts to influence work behavior.

“LEADERSHIP = INFLUENCE”

HOW EFFECTIVE IS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

The cumulative results of these studies revealed that the majority of organizations (70-75%) and employees (73%) rated their leadership development programs effective, demonstrating that the majority of organizations are invested in preparing their leaders and managers to influence behavior, regardless of the training topic or delivery modality. The results also identified increasing effectiveness as the most important training objective in leadership, followed by improving engagement. Although 51 percent of ineffective organizations did not offer any training on influence, a key finding showed
that employees are more receptive to their managers’ attempts to influence behavior when an effective leadership development program is in place. Employees who perceived the presence and effectiveness of leadership development programs also tended to feel more committed to their job and employer.

According to the research results, the companies rated most effective at leadership development frequently include training on the ability to influence others as either part of a general training or as a specific standalone training course. It is also notable that these companies offered this training on an ongoing basis to their upper ranks, where ineffective companies were more likely to offer training on influence intermittently. Influence was rated as most important to organizational functions that involve a high degree of person-to-person interaction both inside and outside the organization, such as HR, sales, customer service and marketing. The organizations found to be most effective at developing their leaders position influence as an integral part of their core leadership training curriculum.

One of the biggest challenges to effective leadership development was found to be sustaining training impact (57%) and ensuring leadership support (49%). However, nearly 40 percent of organizations are not providing anything to address slightly less common leadership challenges such as leading millennials or leading through ambiguity and uncertainty — which, given the well-documented outflow of retiring boomers and the influx of millennials into the workforce, may disadvantage companies seeking to grow in volatile markets and/or with protean personnel.

From an alternative perspective, followers who rated leadership development programs in their companies as ineffective endorsed “very effective” ratings between 6 and 12 percent for leadership activities such as managing employees’ work, facilitating professional development, and advocating for the department with other leaders.

HOW DO LEADERS INFLUENCE OTHERS?

The bases of power are a framework to understand the various avenues through which influence attempts succeed or fail across different situations. Power is a function of both the job and the individual holding that job — in other words, the ability to influence others is a combination of the authority granted to a leadership role in the context of a larger organizational hierarchy, and how the specific person holding that job exercises that authority and leverages interpersonal sources of influence. Accordingly, there are two primary sources of power:

- Position power is the extent to which an individual has a recognized formal role, is seen as a resource for distribution of rewards, or is perceived as being able to administer negative consequences. Position power is granted by a company to a particular job role, largely independent of the person holding that job.

- Personal power is the extent to which an individual demonstrates behaviors and personal characteristics that earn the respect and trust of others. Personal power is earned and maintained through interacting with others, and may be independent of the role they have in the company.

These two sources of power can be interpreted as the underpinning of all attempts to influence, but do not necessarily describe the mechanics of how influence works across situations. To that end, there are seven bases of power that classify the reasons an employee may decide to comply with a request to change their behavior, as follows:
To understand why managerial influence succeeds or fails across different situations, the first research project asked respondents to rate each base of power as to why others respond to their attempts to influence. Specifically, leaders were asked to rate the extent to which they perceived others responded to these seven approaches to exercising influence. The bases of power that received the most robust agreement from leaders’ perspective were referent power (79%), legitimate power (77%) and expert power (77%). Additionally, legitimate power was rated as important to influencing the behavior of employees working remotely or from another nationality. It should be noted that across all seven power bases, no single source of influence was unlikely to play a role in shaping the behavior of others. This suggests that although some bases of power may be perceived by followers as the most likely reason they comply with managerial requests, the influence of their supervisors on their work behavior can take many forms and be comprised of several of the bases of power acting in concert. In short, successful applications of the bases of power may depend on some combination of the situational dynamics and environment in which influence is being exerted.

Figure 1 shows the results for leader ratings of why a follower would change their behavior when asked to, based on the different sources of influence represented by the seven bases of power.

HOW DO OTHERS SEE LEADERS’ INFLUENCE?

The second research project considered follower ratings for leader interactions, including the bases of power, across employees who indicated their company has an effective leadership program. Across generations of employees, both millennials (aged 18-33) and Generation X’ers (aged 34-49) rated the importance of influence highest and tended to have a more positive perception of leadership development than baby boomers (aged 50-68). Exploring these results in more detail across generations, boomers are markedly less positive about the impact of leader activities than younger groups. With respect to learning criteria, employees across all generations perceived their managers to put the most emphasis on the transfer of learned skills to on-the-job application (79%). Accordingly, employees believed their managers were slightly less concerned with enjoyment of the training experience than they were with the impact training will have on subsequent job behaviors and business outcomes.

When considering extremely likely ratings, especially for organizations with effective leadership development programs, results
showed the most important bases of power for managing employees and influencing workplace behavior were referent power, legitimate power and expert power. Further, these results were mirrored across generations, as millennials rated referent, expert and legitimate power the most important followed by Generation X’ers and boomer employees. Millennial respondents also identified information power as an important avenue of influence, suggesting that millennials want as much information from their managers as possible and may see them as a conduit for the information needed to complete work tasks.

Figure 2 shows the results for follower ratings of why they would change their behavior when asked to by their leader, based on the different sources of influence represented by the seven bases of power.

**HOW DO CO-WORKERS INFLUENCE EACH OTHER?**

To provide a contrast with the leader-follower dynamics described above, the survey also explored patterns in how the seven power bases manifested between co-workers. First, referent and expert power, which are in the broader category of personal power, appeared to be the main drivers of influence between co-workers, regardless of generation. This was true to varying degrees, however, as millennials were more likely to attribute earned respect and trust to co-workers compared to older generations. Further, across generations there was an observed trend such that co-workers older than a respondent’s own cohort tended to be rated more favorably on bases of power. In other words, if a respondent was rating whether they respond to various sources of co-worker influence, a co-worker in a generation above the respondent tended to receive higher ratings.

Exploring the data along generational lines, these results showed that millennial co-workers were able to influence those around them, but primarily through building trust and confidence as well as earning a reputation as an expert. Referent and expert power were the most likely reasons that an employee would respond to a request by a Generation X co-worker, although information and legitimate power were more prominent than with millennial
Co-workers. Although referent and expert power were still primary reasons that a co-worker would take the suggestion of a boomer, all other sources of influence were much more pronounced than with younger generational cohorts. These results show that boomers have more avenues of influence with co-workers compared to their younger counterparts.

It bears mentioning, however, that in all co-worker results, none of the bases of power garnered ratings that matched the magnitude of endorsement when a manager was the rating target. This suggests that while influence between co-workers (referent and expert power in particular) is a factor that impacts workplace behavior, the effect of the seven bases of power are of greater consequence in the context of a supervisor-follower dynamic. In other words, employees are constantly assessing attempts to influence their behavior by a myriad of co-workers and colleagues, but the most salient attempts and the ones they are most likely to respond to are those from their leaders.

**CONCLUSION**

Exerting influence on an individual employee is a constantly evolving process, affected by the consistency of the management style of a leader over time. In addition, influence is subject to the perceptions and reactions of followers toward a leader. Leadership training on influence, then, can be a powerful way to equip leaders with the tools to better understand why their own attempts to direct behavior succeed or fail in the day-to-day cycle of management.

The results suggest that the more effective the leadership development programs in place within an organization, the better prepared leaders may be to influence the behavior of followers to achieve business goals — and the more receptive those followers will be to direction. In addition, there were several important findings about followers’ perceptions of leaders. First, transfer of learned skills to application on-the-job was seen as the most important outcome of training to followers. Second, followers respond to all bases of power, but in particular endorsed referent and
expert power as the most salient sources of managerial influence. In nearly all instances, these perceptions were most pronounced for millennials and least pronounced for boomers. Third, the majority of followers believe their managers to work with integrity, and generally trust in both the intentions and capabilities of management in their company.

It is evident that the majority of organizations are effective at training their leaders and the power to influence is crucial to organizational success. Leadership training on influence equips leaders and managers with the insight and tools to understand how to effectively allocate employee resources and effort. When there’s an effective leadership development program in place and employees trust in the capabilities of management, day-to-day workplace interactions become a contributing, rather than detracting, factor in the realization and execution of a shared business vision.

**WHAT CAN YOU DO TO BUILD POWER?**

Although this research found that all bases of power are important to leadership influence, the three power bases that are most critical to leaders’ influence attempts are expert, legitimate and referent power. Following are suggestions for how to build and maintain these crucial sources of leader influence:

**EXPERT POWER**

- Pinpoint your passion
  You can’t be an expert in everything

- Plan your progression
  Expertise does not happen overnight

- Experience trumps understanding
  Deep expert knowledge comes from “doing”

**LEGITIMATE POWER**

- Recognize your responsibility
  Rise to the challenge of leadership tasks

- Orchestrating accountability is key
  The use of coercive and reward power shapes follower perceptions of legitimacy

- If you don’t use it...you lose it
  Followers will react to how you navigate your role rather than how your role is defined by your company

**REFERENT POWER**

- Takes a long time to earn...and no time to burn
  Trust and respect are built up over many interactions between you and your followers

- Become the best listener ever
  Reciprocating your followers’ willingness to listen to you can become a referent power feedback loop

- “Power with” outplays “Power over”
  Lead the charge rather than direct the charge