Influence Without Authority

Version 2026 · verified 2026-11-02

Get decisions made and adopted across teams you don't run — reciprocity, stakeholder maps, pre-wiring, decision meetings, escalation and follow-through.

Contents

Mental model 2

Reciprocity and currencies 2

Map the stakeholders 3

Frame it in their metrics 4

Pre-wire the decision 4

Run the decision meeting 5

Disagree and commit 6

Handle pushback 7

Escalate without burning bridges 8

Follow through 8

Further reading 9

Mental model

Influence is built before you need it. People say yes to someone they trust who is helping them with their own goals, and that trust comes from credibility and many small favours traded over months. The proposal is the last step of the process, not the first — if the meeting is where people hear your idea for the first time, you have already lost most of your leverage.

Reciprocity and currencies

Currency	You can offer
Task	Help, resources, a fixed blocker
Position	Visibility, credit, a seat at a table
Inspiration	A bigger purpose, quality, doing right
Relationship	Being listened to, support, inclusion
Personal	Learning, ownership, gratitude

Cohen and Bradford's influence model rests on reciprocity: without authority you cannot order, but you can trade something the other person values for what you need. They call those things **currencies**. The model starts by assuming everyone is a potential ally, clarifying your own goals, and understanding the other person's world before working out which currencies matter to them.

```
You need: platform team to add a cache API
They value: fewer pages at 3 a.m. (task),
```

```
  credit with their director (position)
You offer: you write the runbook and the
  alert, and present the win jointly
```

> **Gotcha:** Currencies are what **they** value, not what you think should matter. Offering “cleaner architecture” to a team measured on uptime is paying in a currency they do not spend.

Map the stakeholders

Interest / power	Strategy
High power, high interest	Co-design; meet one to one
High power, low interest	Short updates, no surprises
Low power, high interest	Involve, ask for input
Low power, low interest	Inform when it ships

Before proposing anything, list every person who can block, fund, build or be affected by the change, and place each in the grid. Blockers are rarely the loudest people in the meeting; they are the ones whose systems, roadmaps or metrics your change touches and who were not asked.

```
Change: move all services to new CI
  VP Eng       high/low  -> 3-line update
  Infra lead   high/high -> co-own design
```

```
Mobile team  low/high  -> pilot group
QA           low/low   -> notify at launch
```

Frame it in their metrics

Their goal	Your proposal framed as
Revenue	Checkout conversion, churn
Reliability	Incidents, pages, MTTR
Delivery	Lead time, fewer blocked PRs
Cost	Monthly spend, headcount saved

Cohen and Bradford call this understanding the other person's world: the pressures, metrics and boss they answer to. The same change sells differently to each stakeholder, and none of them is buying your reason for wanting it. Say what it does for the number they are judged on, and what it costs them.

```
Before: "We should adopt typed contracts
  between services."
After (to Support lead): "Typed contracts
  would have prevented 3 of last quarter's
  5 billing-ticket spikes."
```

Pre-wire the decision

Step	Purpose
One-to-one drafts	Find objections privately

Step	Purpose
Fold feedback in	Make it partly theirs
Ask the decider early	Learn what they need to say yes
Confirm before the meeting	No first-time surprises

Will Larson's guide to presenting to executives recommends aligning with stakeholders before the presentation — the Japanese practice of **nemawashi** — and sending an early draft to an executive who will attend, asking what to change. People object more freely in private, and an objection you fix beforehand is one nobody needs to defend in public.

```
"Before Thursday's review I'd like your
eyes on this. What would stop you from
supporting it? I'd rather change it now
than argue about it in the room."
```

> **Tip:** Name who raised a concern when you show the fix: "Priya spotted the migration risk, so phase 1 is read-only." Credit is a currency, and it turns a critic into a co-author.

Run the decision meeting

Element	Rule
Decider	One named person, stated up front
Options	Two or three, including "do nothing"
Criteria	Agreed before options are debated

Element	Rule
Output	Decision, owner, date, written down

A meeting without a named decider produces discussion, not a decision. Open with the question and who decides it, compare options against criteria agreed first, and end by reading the decision back. Send the written record the same day; a decision nobody wrote down gets re-litigated in a month.

```
Decision: adopt new CI for all services
Decider: @maria (VP Eng)
Rejected: keep Jenkins (cost), per-team
  choice (support burden)
Owner: @lee; pilot done by 15 Dec
```

Disagree and commit

Before the decision	After the decision
Argue your case fully	Support it in public
Put objections in writing	Execute it as your own
Propose a test or a revisit date	Raise new data, not old arguments

Amazon’s “Have Backbone; Disagree and Commit” principle states the norm well: challenge decisions you disagree with, respectfully, even when it is uncomfortable — and once a decision is made, commit wholly.

Your credibility for the next disagreement depends on how you behave after losing this one.

```
"I still think per-team CI is cheaper, and
I've said why. We've decided otherwise, so
I'll migrate my team first and report what
we hit."
```

> **Warning:** Committing in the meeting and slow-walking afterwards is the fastest way to spend all the trust you built. If new facts appear, raise them openly with the decider.

Handle pushback

Pushback	Usually means	Response
“Not now”	Priority conflict	Ask what would make it now
“Too risky”	Unclear blast radius	Offer a reversible pilot
“Not my problem”	Wrong currency	Show the cost to them
Silence	No owner, or a hidden no	Ask one person directly

Treat an objection as information about the other person’s world, not as an attack to defeat. Ask what would have to be true for them to say yes, and shrink the commitment until it is easy: a pilot, a time box, a reversible first step.

```
Them: "We can't take this on this quarter."
You:  "Understood. Would a two-week pilot on
       one service fit if my team does the
       setup?"
```

Escalate without burning bridges

Do	Don't
Tell them first that you'll escalate	Go over their head silently
Escalate jointly, with both views	Present only your side
Ask the manager for a decision	Ask the manager to overrule them
Thank them afterwards	Treat it as a win

Escalation is a normal tool for resolving a priority conflict two people cannot settle, not a punishment. Write the shared summary together — the options, each side's reasoning, the decision needed — so the manager decides the question rather than judging the people.

```
"We disagree on whether auth or search
goes first. Shall we write up both views
for Sam together and ask for a call by
Friday?"
```

Follow through

After yes	Why
Deliver your side first	Proves the trade was real

After yes	Why
Report results in their metric	Pays the promised currency
Credit them publicly	Builds the next yes

A “yes” is the start of adoption, not the end. Deliver what you offered, report the result in the terms you used to sell it, and credit the people who backed you — that is the credibility you will spend on the next proposal.

```
"Two weeks in: new CI cut median build
time on payments from 14 to 6 minutes.
Thanks to @lee's team for piloting it."
```

Further reading

- Cohen and Bradford — Influence Without Authority
- Will Larson — Staff Engineer
- Will Larson — Present to executives
- Amazon Leadership Principles