

# Introduction

**He who gets fired gets nothing done.**

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**M**idlife is a good time for personal reflection. When I left the rigors of an executive job in 2008, I was able to look back on almost three decades of experiences that had encompassed the military, academia, judicial service, the not-for-profit sector, and life in a global corporation. In the process, I had the opportunity to encounter a fascinating diversity of people with varied personal and professional backgrounds from the Americas, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region.

Now that it was time to chart a new course, my friend and mentor Jim Collins challenged me to write down “everything I had learned.” It is good to have a mentor or coach, especially when he or she is asking us to do something that is important but would otherwise easily fall victim to the tyranny of the urgent or to our own laziness. Having that request come from a person with some profile is helpful, too, as we don’t want to embarrass ourselves. In my own executive-coaching practice, I have found that the combination of questioning, challenging, and making my clients accountable is just as important as giving them good advice. In fact, it’s probably more so.

To write down everything I have learned seemed like an amorphous task to start with. It required some thinking and clarification in order to get to a concrete work plan I could actually implement. Fortunately, as we will see, powerful people have quite a habit of making high-level “visionary” pronouncements and requests that

need extensive translation in order to become operational, so I have considerable experience with this type of activity. I quickly determined that the best way to make Jim's assignment concrete was to create a number of headings under which I could categorize my learning. These headings included things like business strategy, human resources development, corporate governance, ownership succession, international negotiations, business communication, and legal policy.

After reviewing these categories with me, Jim informed me (politely) that although my learning in these areas was valuable, it was perhaps not earth-shattering. However, he picked up on one category that was buried in the fifteen or so I had listed. The heading was "How to Deal with Powerful People."

Interestingly enough, this topic had been a focus of mine for a long time. I learned my first lessons on the topic in the military, hardly a place of "participatory leadership." I had lodged a complaint over a colonel's disparaging remarks of the intellectual abilities of combat troops with the parliamentary ombudsman of Germany's armed forces, which yielded little in return. At the same time, it had been possible to engage in a constructive dialogue with commanding officers of my company, which led to a modification of senseless drill practices. I learned that influencing powerful people was a better and more effective route than complaining about them. Later, my work for university professors and judges, people who had a lot of status and stature, taught me new lessons.

I had my first exposure to "larger-than-life" leaders in politics and industry as a fellow of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, an organization that provides scholarships for university and doctoral studies. In fact, one of the foundation's goals was to expose us to such people so that we could learn how to engage them better. In particular, such exposure taught us how to manage stressful circumstances, keep our balance, and communicate with precision and utmost clarity at all times. All of this proved invaluable when it became my job to interface with entrepreneurs, professional executives, board members, strong-headed managers, and other powerful people. It was also the competency I needed most to survive, make a contribution, and progress within a global corporation.

A key insight—the one I believe makes this book both necessary and useful—is that working with powerful people is not straightforward. You cannot just walk into their office, tell them what is needed,

and expect that they follow your logic. Why not? Because they have their own logic. Further, if they are impulsive enough, which many of them are, they may have already judged you before you even got your first word out. Their judgment may have been wrong, but that matters little. Of course, much has been written lately about emotionally intelligent, participatory, and authentic leadership, and the world would be a better place if more people would embrace these concepts. But the reality is that many powerful people simply are not that way and will not become that way anytime soon. Yes, they may be full of charm, drive, and brilliance (some more than others, of course), but they can and will be equally as domineering, demanding, and temperamental. And you certainly cannot tell them what to do. So instead of engaging in wishful thinking (*I wish my boss would listen, would appreciate what I do, was more reasonable, etc.*), you must face the brutal reality as it is. You must adapt and make things work. You can do so by learning to effectively influence those who are your boss, superior, or otherwise in charge. Waiting for them to change, in contrast, will be just as futile as an all-out power struggle.

The ability to influence powerful people is a critical skill in a large variety of settings. As I alluded to earlier, it is needed in business, the military, academia, politics, not-for-profit organizations, and pretty much every other arena. In addition, it has become even more indispensable in the context of global business, which involves different cultures, personalities, and management styles. Consider how progress in the following situations requires influencing powerful people:

- » **Dealing with a powerful boss.** This is the most obvious category. If your boss is strong-willed, demanding, and has a bit of a temper, you must counter that with superior influencing skills. There are things you can and must do to increase your chances of getting the job, keeping it (the revolving door is a constant theme with many powerful people), and progressing in it. Examples in this book will introduce you to people who were out the door as soon as they got in and others who rose to positions of tremendous influence.
- » **Working in a diffuse power structure.** Organizational power structures have lost a lot of their clarity and definition with the arrival of the “flat” organization, especially if they are global. Clear hierarchies have been replaced by a matrix where geographic managers work (or compete) at the same level as product and/or functional leaders. In

that environment, you are often accountable to more than one boss in addition to “internal customers,” and you may have to influence quite a few other people—many of them more powerful than you are—to get the resources you need and deliver the results your organization expects. These people include sales and marketing directors, vice presidents of finance, purchasing managers, and a whole host of strong-willed managers at various levels. For example, you may need budget approval from a corporate finance chief, customer support resources from an overseas manufacturing operation, or buy-in for a compensation policy from a subsidiary with foreign laws. You may not have authority, but you do have responsibility for results. The power structures in the world of politics and not-for-profits can, of course, be just as byzantine. There is no question: people who can navigate such environments will be in high demand.

- » **Dealing with powerful clients.** Influencing skills are a must for professional service providers and other advisers. I have seen lawyers, accountants, and other consultants lose clients because they did not understand the dynamic of a powerful personality. I have seen others relate in the right way, act without presumption, and communicate with great effectiveness. As a result, they increased their influence and were called upon in a much broader range of circumstances. The powerful people they worked with valued someone who understood them much more than someone who (just) had brilliant technical expertise.
- » **Sitting on boards of directors.** This can be an extremely tricky category. Conventional wisdom says that the board has all the power and that the chief executive serves at the board’s pleasure. But the reality can be quite different. Your chief executive may be a major shareholder or have star power that makes him or her indispensable and irreplaceable, or there simply may be no one else to do the job—and the CEO well knows it. Instead of the directors governing the CEO, he or she may actually think that they work for him or her. Superior influencing skills will go a long way in managing this situation, leaving power struggles as a last resort, if that.

To provide structure to the key insights—I have called them rules—that describe how to influence powerful people, I have ordered them in the following way: Rules 1 and 2 deal with some general attributes of powerful people, that is, what they are like as a type and how

they perceive us, the less powerful. To be effective, you have to know who you are dealing with. Rules 3 to 9 focus on building a working relationship with powerful people. That relationship becomes critical to managing the inevitable ups and downs and, of course, the occasional crisis. Rules 10 to 15 look at specific things you may be doing for and with powerful people. Once the relationship and your influencing skill progress, you may be doing much more than your regular job. You will be called upon as a facilitator, counselor, and even counterweight; as you'll discover, powerful people occasionally need protection from themselves. Rule 16 addresses the fact that you will likely have some power of your own and that there are things you can learn from your dealings with powerful people in order to make more effective use of your power.

Many of the illustrations, examples, and case studies in this book come from well-known powerful people. They describe real instances as reported in a variety of media. I have found this approach compelling for a number of reasons: My research of powerful characters confirmed that many of them have common traits and that the "rules" have worked in practice across a much larger spectrum than my own experience. It also confirms the breadth of application, as the illustrations span business, politics, and the military. Further, it allows a look at some very high-impact people and situations. Whether you find yourself in exactly that situation or deal with circumstances that are not quite as dramatic, the range of examples should help you prepare for your biggest challenges. Some of the powerful people I have referenced include Steve Jobs of Apple, Rupert Murdoch of News Corporation, William Paley of CBS, General Norman Schwarzkopf, Donald Trump, Oprah Winfrey, Canadians Ted Rogers (Rogers Communications) and Frank Stronach (Magna International), Britain's Conrad Black (formerly of Hollinger) and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and Germany's Ferdinand Piëch of Volkswagen and Chancellor Angela Merkel. I have chosen their stories because I believe all of them deserve admiration for their accomplishments, all seem to be demanding personalities who could never be accused of coddling people, and a few of them had their share of controversy. In the following chapters, you will also meet real people who have done an outstanding job at engaging them and helping them and their enterprises succeed, all while building great careers and profiles

of their own. Others have suffered shipwreck, and you must learn from them as well.

In addition, other examples will relate to working with “everyday” powerful people.” Clearly, the rules for influencing powerful people apply far beyond interaction with high-profile characters. Depending on where you are, the managing director of your local subsidiary, the head of your finance department, the influential member of your board, the critical donor in your charity, or the owner of your small business may be just as powerful in your setting as a corporate tycoon in someone else’s. Thus, exercising smart influence as detailed in the pages that follow will be critical to making your best contribution, earning respect, and progressing toward greater achievement and responsibility.