



PUSH OR PULL?

Ally Yates talks about influencing in the digital workplace



The world of work is on the edge of the most disruptive and potentially transformative experience since the industrial revolution: the digital revolution. Or, as Darden professor Ed Hess calls it, a technology tsunami.¹

As technology travels to almost every cell in the body of business, it has the power to transform the way we work and the way we trade, making us better, faster, stronger.

It also has the power to ail and potentially to kill, as traditional jobs are consumed and transplanted. Various sources are estimating in the region of 45% of jobs being displaced by technology over the next 5-15 years.

The lifesaver for “technology as disease” is our ability to excel in the things that machines can’t do, most notably human interactions and our creative endeavours. This has the power to change our traditional concept of work and make us fit for current and future purpose. How we behave with, and relate to, others to create and innovate is where we humble humans can exercise our distinctive capabilities.

In our day-to-day business interactions we will, more than ever, be required to collaborate across borders: geographic, functional and demographic. And each of us needs to be better equipped to influence and engage our colleagues, bosses and customers.

A number of different influencing styles have been identified. At their root, influencing rests on two distinct styles: push and pull. A generation ago these were first identified by Neil Rackham and defined behaviourally. Now our evolution depends on these skills as essential to our survival. It’s not enough to understand them as concepts, we need to be able to use both styles and to execute them skilfully if we want to stay relevant.

Push style

Push is the most commonly used influencing style. It’s the default for most people who have been through a logic-based education system. Behaviourally, it goes like this:

- ▶ I have an idea or opinion to which I am committed.
- ▶ I share it with you.
- ▶ I tell you the reasons why it’s a good idea or why I believe I’m correct.

- ▶ (Hopefully) you agree and move your position.

In a push style the behaviours used are proposing content, giving information and shutting out. The solution comes from the influencer and it’s the influencer who does most of the talking. We use this style day in and day out. But it is only effective around 50% of the time.

Push works in conditions when the influencer has positional authority or expertise and where decisions need to be made very quickly. It’s not strong-arm tactics or aggressive behaviour. Rather, effective push means proposals and arguments are set out clearly, explaining what and why, often articulating the WIIFY factor (What’s In It For You) and how/who it will help.

A word of warning – using your authority may result in compliance or resistance rather than commitment. In other words, a win-lose outcome. Overuse of positional power to give credence to a push style is likely to lose you a lot of friends and win you a few enemies, so this is a tactic to be used sparingly. As a former boss once sagely advised: “Choose your battles wisely.”

Where you have expertise and the other person lacks knowledge



Push works in conditions when the influencer has positional authority or expertise and where decisions need to be made very quickly

(for example, someone new to the organisation or new to a position), then a push style is both legitimate and helpful. Where there are endless possibilities and people crave some self-determination, push may land badly and risks coming over as an “I know better than you” position.

One of the weaknesses of employing a push strategy is that you underestimate the amount of resistance you may encounter. And because you reveal your solution early on, you may be doomed almost before you’ve started.

However, there will be some circumstances where you’ll choose to use a push style in spite of the resistance. Sometimes you’ll need to drive ahead with a solution without consultation. If goodwill exists in the relationship you can probably afford to use a push style with little or no consequence. But if you move ahead in situations where you haven’t established goodwill you may damage the relationship. Therefore, it’s important to consider the degree of resistance before determining your influencing strategy.

Another drawback is where push is used apologetically, undermining the clarity of the message. Push can also negatively impact the degree of connection between the influencer and the person being influenced. The less the connection, the less likely that trust will exist between the two. Damage caused by an ineffective use of push can take a long time to repair.

Pull style

Pull is the most successful of the influencing styles, registering just 18% on the resistance scale. It goes like this:

- ▶ I ask you for your ideas.
- ▶ You offer some options.
- ▶ I ask questions to explore your suggestions.
- ▶ I build on your suggestions.
- ▶ We agree on a way forward.

In exercising a pull style you’ll be using two behaviours in particular – seeking and building. While a pull style isn’t pure seeking, it predominantly uses questions to generate an outcome together with the other person or people.

Pull style is appropriate when helping people to think and reflect on situations and behaviours. For example, in performance conversations. Instead of the manager pronouncing on an employee’s performance, he/she makes use of a series of questions to help the individual critically evaluate their performance and determine their development goals.

In your influencing task, to what extent do you need and want people to be committed to the solution? If you require a high level of commitment, your strategy should involve others as much as possible in determining the solution. And this points to using a pull style. →

The level of commitment you can achieve through involving people is not to be underestimated. It's often worth going for what you might consider a sub-optimal solution as a trade-off for that increased commitment. It's a stepping-stone. You're gaining engagement, trust and motivation as a trade-off for control and perfection



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(which, after all, rarely exists).

Using a pull style with a team allows you to generate and explore multiple ideas together – essential for creativity and innovation. It's well documented that ideas generated in a team are qualitatively superior to those we dream up in isolation.

The risk with an authentic pull style is that the other person's thoughts are outside your control, so you have no

idea where you may end up. If you're a control freak, this style will be a challenge for you to employ. If you're excited by new possibilities, a well-honed pull style will be a valuable ally.

Pull style can be ineffective when the influencer's questioning skill is limited. Our mental models of the world blind us to possibilities that exist elsewhere. We tend to be convinced by our own experience. As a consequence, we don't exercise our 'seeking' pathways anywhere near as hard as we could. We spend insufficient time attending to the views of others, and we lose the opportunity to uncover a truly innovative solution and/or to understand the value of a different perspective.

Sticking to what we know or what feels comfortable is easier for the brain, which is essentially an energy-saving, pattern recognition machine. The 'asking questions' part of the brain can be under-utilised. Using more seeking causes the brain to work harder in four ways: asking the question, listening to the answer, evaluating the answer and integrating the answer in our existing mental model.

Ask more questions

I often tell my clients, "If you take just one thing away from this workshop it would be this: give

less, ask more, ask better." This is because most people spend too much time offering their own thoughts, ideas and opinions. However, if you're trying to use a pull style you're heading in the right direction because you're asking more questions.

Here's a helpful exercise for 'ask more'. Create a list of statements that are typically heard around your business, for example:

- ▶ What you could have done is...
- ▶ Look at the guidance notes.
- ▶ I suggest we do...

For each of the statements, encourage people to come up with questions as alternatives. You can extend the exercise, introducing some fun. Give everyone in the group a 'red card' and each time someone gives their idea or opinion, show the red card and invite them to find an alternative using seeking behaviours.

Ask better questions

Sometimes questions barely mask our ideas/point of view, for example: "Would it be useful if we discussed this with the client?" or "Don't you agree that the study needs to be presented differently?"

More powerful questions would be those that are open and free from our bias. These smarter questions





cause the other person to think more/ generate their own ideas. For example: “Who do we need to discuss this with?” and “What might be some of the best ways to present this study?”

The next step is to ask more varied questions. This includes seeking reasons, reactions and proposals. For example:

Seeking reasons:

“What leads you to think this will work?”
“Why do you say that?”

Seeking reactions:

“What do you think?”
“How does that feel?”

Seeking proposals:

“What ideas do you have?”
“How should we proceed?”

Pull style is difficult to do well. We are better at telling people what we know and think, and are less good at engaging through questions. Pull also takes longer. It requires more skilful questioning and it also requires you to let go of some control. This is because, in an authentic use of pull, the person being influenced generates the solution. As with all skills development, intentional practice makes perfect. Everyone can master the skills of pull style influencing if you’re motivated to do so.

To help you focus on questions, try to remember this phrase: “Be curious rather than judgmental”. Being open to possibilities the other person generates can enhance the potential for learning. In the process, it can strengthen your relationship and generate a better quality outcome.

Developing stronger seeking pathways in the brain is critical in the machine era. Smart questions will help to stress-test our own and other people’s thinking and lead us to better quality and more innovative solutions.

Pusher or puller?

Are you a pusher or a puller? One of these styles will come more naturally to you. For most people, it’s push. Do you execute this style effectively? Or are you perhaps an apologetic or aggressive pusher? Do you sometimes use push when a pull strategy would be more suitable? What causes you to use push as your default?

How can you help your people?

Push and pull are easy concepts to understand. The lazy brain tricks us into believing that, de facto, these concepts are just as easy to execute. That’s a con. The reality is that using either style effectively is challenging. Using both styles well is rare.

In our new machine-age, getting by on push or pull won’t be enough. We have to excel at both. Organisations need to make the underpinning skills part of their DNA, with training and coaching being powerful facilitators. We need to help people understand what constitutes both effective push and effective pull.

The next step is to unlearn counter-productive behaviours from the past. This is best achieved through practice and feedback on real-world situations. For many employees, this will include using influencing skills with team members based in remote and diverse locations.

Creating push and pull learning that sticks will be a first line of response in building human resilience to survive and thrive where technology fails. Will your business be fit and ready to respond? **TJ**

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Reference

1 <https://at.virginia.edu/2zCnLpp>