

WARREN PETERS NAVIGATES A COMPLEX, MULTISTAGED EXCHANGE PROCESS: WORKING WITHIN ORGANIZATIONAL REALITIES

How do you influence a higher-power person to do something he doesn't want to do and still keep a relationship because you have to work together in the future? There are many possibilities for going astray, either by spoiling your relationship or reputation, or giving in prematurely and missing an important opportunity.

Watching someone close-up in a reasonably typical situation can be instructive, both for his successes and failures. Warren Peters, underwriting manager in a large branch of Venerable Insurance Company, (VIC), tells us about his struggles with the dilemmas of openness and spontaneity in his dealings with Chuck Stevens. Note how he decides to avoid negative threats and discussions of the relationship with Chuck.

THE INFLUENCE CHALLENGE

Warren Peters faced a difficult problem. He was under considerable pressure to fill a newly created unit manager position in his branch; and, after interviewing several candidates, he settled on Debbie Casey, who had a good track record as a supervisor but who did not have the technical knowledge of the other five new unit managers. Debbie was willing to take the job, but her boss's boss, Chuck Stevens, was unwilling to let her go.

Furthermore, although Chuck was in another division at headquarters (product management), he outranked Warren and could be a formidable opponent. Warren wanted to influence Chuck to release Debbie Casey, but he wanted to do so while preserving his relationship with Chuck for future transactions.

BACKGROUND

Several months earlier, VIC had reorganized within its branches. Coordination problems between underwriting and processing had led to serious customer service problems. An extensive study by a consulting firm had resulted in the combining of these areas into teams that would contain members from each of these two groups. A unit manager, a position created in the reorganization, would head each team.

Warren's branch had been allotted six units; the first five manager posts had been easy to fill from among branch employees, but the last position had proven more difficult. Warren conducted an exhaustive search using VIC's corporate list of "promotable employees" and colleagues' responses to his requests for candidate suggestions. As a result of his search, Warren first offered the job to a very good manager, who took a month to decide that he did not want to relocate to the city in which the branch was located.

Another good selection was made, but the candidate declared that he wanted his next promotion to come from the actuarial area. No one else on the company's list looked terribly promising to Warren; he knew that often people were put on the list by dissatisfied managers who hoped to "lose" them through transfer.

SCOUTING REPORT: GOOD PROSPECT SPOTTED

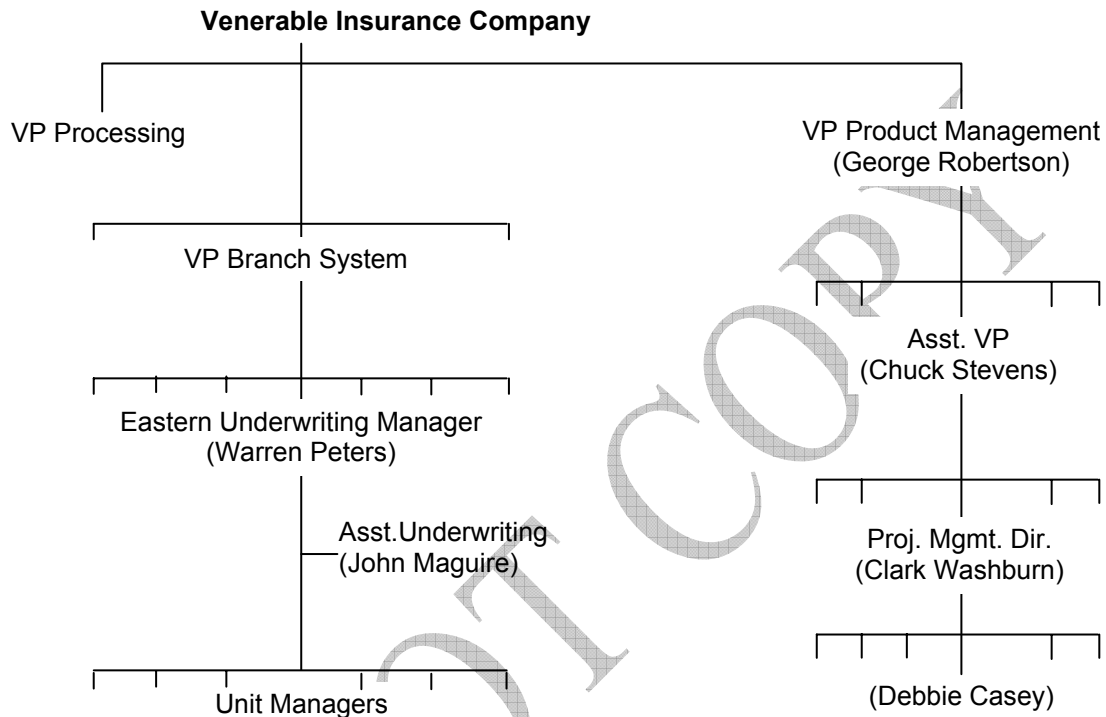
As Warren grew desperate, and the members of the new unit became restless to know who their supervisor would be, a new assistant underwriting manager, John Maguire, suggested Debbie Casey. Although her background was neither in underwriting nor processing, she had worked for John, and he was enthusiastic about her supervisory skills and ability to learn. Warren was reluctant to go ahead, but John's enthusiasm prompted him to interview her.

Warren's first step required his getting permission to interview Debbie. While he realized some people would react with surprise to his interest in her, Warren did not anticipate any major roadblocks. He contacted George Robertson, vice president of product management, who had overall responsibility for all areas of that department. (See Figure 1 for a partial organization chart.) Robertson, who had been the chairman of the original reorganization steering committee, did not object to Warren's request. He told Warren to contact Clark Washburn, a product management director, who was responsible for the area Debbie worked in.

When contacted by Warren, Washburn objected vehemently to Debbie being interviewed because he felt she was unqualified for the job. However, Washburn gave in when he learned that Robertson had given his blessing to the interview. At this point, Warren thought the situation was under control, and he informed Washburn he would contact Debbie within the next week or two to set up the interview. He didn't bother to develop a strategy, since he assumed he was facing a straightforward decision of whether he wanted her.

Figure 1

PARTIAL ORGANIZATION CHART



SURPRISE ATTACK: DEBBIE'S BOSS'S BOSS PICKS UP A BAT

The process turned out to be a little more difficult than Warren had anticipated. Chuck Stevens had been on vacation the week Warren discussed his plans with Robertson and Washburn. In the structure of the product management department, Washburn reported to Chuck, an assistant vice-president, who in turn reported to Robertson. Chuck was incensed when he discovered that Warren had gone to Robertson in an effort to pursue someone in his area. He was equally upset that Warren was looking at someone who did not have what he considered to be proper qualifications for the job. "What's it to him?" Warren wondered.

Chuck wasted no time in drawing the battle lines. He was very open and direct in venting his views to Warren on this issue. He began their initial telephone conversation by voicing his strong disapproval of Warren's going over his head to discuss a personnel issue with Robertson. Furthermore, he stated emphatically, Warren "must not have a very

good understanding of the requirements of the unit manager position" if he were willing to give it to someone who possessed neither a processing nor underwriting background.

Chuck continued by reminding Warren that he had served on the original reorganization steering committee, and he personally would never consider someone without a processing or underwriting background as a candidate for the unit manager job. He advised Warren to continue to look at the list of promotable employees to find a suitable candidate for the job. That was the purpose behind the list, he told Warren, and tremendous morale problems resulted when managers chose people who were not even on it. Finally, Chuck concluded by saying there was no possible way that Debbie was going to interview for the job.

Warren had not fully thought through the question of who to exchange with. VIC is a status-conscious, hierarchical organization, a fact revealed by Chuck's reaction to Warren's "going over his head," as Chuck put it, and his referral to having been on the original reorganization steering committee. Clearly, Warren was not unaware of this aspect of VIC; he had gone first to Robertson, the head of product management, trying to pave the way. Since he knew that Robertson had chaired the steering committee, he might have considered that, as a member of the committee, Chuck had a stake too. This kind of oversight can happen to anyone, so we will not be too critical of Warren, but it does reinforce the importance of early on figuring out who has a stake in an issue.

Chuck and Warren had an amicable relationship of five years with no history of problems. While there was no direct reporting relationship between the two, Chuck was responsible for product management's operations in Warren's region. Product management personnel often have to work with the branch offices to implement the price and product changes that are constantly necessary.

Thus, Warren was surprised by the barrage of objections he received. He liked to get to the heart of matters immediately and usually would readily match fire with fire. However, he contemplated a different strategy in this situation. He knew that Chuck had more organizational clout; by directly confronting him, Warren ran the risk of increasing Chuck's anger even further and leaving no room for negotiation.

Warren was fully aware of Chuck's reputation for being extremely stubborn. He knew from experience that fighting Chuck toe-to-toe would not be in his best interests. He had seen Chuck use high-pressure techniques in the past, and he had watched him grow more stubborn as an opponent became more strident in his requests. He believed that Chuck had a psychological need to win arguments.

Furthermore, Warren was puzzled. He couldn't understand why an assistant vice president would be so caught up in a relatively minor personnel issue of this kind.

WARREN PLANS WHAT TO DO NEXT

What were Warren's strategic choices at this point? He could have backed off and sought another candidate; fought back at Chuck for standing in his way; tried to line up Chuck's boss, Robertson, who had already cleared the approach to Debbie Casey; or tried to explain more to Chuck in the hope of persuading him that he had not meant to go over his head, that Debbie was at the end of a long list, and she possibly could be competent for the job even if not directly experienced in some aspects of it.

Warren diagnosed Chuck as more powerful than he and likely to veto his rather urgent request; therefore, Warren needed to placate Chuck. Warren had dual objectives: obtain permission to hire Debbie, but avoid all-out war with Chuck. The hiring of Debbie was not worth making an enemy of Chuck; but he didn't want to have to start the search for a unit manager all over again, so he wasn't about to back off.

Warren saw Chuck as easily provoked into competitive battle. Thus he decided to keep the discussion low key no matter what Chuck did and not to be completely open about his feelings. Although he was tempted to, he would not tell Chuck to “stick to issues worthy of an assistant vice president.” Instead, his basic approach would be an appeal to reason, considerable deference, and quiet persistence. He would approach the situation very calmly and explain his position; he felt that if he were able to clarify Chuck's specific concerns, he had a good chance of being successful in the negotiation. He assumed that by giving Chuck more information, Chuck would come around, as if no one who understood the efforts Warren had made could come to any other conclusion. Then he would ask Chuck what options he could suggest. Warren felt that by asking Chuck how he would handle the situation, he would be able to harness Chuck's anger.

Warren carefully explained to Chuck that there was not another person in the branch who was ready to take on the responsibilities of the sixth unit manager. He recounted how they had gone to the promotables list and found a good candidate. Even though that person was interested, he eventually turned the job down. They had approached someone else, who also subsequently turned the position down. They had explored underwriting departments in branches across the country and still not come up with a suitable candidate. He finally decided to pursue Debbie because she had worked for John Maguire in the past, and Maguire believed that she had the potential to be transformed into an effective unit manager.

Chuck interjected into this explanation that he felt there were several qualified people on the list of promotables. Despite the anger Warren felt building up, he remained calm and suggested they go over the work history of some of those people Chuck believed to be qualified.

Chuck eventually conceded that several of the people he had in mind had taken a number of years to attain a satisfactory work performance rating and that they were generally marginal performers. He also agreed that if any of these people were given the position, they would probably need considerable guidance for a period of time. Since he was able

to get Chuck to concede on several points, Warren felt more confident. Nevertheless, Chuck got defensive; he emphatically stated that he could come up with at least eight or nine candidates, who were better for the position than Debbie, from his own department.

Warren reminded Chuck that the two people who had turned the job down were both from his area. However, Warren agreed to discuss any possible candidates that Chuck came up with. He did indicate that he was a little surprised by Chuck's desire to do this, since he had contacted him over a month earlier asking for any possible candidates they may have overlooked. Unfortunately, Chuck had never gotten back to him.

Chuck told Warren that he would put together a list of names for him. Before Chuck could end the conversation, Warren interjected that he would appreciate any suggestions Chuck might have for the future if the same type of situation occurred. Chuck responded that if he did not like the candidates on the promotables list, he personally would have open-posted the position through the company's job-posting program.

Warren knew that posting the job would require waiting for two precious weeks and then sifting through all the applications and interviewing all "qualified" candidates. This could be a very time-consuming process. So Warren told Chuck that although he had a lot of faith in the job-posting program, he had hoped to solve the situation more quickly; and he had feared that he would only receive applications from those people on the promotables list whom he did not want to pursue. However, Warren offered to post the job if Chuck felt that was the best avenue. Chuck replied that he would forward some names; if Warren could not find a suitable candidate from that group, he would insist that the job be open-posted.

After this conversation, Warren was frustrated. He was aggravated that the unit manager search was going to be further delayed and that an assistant vice president was becoming this actively involved in a personnel decision involving an employee on the supervisory level. He was also extremely frustrated. All of a sudden, Chuck had a list of well-qualified candidates when he hadn't even bothered to respond weeks earlier to the request for a list of this nature.

WARREN TRIES TO KEEP COOL

Warren reflected that his strategy of remaining calm and asking for advice on how to handle the situation had been relatively effective. But he was growing more frustrated. He was sorely tempted to come back hard at Chuck, hoping to embarrass him into giving way. Would being open about his anger now help or hurt his case? Was the issue big enough to fight?

Because he still didn't fully know Chuck's world, Warren found it hard not to get angry. He managed to stick to his strategy of playing it low key, but it was at some cost to his ability to be open. He did inform Chuck at one point that he was frustrated, but he told about it without allowing it to fully show. Chances are that Warren's feelings did come through his careful language, but not in so strong a way that Chuck got aroused.

Warren realized that Chuck would not back off if he thought that Warren was not taking him seriously, so Warren cooperated with the process of adding names and investigating them. He was unfailingly respectful of Chuck's views, even when they were inconvenient. By agreeing to extend the search to those on Chuck's list, Warren made it hard for Chuck to stick to his intransigent views about Debbie as unit manager.

In spite of all this, Warren still perceived that Chuck was in the more powerful position; so, despite the inconvenience caused by Chuck's intervention, Warren decided he would go along with the game plan proposed by Chuck. He felt that this might be his only way of getting what he wanted; if he were going to get involved in a full-scale war with an assistant vice-president, it would be over an issue of greater importance than an open unit manager position. That blocked Warren from more direct inquiry and action.

A week later, Chuck's list of possible candidates arrived. Much to Warren's surprise, the list contained only four names; and Debbie Casey was one of them. Warren was very pleased with this development. He believed it meant that Chuck recognized Debbie's potential to be unit manager, and he was relieved that he would not have to argue further in order to interview her. All four people on the list were immediately contacted and offered interviews.

Three of the four candidates (including Debbie) agreed to an interview. The fourth declined the interview because his spouse had just received a promotion in another area of the company and it was not the right time for them to make a move. Within the following week, all three interviews were conducted at the branch by John Maguire and Warren Peters. Warren interviewed Debbie at the home office while there for other business. Maguire didn't interview Debbie; he was well aware of her capabilities.

Before Maguire and Warren had reached a decision, one candidate called to withdraw her name from consideration. She was a single parent, felt she would not be able to afford the increase in housing costs at the new location, and did not want to uproot her child in the middle of a school year. This left only two candidates.

WARREN GOES TO BAT FOR CASEY

Warren decided that he wanted to offer Debbie Casey the position. He had been impressed by the self-confidence and maturity she displayed in her interview. While he felt that the other candidate had the required technical skills, he was concerned about her lack of supervisory experience and an apparently abrasive personality.

Warren concluded he should go directly to Chuck to inform him of his decision. While he anticipated that Chuck might balk at first, he did not expect any more roadblocks since he had followed Chuck's game plan exactly. However, Warren soon learned he had misjudged Chuck's reaction.

Chuck became furious once again. He exclaimed that there was no possible way that Warren could have chosen Debbie over the other candidates. He admitted that the only reason he included Debbie's name on the list was that he was confident Warren would decide she was unqualified when he was able to compare her with the other candidates. Chuck continued by saying there was no way he would allow a person with no underwriting or processing background to move into a position like that, especially a person like Debbie, who was extremely valuable in her current area. They could not afford to lose Debbie. The area had been hard hit by turnover, and Debbie's expertise was needed for training new individuals.

Chuck also insisted that he had to consider the repercussions from the people in his area if Debbie got the job. Many would be discouraged that a person with no processing or underwriting background could get a unit manager position in a branch office. Feelings of favoritism would arise, especially from people on the promotable list who had not even been interviewed.

WARREN CONTAINS HIS ANGER

At this point, Warren had four choices: He could finally get tough, claim desperation about finding a unit manager, placate further, or openly confess how hard all of this was on him and what inconvenience it was causing.

It is useful to note Chuck's currencies and the currencies Warren attempted to pay in. Chuck had an investment in the reorganization and the new position of unit manager. Although it eventually became apparent that Chuck was partly resistant to losing Debbie because he needed her expertise, he also did care about the quality of unit managers. Furthermore, he didn't want to deal with morale problems for those not selected. And, by implication, we can deduce that he wanted to be taken seriously and not have his opinions ignored.

But there were two important shifts in Chuck's position, which Warren could possibly take advantage of. Chuck had inadvertently admitted that he wasn't being completely honest when he included Debbie's name on the list he sent. This was a shift in the power balance, because now Warren could point out that Chuck was not playing fair, which would move him some if he had any sense of honor.

Second, Chuck had admitted that part of his opposition arose from his need for Debbie's skills in his area, which was a far more self-interested position than Chuck had originally staked out. Although he certainly did care about the quality of unit managers, Chuck had revealed a personal motive that put his "company concern" into a shadow of self-interest. All of this provided Warren with more of an edge than he previously had felt. He could go on gently pressing Chuck, but with a bit more force. Although he was still extremely frustrated, he was able to maintain his cool.

When next the two men met, Warren had one more try at rational explanation. He calmly said that he had followed the guidelines Chuck had set up for filling the position; now

that he had made a decision, Chuck was trying to prevent him from proceeding. He explained that he found this very frustrating, since the first two people who turned the job down were from product management; and, of the other three people from product management who were on the list, one didn't want to interview for the job, and one wanted her name withdrawn from consideration, which left just one person in contention with Debbie. Finally, in his comparison of the two candidates, Debbie was the better prospect.

Chuck quickly interrupted to ask who had actually interviewed Debbie. He was under the impression that John Maguire had been the only person to conduct the interviews, and he didn't like the idea of an assistant underwriting manager being solely responsible for making a personnel decision of that size on his own. In addition, he "knew" from past experience that Maguire was an opinionated individual who tended to follow only his own ideas on certain things. Thus, he felt that Maguire might be a little blinded in his overwhelming confidence in Debbie.

WARREN COUNTER-PUNCHES

Warren responded by telling Chuck that he understood his concerns, but that Chuck was under the wrong impression. Warren explained that he personally had interviewed all of the candidates and that he was the only one who had interviewed Debbie. Furthermore, while he liked to let people vote on certain matters, Warren advised Chuck that final decisions on important matters almost always rested with him. Thus, he personally had been impressed with Debbie and felt that she would be the best candidate for the job.

He continued to address Chuck's other concerns. While he realized the impact that Debbie's departure would have on her current unit, he reminded Chuck of the company's philosophy that no individual be held back from getting ahead due to the problems the vacancy may create. The company believes that it cannot fulfill its motto of being "First in the Field" without providing its employees with the opportunities to be the best they can.

In addition, Warren claimed he was doing a disservice to the people on the branch unit team by letting them go so long without a unit manager. They were becoming increasingly anxious about who they were going to be working for because the vacancy had gone unfilled for over two months. Warren concluded that he really did not understand Chuck's concerns, because he, Warren, was the one who had to live with the decision. He was the person who was going to pay the price if Debbie failed. However, he was confident in his decision and felt that it was in the best interest of all parties concerned.

Chuck suddenly changed his attitude. He said he had not realized that Warren had interviewed all the candidates himself. If that was the case, and Warren felt Debbie was the best candidate, then the situation had his blessing. He had just been concerned that Warren might not be getting the best advice from the people who had conducted the interviews. But, now that he understood the full situation, he felt comfortable with the

decision to make Debbie the branch's sixth unit manager. He concluded the conversation with several "small talk" topics and questions to Warren about his wife and family. Debbie was selected.

When Chuck realized that he had used up his arguments in favor of leaving Debbie Casey in place, and a bit sheepishly had to back off, he instinctively "made nice." Warren Peters was smart enough not to gloat; rather, he chatted in a friendly way that saved face for Chuck and let him establish that there were no hard feelings. Each realized that it was important to follow a tough task exchange with some relationship repair.

THE TURNING POINT: FINDING COMMON GROUND

The turning point came when Chuck accused Warren of being too influenced by Maguire's bias, and Warren countered that he alone had interviewed Debbie. This heretofore undisclosed information about the process allowed Chuck a graceful way to back off his "over my dead body" stance, since he could now claim that his only concern was to see that a competent person was picked. One important part of any exchange process is to allow exploration of common ground; Chuck could now agree that both he and Warren were trying to insure competence in a crucial new role. A second important part of a win-win exchange is to allow the other person not to feel defeated.

When Warren realized that Chuck wanted to hold on to Debbie for the sake of his own area, Warren invoked the currency of company policy, reminding Chuck that local need cannot prevent individuals from advancing. That was hard for Chuck to fight, even if his own interests were best served by keeping Debbie in her present job. By all of this, Warren demonstrated that he too wanted a good person to fill the unit manager job, which was the basis for an eventual alliance with Chuck.

LOST OPPORTUNITIES

Although Warren had successfully influenced Chuck and preserved the amiability of the relationship, he had not fully responded to what he learned—or should have learned—from their conversations. He hadn't really explored what was important to Chuck when he first found out about Chuck's resistance, which slowed the influence process by making it difficult to satisfy him. He could have asked Chuck if he wanted to interview the two finalists; could have reviewed the unit manager criteria; could have discussed the timing of Debbie coming over full time, etc. When he finally discovered that Chuck was so concerned about how to replace Debbie, he could have sympathized and offered to help find a replacement. That might have strengthened the relationship rather than merely prevented it from worsening. Warren escaped without scars, but he did not build a stronger alliance for the future. Perhaps Chuck won't jump to conclusions so quickly in his next transaction with Warren, but there is no indication that Chuck came away from the exchange with greater trust for Warren.

Warren might have also shifted a bit to discussing the nature of their relationship when the going got rough; he never talked with Chuck about what it felt like to be suspected of

rash decisions about personnel by someone he had always gotten along with. Done with grace, that might have earned Warren more respect for future dealings.

Instead, there is a danger that Chuck will eventually suspect that he was "had," because he may sense that Warren was not completely open with him. Warren's irritation may have come through enough that, in retrospect, Chuck will wonder just what Warren was thinking and whether he had some ulterior motive that was never revealed. This may be a minor danger; but, to win this skirmish, Warren may have unnecessarily planted a dangerous seed of later doubt. It is difficult to balance task completion with openness, and sticking to plan with flexibility, but careful attention to the tradeoffs is needed.

CONCLUSIONS

Not Attacking Despite Provocation

A less prudent person, or a more defensive one, might have found the "interference" with his management prerogatives cause for anger. Warren, however, chose to preserve the future relationship, and kept working to meet objections. This was a wise choice, and he eventually found a way to get what he wanted.

There are no guarantees that choosing not to attack will always work out, and there are situations, described in the revised *Influence without Authority* Practical Solution Chapter, "Hardball: Escalating Toughness When You Can No Longer Catch Flies with Honey." But that should be your last resort, not your default option. Keeping the lines of discussion open can allow you to discover important information for influencing.

Using Opponent's Arguments to See What Is Important

Part of keeping the discussion going is the possibility of finding out what matters to your difficult colleague. Warren discovered that Chuck cared about seeing a broad range of candidates, the level of the people who had done the interviewing, respecting Warren's choice if he were the one to live with it, and to some extent, following company policy about not holding people back. These currencies gave Warren material to work with, and he was able to gain traction as he addressed each one.

Persistence

Many managers would have given up much earlier, despairing of the number of hurdles thrown up. Warren's patience and determination, despite avoiding anger and retaliation, helped him get what he was looking for. It isn't always easy to know the difference between a lost cause and one that can be "found" with more effort, but in an impatient era, don't just automatically cut and run.

Finding a Graceful Way Out

A wise influencer thinks in advance about his or her own exit if needed, and allows the resistant colleague a way out too. Winning in a humiliating way almost never is worth the momentary satisfaction—and those who do it usually don't last long.

For another example of an effective influencer, who had to struggle with a rigid organization, multiple stakeholders and alliances, prejudices about her background, and numerous other hurdles, click on the case of Anne Austin.

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