

printed from:

strategy+business**S+B BLOGS** Published: July 6, 2016**ORGANIZATIONS & PEOPLE**

How to Find and Engage Authentic Informal Leaders

**Reid Carpenter**

Reid Carpenter advises clients on tapping into cultural energy to motivate people and achieve strategic objectives as codirector of the Katzenbach Center, PwC's Strategy&'s global institute on organizational culture and leadership. She is a director with PwC US based in New York.

 EMAIL

In a recent article, “[10 Principles of Organizational Culture](#),” *strategy+business* highlighted how crucial it is to deploy authentic informal leaders (AILs). As the acronym suggests, AILs are not people in your organization who have been endowed with formal authority by title or by memo. Rather, they possess and exhibit certain leadership strengths such as the ability to do something important well and showing others how to do it (exemplars), or they demonstrate the skill of connecting people across the organization (networkers). Some AILs influence behavior by being the first to understand the value of a new trend (early adopters) or by instinctively associating peers’ positive feelings with day-to-day activities (pride builders). These strengths — which my colleagues at the Katzenbach Center and I refer to as “spikes” — can make AILs powerful allies in any transformation effort.

In our work, we have seen AIL networks help bring about changes that lead to real business outcomes such as creating a more positive customer experience on service calls, improving quality during product development, and

Reading: **HOW TO FIND AND ENGAGE AUTHENTIC IN**



Illustration by Shutterstock/alphaspirit

But how can you identify, engage, and motivate a group of leaders whose resumes, 360 reviews, and LinkedIn profiles won't necessarily highlight their capabilities and status?

One of the best (and most entertaining) characterizations of how this process works comes from Derek Sivers's TED talk "First Follower: Leadership Lessons from Dancing Guy." (Take three minutes now and [check it out here](#). You're welcome.) In the video, a lone dancer wobbles around, looking ridiculous. The first follower comes in and encourages his friends to join. The first follower is crucial. He transforms the lone nut into a leader. The turning point comes when the second follower joins in, validating the action of the leader and the first follower. Soon after, even more join in. Eventually, the ones staying seated are in the minority.

First Follower: Leadership Lessons from Dancing Guy

Reading: **HOW TO FIND AND ENGAGE AUTHENTIC IN**



save

Sivers's key point is this. The *formal* leader (the guy who starts the dance alone) is essential to catalyze a movement. But it is *informal* leaders like the early adopters (the first and second followers) who ultimately influence and decide whether a new behavior takes hold. There's another key lesson we can draw from this video: The informal leaders are, crucially, self-selected. They find themselves drawn to this new activity because the music and the motions speak to them. They begin to imitate it — not because they've been tasked or paid to do so, but because they can't help themselves. And when they no longer feel the beat, they stop. This is what we mean when we say a movement goes “viral” or is “organic.” The individuals participate of their own volition, draw in others by example, and stick around for as long their wants and needs are being served.

Companies, of course, are more buttoned-down than dance floors. And it's pretty rare for colleagues to break out spontaneously in viral cost-efficiency behavior. Nonetheless, once you know what you're looking for, finding AILs is not particularly hard. (They are likely, as with the “first followers” in the video, to make *themselves* noticed.) Rather, engaging and nurturing them effectively is the real challenge. By their nature, AIL networks are chaotic and unplanned. That's why they work.

Still, we've found that following these four points, some of which are counterintuitive, can help organizations choreograph a gratifying AIL dance.

1. AILs aren't always your “star performers.” AILs, as we've noted, come in many different flavors. And they won't always spike in all the behaviors that land employees at the top of rankings. Pride builders, for example, often care more about coaching and mentoring others than they do about their own careers. Networkers may prioritize relationships over status. And exemplars may stand out in a key area, but not excel across the board. Even so, each has a special quality that allows him or her to contribute.

Reading: **HOW TO FIND AND ENGAGE AUTHENTIC IN**



save

source of influence. But it also means they won't simply take your talking points and repeat

them as gospel. While you can provide AILs with information, they need to — and will — tell the story in their own words. This may upset those concerned with message discipline, but it builds credibility for any effort to bring change.

3. AILs shouldn't be required to submit project status reports. AILs operate in the informal organization. And while an AIL network needs some nurturing to get started, ultimately the participants are self-directed volunteers who want to make a difference. Straining to meet metrics or holding meetings to discuss progress reports can deflate energy and drain such efforts of spontaneity. The minute too much process is imposed, you lose the magic and power of building a movement.

4. AILs may only be involved for a short time. AILs will stay engaged with an idea for only as long as they are interested and getting something out of it. When the objective they are most passionate about has been achieved — when the error rate on a production line hits zero, or when food waste has been eliminated from the cafeteria — they likely will move on to something else. But if the effort is still seen as worthwhile within the organization, someone else will likely pick up the baton. This is one way in which some AIL networks have managed to stay alive and well for years.

The minute too much process is imposed, you lose the magic and power of building a movement.

Again, much of this wisdom runs counter to established norms, especially those that prevail in large organizations. We are trained to measure and reward those who score highest on consistent performance measures. We impose discipline in the way we talk about our strategy and the way we go to market. We need to measure the progress of projects and initiatives in order to justify their cost. And we constantly focus on how we can produce long-

term results.

All of which is to say that working with authentic informal leaders means we have to get out of our comfort zones. To tap into the power of AILs, we may have to depart from the usual way of doing business, and perhaps expose ourselves — kind of like that guy starting a dance movement when no one is dancing.

Reading: **HOW TO FIND AND ENGAGE AUTHENTIC IN**



save



Articles published in *strategy+business* do not necessarily represent the views of the member firms of the PwC network. Reviews and mentions of publications, products, or services do not constitute endorsement or recommendation for purchase.

***strategy+business* is published by certain member firms of the PwC network.**

©2016 PwC. All rights reserved. PwC refers to the PwC network and/or one or more of its member firms, each of which is a separate legal entity. Please see www.pwc.com/structure for further details. Mentions of Strategy& refer to the global team of practical strategists that is integrated within the PwC network of firms. For more about Strategy&, see www.strategyand.pwc.com. No reproduction is permitted in whole or part without written permission of PwC. "strategy+business" is a trademark of PwC.