

Influence Without Authority

You can be the person everyone relies on to deliver, and still have no authority to tell anyone involved what to do. If you work in research or collaborative knowledge work, that's probably familiar — working alongside people you don't manage, some more senior than you, while carrying the weight of the outcome.

This isn't a personal confidence problem. It's a structural one, and structural problems can be managed by specific, evidence-based skill sets.

Hiring managers consistently report that communication skills, not technical brilliance, are what separates strong candidates from the rest. Technical expertise gets you in the room. Your ability to bridge the gap between that expertise and messy human collaboration is what actually gets the work done. The following shows how communication skills let you influence people to work with you, even without the authority to tell them what to do.

The structural problem

Collaborative work has one defining feature: you cannot mandate action. You can't order a senior colleague in another department to meet your timeline. Influence is the only lever available, and effective influence isn't about speaking louder or being more assertive — it means reading the room before deciding how to speak into it.

Why we misfire under pressure

Unspoken behavioural scripts often cause collaborations to break down. A useful framework here is Taibi Kahler's five drivers: Be Perfect, Hurry Up, Please People, Be Strong, Try Hard. These aren't fixed personality traits — they're situational tendencies that competent people default to under stress. They explain why people react as they do, they don't describe “what's wrong with them”.

Take a common clash: a principal investigator running on Hurry Up (“Is it done yet?”) paired with a researcher running on Be Strong (“I shouldn't ask for help”). Neither is behaving badly, but because neither recognises their script or says it aloud, the researcher hides the difficulty and the PI reads the delay as inefficiency. Naming the driver in the moment breaks the pattern — the PI can ask “What roadblocks are you hitting?”, the researcher can say “I need help prioritising these tasks.”.

Reading your audience

Once you understand why people react as they do, the next step is adjusting how you communicate. The DISC model offers a practical lens — not a diagnostic label, just a way of reading a situational preference. A person with a high-D preference wants the bottom line first. Someone with high-I style wants to know who else is involved. A colleague with a high-S preference wants reassurance and a step-by-step plan. A high-C style wants the evidence before committing. The same underlying message needs a different opening depending on who's receiving it — lead with the result for a direct colleague, lead with the data for an analytical one.

Structuring the first minute

Knowing what someone needs is only useful if you can deliver it quickly. The First Minute Clarity framework (Chris Fenning) gives a simple structure for the opening of any interaction:

Context (*what this is about*), **Intention** (*what you need — a decision, an update, input*), and
Key Message (*your main point, stated plainly*).

Without this, a listener has to work out what kind of response is needed before they can actually engage with what you're saying.

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For example, asking a data-driven colleague for a conversation about a slipping timeline might sound like: “Regarding the timeline, I need to review the data with you because we have to adjust our projections.” For a people-focused colleague, the same ask becomes: “Regarding the timeline, I'd like to talk through the impact this is having so we can look at the team's workload.” Same problem, tailored delivery.

The same structure helps with pushback. Instead of “that won't work,” which shuts a conversation down, try “what could work if we adjusted the approach?” — it keeps the door open without conceding the point.

Adapting isn't favouritism

A common concern is that adjusting your communication style person by person amounts to playing politics. It doesn't. Fairness doesn't mean everyone gets identical words — it means everyone gets the structure and context they need to actually hear you. Tailoring your delivery is a skill, not a compromise of integrity.

Being responsible for an outcome without holding the authority to control it doesn't mean carrying that weight in silence. Reading the room, recognising stress drivers, and structuring your first minute of any conversation are all things you can start practising in your very next interaction.

**This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins.
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