

"The key to successful leadership is influence, not authority."

—Widely attributed to Ken Blanchard

When we think of leadership, it's easy to picture someone with a title, a corner office, or decision-making power. But if we pause and reflect on the people who've truly influenced our lives—the ones who sparked our growth or helped us reconnect with what mattered most—it's rarely their authority we remember.

It's their presence.

Influence isn't about power over others; it's about how we show up with others. The people who've shaped us most deeply likely did so not by instructing us what to do, but by inspiring us to uncover our own potential. They made us feel seen. They sparked something inside of us that already existed—then stood by us as we brought it to life.

This kind of leadership is relational, not transactional. It lives in the space between two people, in the quality of attention we give, and in our willingness to walk beside someone as they discover their own path.

The Power of Caring and Connection

Influential leaders exhibit a consistent pattern in their interactions:

They inspire.

They care—genuinely.

They offer support and encouragement.

They help people reconnect with their goals, dreams, and deepest passions.

And perhaps most importantly, they don't do this to get others to meet an external expectation or to fulfill a checklist—they do it to facilitate *intrinsically motivated growth*. That's the kind of change that lasts.

When we help someone remember why they care in the first place, their desire to grow is no longer about compliance—it becomes about alignment. They move forward not because they have to, but because they want to. And that's where transformation lives.

This distinction is crucial in coaching, leadership, and early childhood education. We are not in the business of fixing or directing people toward our vision. We're in the business of helping them reconnect with their *own*.

What Makes Influence Stick?

Think about the people who've influenced you. Maybe a mentor, a coach, a colleague, or even a family member. What did they do that truly made a difference?

Chances are, they didn't hand you an answer—they helped you uncover your own. They asked questions. They listened deeply. They believed in you when you weren't sure you believed in yourself. And through their care and consistency, they gave you the space—and the courage—to grow.

This kind of leadership doesn't require authority. It requires presence, patience, and a belief in someone's capacity to rise.

It's not about *doing* for others—it's about being with them as they discover, choose, and practice their next steps. Influence is what happens when someone walks away from an interaction with a stronger sense of who they are and what matters most.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Write a list of people who influenced you. Think of a specific situation in which each of these people helped you. Write what they said or did in those situations, and reflect on how these people made you feel during and after. What did you learn from each person and situation? Review them all looking for patterns or themes in how these people inspired, motivated, or supported you. What did they do that actually influenced you? What might you pay forward to help others?

As we deepen our own leadership or coaching practice, let's remember: our greatest impact rarely comes from the knowledge we pass along. It comes from the presence we bring. When we choose to influence rather than instruct—when we lead by inspiring instead of directing—we give others a lasting gift: the confidence to find and follow their own purpose.

That's where real transformation begins.