



PSDP–Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors: Spheres of influence: exploring the impact of your leadership style

Introduction

We live in a world where people can now make a living from being ‘influencers’. Through social media platforms, individuals create stories about themselves or products that persuade others to change behaviours, buy products, support specific causes, etc. But the idea of influence is not new and has been the subject of many books and journal articles for decades. The 1936 book ‘How to Win Friends & Influence People’ by Dale Carnegie is still in print.

Using your own sphere of influence as a basis for reflection, this learning tool will explore the ways in which it is possible to influence for improvement, challenge for change, and explore your own personal preferences for how you influence others.

We will look at a number of different concepts, including:

- > personal narratives
- > limiting assumptions
- > double loop learning
- > the principles of persuasion.

As you work through the tool you will have the opportunity to engage in reflective tasks based on the information and concepts presented. You can work through everything in one go or in stages depending on how much time you have available.

Section one: personal narratives and limiting assumptions

When beginning to think about the impact of your leadership style and how you influence others, it is important to start by being curious about yourself. In particular, to think about the stories you tell yourself about what is happening and what part you play in creating and sustaining patterns of action, interaction and non-action with the colleagues you communicate with in your role as leader (Marshall, 1999, pp. 156-157).

We all have a personal narrative (a story we tell ourselves about who we are) and this is informed by aspects of personal and social identity which include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality. Burnham (2013) refers to these aspects of social identity as the social GRRRAACCEEESSS and highlights that they inform our behaviours, expectations and experiences (2013). The social GRRRAACCEEESSS also cover experiences of structural and economic inequalities within society which can also inform our personal narrative and sense of identity.

One personal narrative that many people experience (which can also play out in professional contexts) is that of the 'limiting assumption'. These can be, and most often are, part of our personal narrative. They are the negative stories we tell ourselves which limit us, e.g. 'I'm not the sort of person who can do public speaking', or 'No one will listen to what I've got to say'.

If left unchecked or unexamined, limiting assumptions can easily get in the way of your capacity to successfully influence in the workplace. While many limiting assumptions arise from personal narratives, they can also be shaped by socio-culturally constructed and structurally embedded narratives and conditions within society.

The concept of limiting assumptions was developed by Nancy Kline (1999) as part of a model called the 'thinking environment', designed to help individuals contribute to and challenge and influence organisational behaviour and decision-making. There are ten components which make up this model as you can see in the picture on the next page (reproduced with permission from [3 Stickmen](#)).

HOW TO **THINK BETTER** & help others think better, too



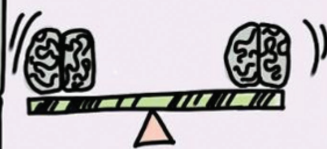
From the work of Nancy Kline - "More time to Think." **3STICKMEN**

ATTENTION



Listening without interruption is an act of creation

EQUALITY



Our thinking is different and equal

EASE



You cannot think in a hurry. Create freedom from rushing

APPRECIATION



Appreciate 5 x more than you criticize

ENCOURAGEMENT



Eliminating competition improves thinking

INFORMATION



What are you denying that could liberate your thinking?

FEELINGS



Fear prevents thinking, laughter helps

DIVERSITY



People will think for themselves

INCISIVE QUESTION



Remove false limiting assumptions

PLACE



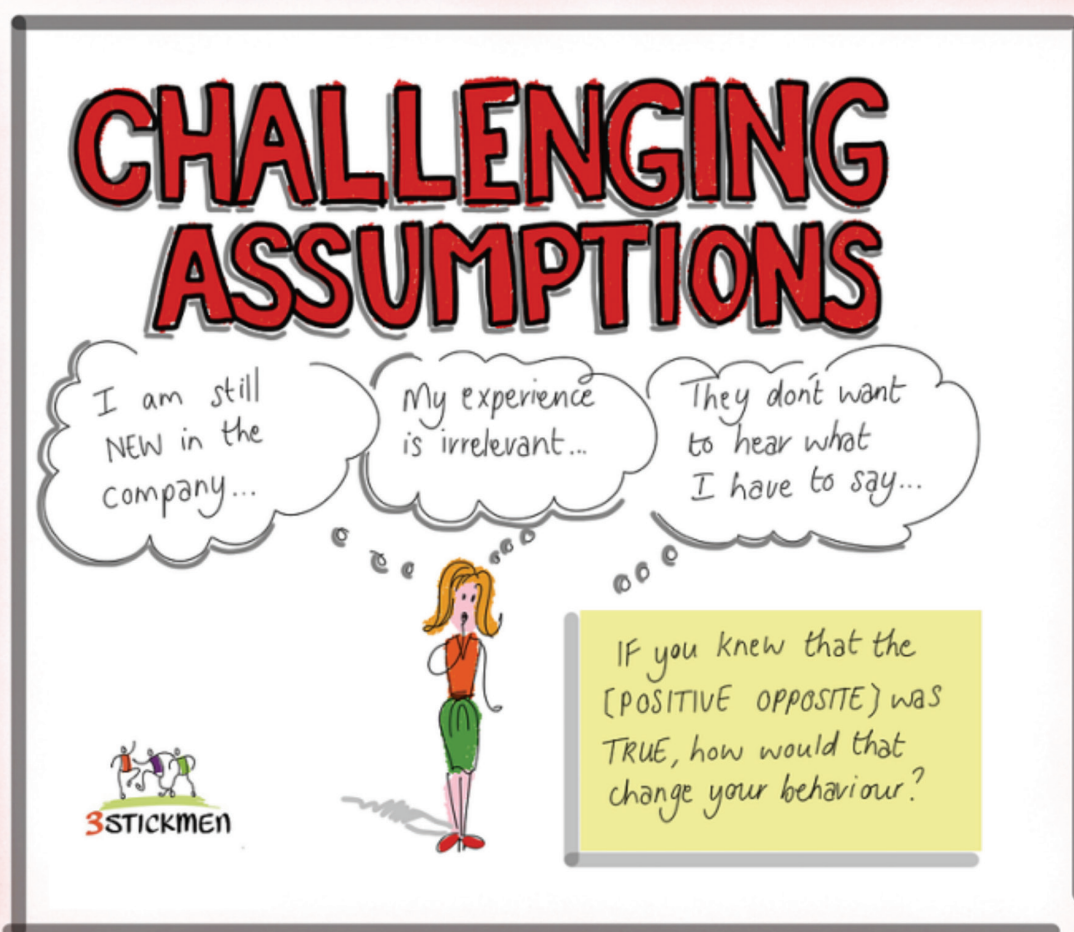
The place - and your body - matters

NOTE: Please use this poster when facilitating, training or leading thinking.

Drawn by Lita Currie
© www.3stickmen.com

In this tool, the component we are going to consider in more detail is the incisive question, which can be used to challenge limiting assumptions and explore thinking about the possibility of an alternative outcome. Activity one below provides more information about incisive questions and prompts you to think about how you might use them in your work context.

Activity one: challenging limiting assumptions



Copyright: Lita Currie, [3 Stickmen](#)

1. Please spend a moment reflecting in order to identify a specific goal that you want to achieve in your role as a middle leader. Ask yourself the following questions as you think about yourself in your system:

> What person, team, organisation, or network do I want to influence?

> What message do I want to communicate to them?

> What do I want to persuade them to do?

> What have I tried already?

2. At this point, and with your specific goal in mind, think about how you currently feel about your sphere of influence, then answer Nancy Kline's incisive questions below:

> Which of my assumptions most limits my thinking here?

> Is this assumption true? Do I have any evidence to prove it?

> What is a liberating true alternative to the limiting assumption?

> If I knew (insert true alternative), what would I think, feel or do?

3. Having completed the activity:

- > Can you think of other times when the same limiting assumption has got in your way? Does it feel familiar?
- > When do you think you are most likely to experience a limiting assumption?
- > What do you think might happen or change if you use the incisive question technique?
- > How did it feel to reframe and consider alternative options?
- > How many other situations can you think of (personal or professional) where the challenge of the incisive question technique might be helpful?

So how does this relate to exploring your sphere of influence? We've had to pedal back a bit to consider where the thought process starts, and it's nearly always with an assumption about what is possible. Your assumptions around your sphere of influence are likely to be based on all kinds of personal and professional experiences. Lack of confidence will often feed the strength of limiting assumptions. Exploring and questioning your limiting assumptions requires that you consider how your assumptions arise in the first place.

Let's now move on to consider the next idea: the 'ladder of inference' which will allow us to explore our spheres of influence further.

Section two: the ladder of inference and double loop learning

In order to explore limiting assumptions further, we are going to use the 'ladder of inference'. This is a tool developed by Chris Argyris in the 1970s which helps us to understand how we commonly make assumptions in thinking when trying to understand what is happening around us (both professionally and personally).

The idea behind the ladder of inference is that there is a self-limiting thought process that most people engage in which, if left unexamined and accepted as true, creates assumptions that go unchallenged in both personal and professional aspects of our lives. The assumptions that arise which influence our thinking are often characterized by 'defensiveness, self-fulfilling prophecies, self-fuelling processes, and escalating error' (1982, p. 8). Figure 1 illustrates the process of 'escalating error' in action.

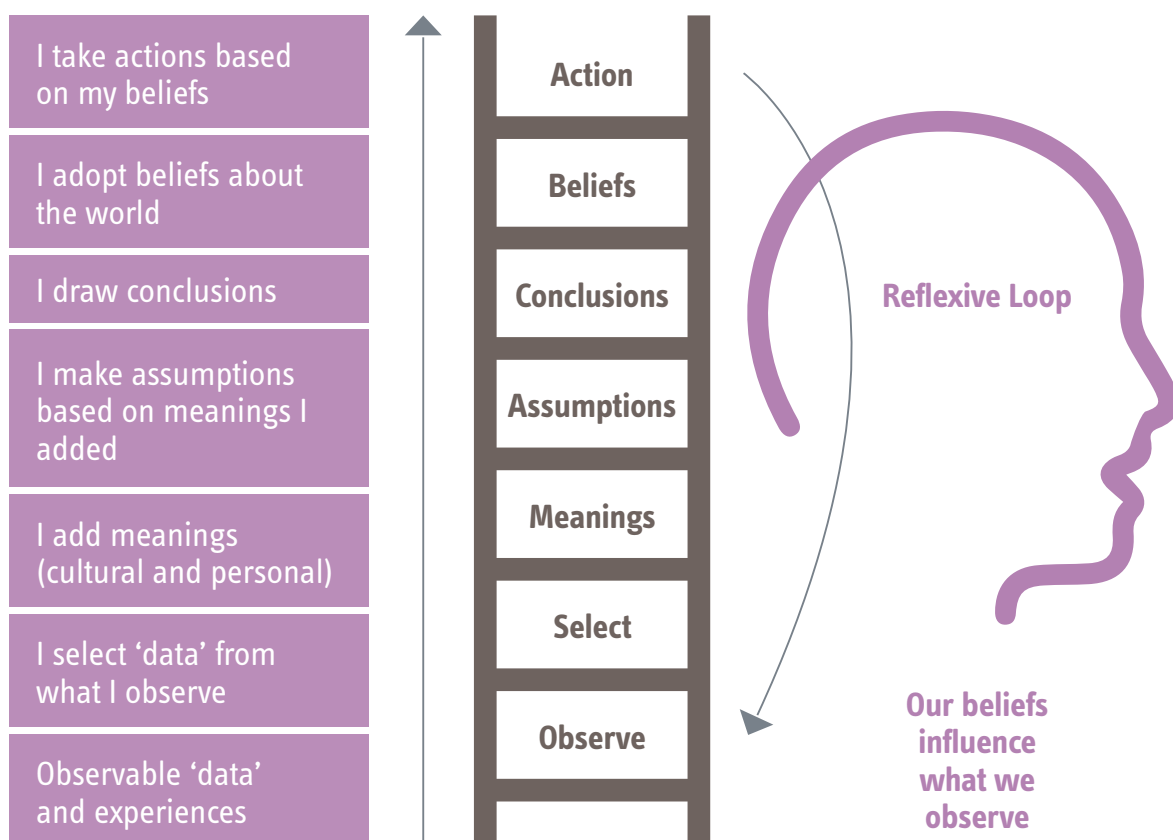


Figure 1: The ladder of inference

The example below illustrates how this process of thinking can influence what we say and do:

Your supervisee says she isn't going to go for a job despite the fact that she has been asked to apply. Her thinking is that she was not successful at her last interview and, therefore, is likely to not be successful again.

This view is also influenced by her personal context and the fact that no one in her family has ever achieved managerial status. The silent assumption she has drawn from this is that she will not achieve it either and so there is no point in even applying.

In challenging limiting assumptions you might therefore:

- > question the supervisee's defensive reasoning ('no one in my family ever achieved managerial status')
- > suggest that her statement about failing at her last interview seems to be a limiting assumption
- > challenge her to consider why she has not allowed the recommendation to carry weight
- > ask her to consider an alternative frame.

Single and double loop learning

In the example you have just read, the supervisee has engaged in something which Argyris called 'single loop learning'. Argyris found that organisations (and the staff within them) often engaged in what he called 'single loop learning,' which has the effect of reproducing limiting assumptions (Smith, 2011).

Single loop learning arises where the steps of the ladder are climbed without any interrogation or reflection. Single loop learning has little reflection but some insight. It can result in knowledge about oneself but doesn't offer the opportunity to change. Instead, we need to be aiming for what is known as double loop learning.

Double loop learning has a reflective element and, importantly, considers assumptions and associated defensive reasoning. Double loop learning is an important part of the process that leads to increasing your sphere of influence. It involves challenging your defensive reasoning and being curious about the underlying assumptions that inform behavioural choices (see figure 2 below). The reflexive loop in double loop learning expands the observable data and allows us to begin to be curious about why things are as they are, which can lead to behavioural (or process) change.

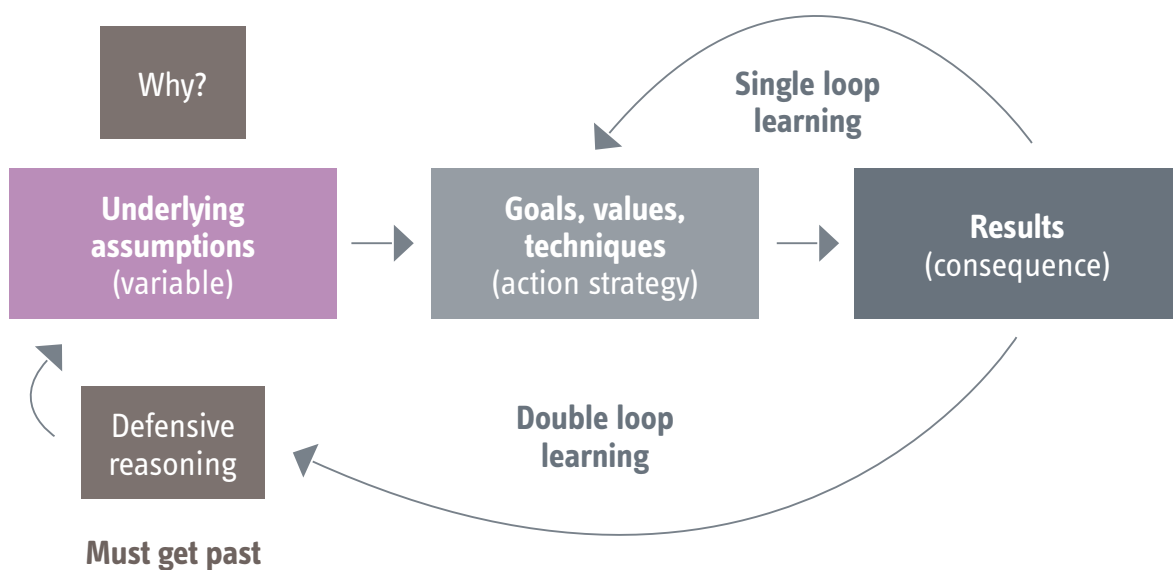


Figure 2: Double loop learning

As you can see, double loop learning allows us to begin to challenge personal narratives and limiting assumptions. The use of the incisive question technique adds another layer of understanding to this.

You can [find out more about Argyris's work on infed.org](https://infed.org).

Activity two: thinking further about single and double loop learning

To summarise what we have considered so far, beliefs based on personal and professional experience are likely to lead to limiting assumptions which, if left unchallenged, can create single loop learning environments.

In order to explore this further please take a moment to reflect on the following questions:

- > What effect do you think your limiting assumptions might have on your ability to influence changes in practice and processes within your organisation and in your team(s)?
- > What might you need to consider about your own assumptions?
- > How far might socially constructed ideas related to your social GGRRAACCEEESSS influence your assumptions?
- > How many different situations can you think of where the incisive question technique introduced in activity one might encourage double loop learning?
- > In your organisation, who might benefit from considering the incisive question technique?

Section three: Cialdini's influencing styles and the six principles of persuasion

Having considered limiting assumptions and single / double loop learning, let's turn now to think further about your sphere of influence and what kind of influencing styles you have a preference for as a middle leader.

Developing an ethical practice of persuading and influencing those around you will enhance your effectiveness as a manager and a leader. Whether or not you agree that there is a 'science' to persuasion, there are many theories that explore how people are influenced. Robert Cialdini's theory, which he describes as 'The Science of Persuasion', is one.

Cialdini has written and researched extensively, and published widely, on this subject. 'Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion' (2007) is a modern day companion to Dale Carnegie's 'How to Win Friends and Influence People' (1936). In essence, Cialdini has categorised a number of influencing styles which have discernable characteristics, and it appears that we all have a personal preference for one or two styles and tend to avoid all the others.

Activity three: Cialdini's influencing styles questionnaire

1. Complete the **influencing styles questionnaire** to discover your personal preference. This will take around half an hour and you will be asked to consider a number of different scenarios. There are no right or wrong answers!
2. When you've completed the questionnaire and carefully scored your answers, have a look at the **debrief document**.
3. Then please spend a few moments thinking about what you found out about your influencing style by reflecting on the following questions:
 - a. Were there any surprises like high scores in one domain and low in another? Or were your scores evenly spread across all?
 - b. What might this tell you about your own preference for influencing?
 - c. Can you think of a situation where you have clearly used your most preferred influencing style?
 - d. How might your influencing style be influenced by your social GRRRAACCEEESSS?

Activity four: an introduction to the six principles

Cialdini then mapped the influencing styles to six different principles of persuasion, arguing that some influencing styles work better with one principle.

Activity four: an introduction to the six principles

Please watch this [animation](#) which explains the six principles and how these relate to your influencing style. It's about 12 minutes long so make sure you've got time to watch it all.

Figure 3 shows how the different influencing styles and the six principles identified by Cialdini map on to some common leadership themes.

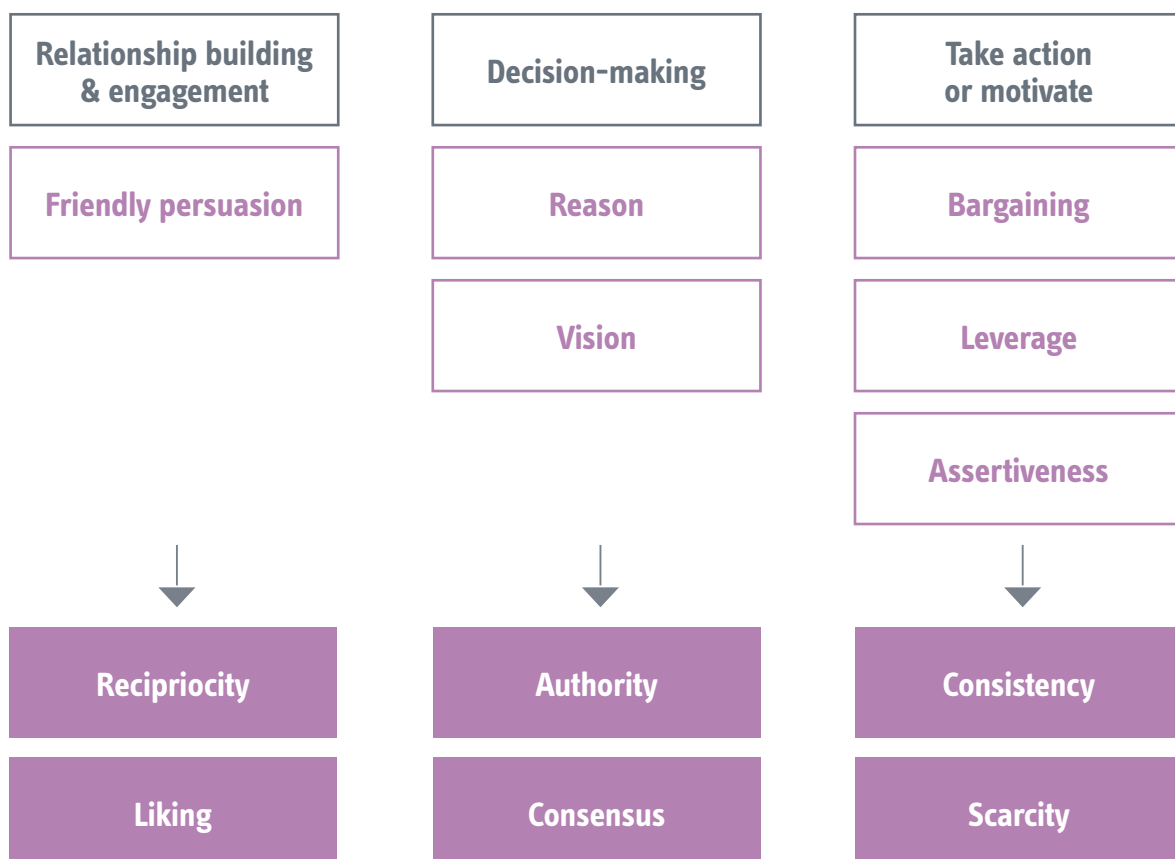


Figure 3: Influencing styles and the six principles

On the first level in figure 3 you can see three common themes that confront leaders and managers across many different disciplines and sectors:

- > Relationships.
- > Decision-making.
- > Motivating.

In the second level of the figure you can see the six influencing styles you explored in the questionnaire.

In the third level of the figure you can see these are mapped on to the six principles of persuasion, which you were introduced to in the animation.

What becomes clear in the animation you watched earlier is that certain situations require certain approaches. And the same can be said of people. So the relevant question (thinking back to the person or situation that you want to influence) is whether your preferred influencing style meets the need of the situation / person and, if not, whether it would be helpful to use another influencing style instead.

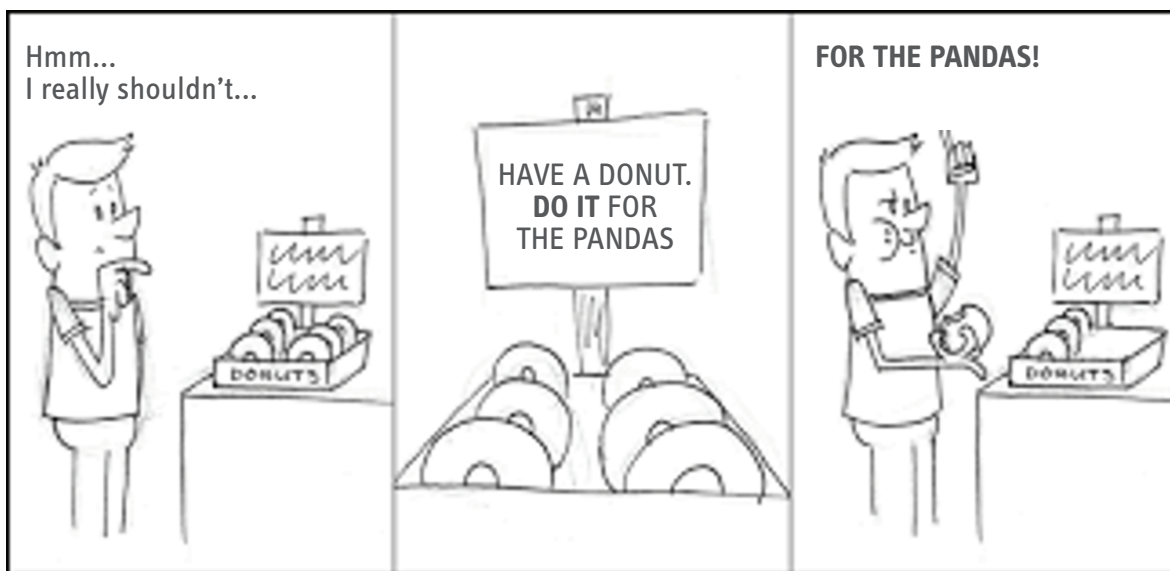
For example:

- > If you scored highest in friendly persuasion then you are likely to use relationship building and will tend to use reciprocity and liking as the means to influence.
- > If you scored highest in friendly persuasion but really low on leverage, you will need to think about how you might persuade a more senior leader that a change of process is required (this would fall under the theme of 'take action or motivate' in the table above).
- > If you are not familiar with using the principles of consistency and scarcity as your means to influence, this may help you understand why your usual approach (reciprocity) is not working for you.
- > What might these constellations mean when seeking to influence people similar / different to you?
- > The benefit of reflecting on your personal preference is that you can also consider adopting and improving your less preferred styles for specific situations. So, using the example above, where your preference is for friendly persuasion, what might happen if you adopted a bargaining, leverage or assertiveness style?

Activity five: thinking further about the six principles of persuasion

Most importantly, you need to consider the perceived preferred styles of other stakeholders in the process / decision you are trying to influence. Someone consistently using a friendly persuasion style to influence someone high on the leverage scale is unlikely to be successful.

- a. Please think about an experience when you have been successful with getting an idea or project off the ground. Using the language from the 'science' of persuasion, what style did you use and what principles were in play?
- b. Now think about a time you felt you were getting nowhere with something you really care about. Again, using the language, what style did you use and what principles were in play? Does the style match the principle and how might you adopt a different style? What limiting assumptions will you have to challenge in order to do so?
- c. What might the limitations of these ideas be when faced with structural discrimination based on, for example, race or disability?



Source: [tes.com](https://www.tes.com)

Section four: checking on limiting assumptions about time

In this final section of the tool it is important to highlight that influence is not a linear process. You can influence upwards, sideways and downwards from wherever you are in the system. The size of your sphere of influence depends to a degree on the limiting assumptions you make. Have a look at figure 4 - circles of influence, which illustrates this point.

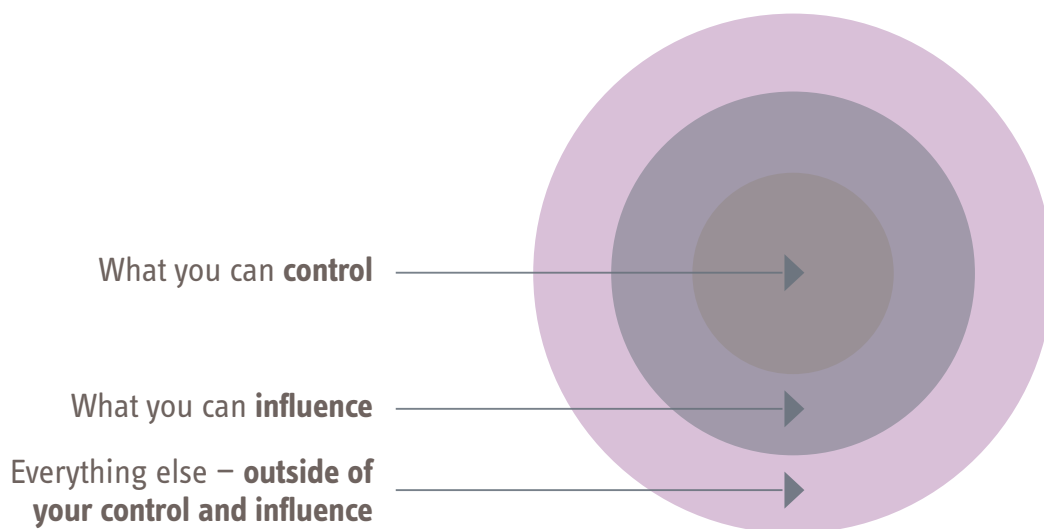


Figure 4 - circles of influence

The task is to question whether everything you deem to be in the outer sphere (out of your control) is in fact true. A really useful example to consider here is to reflect on your relationship to time. A constant counter argument to the idea of developing space for a double loop learning environment is that there isn't enough time and that this is out of your control. So 'time' sits in the purple sphere.

It is therefore important to think about how you can increase your sphere of influence to include 'time' (by challenging your limiting assumptions), and identify who / what you need to influence (and the best style to adopt) in order to achieve this.

Final reflections:

- > What have you learned about yourself while working through this learning tool?
- > What have you discovered about your perception of your sphere of influence in your organisation?
- > What behavioural change might you make as a result of your learning?

Other ways you can use this tool:

Talk to the practice supervisors you line manage about the ideas explored in this tool, to start a conversation about how they influence as managers.

Share the tool with peers and talk together about your influencing styles as middle leaders.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

Argyris, C. (1982). *Reasoning, learning, and action: Individual and organizational*. Jossey-Bass.

Burnham J. (2013). Developments in Social GRRRAACCEESSS: visible-invisible, voiced-unvoiced. In I. Krause (ed.) *Cultural Reflexivity*. Karnac.

Carnegie, D. (2006). *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Random House.

Cialdini, R. (2007). *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. Harper Business.

Kline, N. (1999). *Time To Think*. Ward Lock.

Kline, N. (2009). *More Time To Think*. Fisher King Pub.

Marshall, J. (1999). 'Living life as inquiry.' *Systematic Practice and Action Research*, 12 (2) 155-71.

Smith, M. K . (2001, 2013). *Chris Argyris: theories of action, double-loop learning and organizational learning*. The Encyclopedia of Pedagogy and Informal Education.

Supervising the Supervisor
Practice Supervisor Development Programme
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@researchinpractice.org.uk
 [#researchIP](https://twitter.com/researchIP) [#PSDP](https://twitter.com/researchIP)

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Author: Abigail Concannon
Organisational Consultant, Facilitator,
Psychotherapist and Coach

Helen Shaw
Organisational Consultant and Coach,
Portfolio Manager: Social Care,
Leadership and Management
Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation
Trust

Research in Practice is a programme of
The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company
limited by guarantee and a registered charity.
Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756
VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,
Totnes TQ9 6EL