



Invisible Power Structures at Work

What Organisational Charts Do not Show

 Developed from an expert session for the Association of Elite HR Professionals — May 2026

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Why This Conversation Matters

The organogram shows reporting relationships; it does not always show who is trusted, feared, consulted, protected, avoided, sponsored, resisted or quietly obeyed.

Every organisation has two structures. The first structure appears in the organogram. It shows offices, reporting lines, departments, formal authority and approval pathways. The second structure lives in the daily experience of work.

The lived structure shows access, trust, information flow, proximity, sponsorship, political skill, credibility, resource influence, cultural authority and the pathways through which decisions gather momentum.

I call the first one the formal structure. I call the second one the lived structure. The formal structure tells us who occupies office. The lived structure tells us who shapes outcomes

- **10 Sources of invisible power**
- **6 Influence families**
- **9 Instruments of influence**
- **3x3 Influence-legitimacy grid**

About This Publication

This article converts the Association of Elite Human Resource Professionals expert session on invisible power structures into a professional publication for leaders, HR practitioners, organisational designers and governance actors.



Dr. olumuyiwa A. Oludayo , MCIPM, FITD

TABLE OF CONTENT

Executive summary

Chapter 1. The organisation you see and the organisation you experience

Chapter 2. The hidden architecture of influence

Chapter 3. Postures of Influence by families

Chapter 4. Indispensable influencers that shape careers

Chapter 5. Political Skill as workplace literacy

Chapter 6. Instruments of Influence

Chapter 7. Decision legitimacy and ethical influence

Chapter 8. The Influence-Legitimacy Grid

Chapter 9. Diagnostic questions for HR leaders

Closing thought

References and author profile



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Invisible Power Needs Organisational Intelligence

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Organisations rarely run on formal structure alone. Work moves through relationships, access, expertise, trust, institutional memory, sponsorship and informal decision pathways. HR leaders therefore need two maps: the organogram and the influence map.

The Dual Map Mandate

The Organogram

Explains formal accountability.

The Influence Map

Explains movement, momentum, resistance, and practical power.

Key Findings

- Power often travels through informal networks before it appears in formal decisions.
- Influence operates through repeated postures, not only through titles.
- Political skill helps professionals read systems, build trust and shape outcomes ethically.
- Decision-making requires legitimacy; problem-solving can involve many contributors.

Invisible power creates value when leaders govern it with legitimacy, clarity and accountability. It creates risk when it becomes stronger than governance, rewards the wrong behaviour or allows unaccountable actors to shape decisions.

Evidence Note

Krackhardt and Hanson (1993) described informal networks as the "**company behind the chart**". Deloitte (2024) links organisational network analysis to visibility into communication and information flows.

The Wells Fargo and Boeing 737 MAX cases demonstrate how pressure, incentives, culture, communication and accountability can shape organisational risk.



Chapter 1

The Organisation You See and the Organisation You Experience

The Organisation You See and the Organisation You Experience

Formal structure explains office. Lived structure explains movement, voice weight and practical influence. HR leaders must read both systems.



The Visible Organisation

What the Organogram Shows

- Job titles
- Reporting lines
- Departments
- Policies
- Meetings
- Formal communication
- Appointed leaders
- Approval process

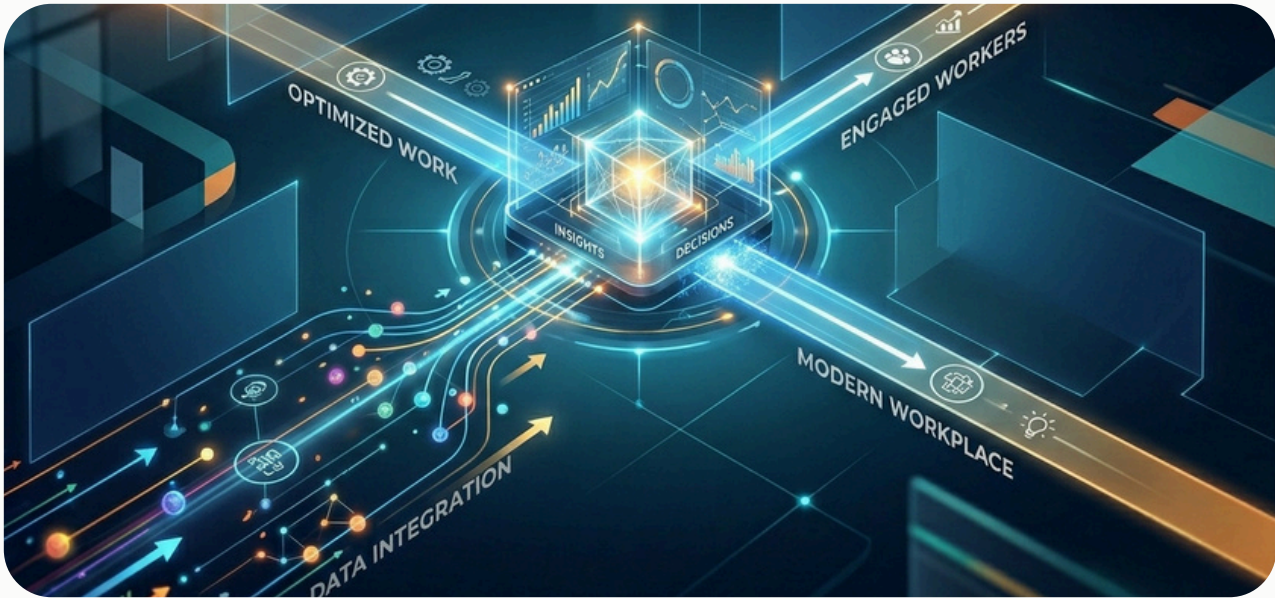


The Invisible Organisation

What the Influence Map Reveals

- Actual voice weight
- Access lines
- Coalitions and informal networks
- Unwritten rules
- Pre-meeting alignments
- Trusted channels
- Recognised influencers
- Real decision pathway

The Core Principle: HR leaders must read both systems. Formal structure defines accountability. Informal structure explains how work actually gathers support, resistance and speed.



Chapter 2

The Hidden Architecture of Influence

The Hidden Architecture of Influence

Invisible power structures sit beneath formal reporting lines. They shape how information moves, whose voice carries weight and whose ideas receive attention.

Ten Recurring Sources of Invisible Power

01

Access

Direct reach to decision-makers.

Bypasses layers.

02

Proximity

Closeness to authority and executive mood.

Voice travels faster

03

Information

Control of what is known and when.

Early knowledge.

04

Trust

Credibility that reduces explanation burden.

Believed quickly

05

Expertise

Knowledge others depend on

Competence-led influence

06

Tenure

Institutional memory and historical context

Knows the real story

07

Network Centrality

Ability to connect people across silos

Makes work move

08

Sponsorship

Advocacy by powerful others

Names enter rooms early

09

Cultural Authority

Ability to define acceptable behaviour.

Shapes how things are done

10

Resource Influence

Control of budgets, platforms and opportunities. **Funds, delays or prioritises**

Real issues for learning and growth

Wells Fargo Sales Practices

The independent investigation into Wells Fargo's sales practices showed how pressure, incentives, weak escalation and organisational behaviour created conditions for improper practices to spread.

Lesson: formal structure cannot protect an organisation when lived incentives and cultural signals reward the wrong behaviour.

Boeing 737 MAX

The U.S. House investigation identified issues involving design, certification, management assumptions, oversight, pressure, communication and safety culture.

Lesson: influence without disciplined accountability can turn organisational complexity into organisational risk.

Evidence anchors: Evidence anchors: Independent Directors of the Board of Wells Fargo & Company (2017); U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (2020).

- Independent Directors of the Board of Wells Fargo & Company (2017).
- U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (2020).



Chapter 3

Postures of Influence by Families

Postures of Influence by Families

Influence appears through repeated behavioural postures. People influence through conduct, competence, courage, relationships, timing, resources, discretion, values, and symbolic behaviour.

The Six Influence Families

The 30 Postures of Influence clustered by family



1. Relational Influence

Respect, cooperation, kindness, humility and relationship preservation

Postures

Collaborative

Compromise

Care

Civil

Credit-Deference



2. Expert & Advisory Influence

Knowledge, judgement, experience, interpretation and professional usefulness.

Postures

Consultative

Command

Competence

Case

Contextual Intelligence



3. Moral & Institutional

Values, ethics, principles, discipline and institutional alignment

Postures

Cause

Conviction

Conscientious

Constitutional

Compliant



4. Strategic & Resource

Resource control, discretion, scalability, timing and long-term positioning.

Postures

Calculated

Capital

Capacity

Confidential

Compounding

Postures of Influence by Families

5. Disruptive & Corrective

Challenge, boldness, risk-taking, correction and principled disruption

Postures

Combative

Compromise

Courage

Castigating

Chance

6. Cultural & Symbolic

Norms, symbols, imagination, emotional signals and cautionary examples

Postures

Creativity

Cultural

Countenance

Casual

Covetous

The six families make the 30 Postures of Influence usable for leadership development, HR diagnostics and organisational behaviour analysis.



Chapter 4

Indispensable Influencers Shape Careers

Indispensable Influencers Shape Careers

Every career grows within a network of influence. Role models, mentors, coaches and sponsors shape aspiration, judgement, capability, visibility and opportunity.

01

Role Models

Demonstrates what is possible.
Aspiration and standards

02

Mentor

Offers guidance and interpretation
Judgement and direction

03

Coach

Builds capability through practice.
Execution capability

04

Sponsor

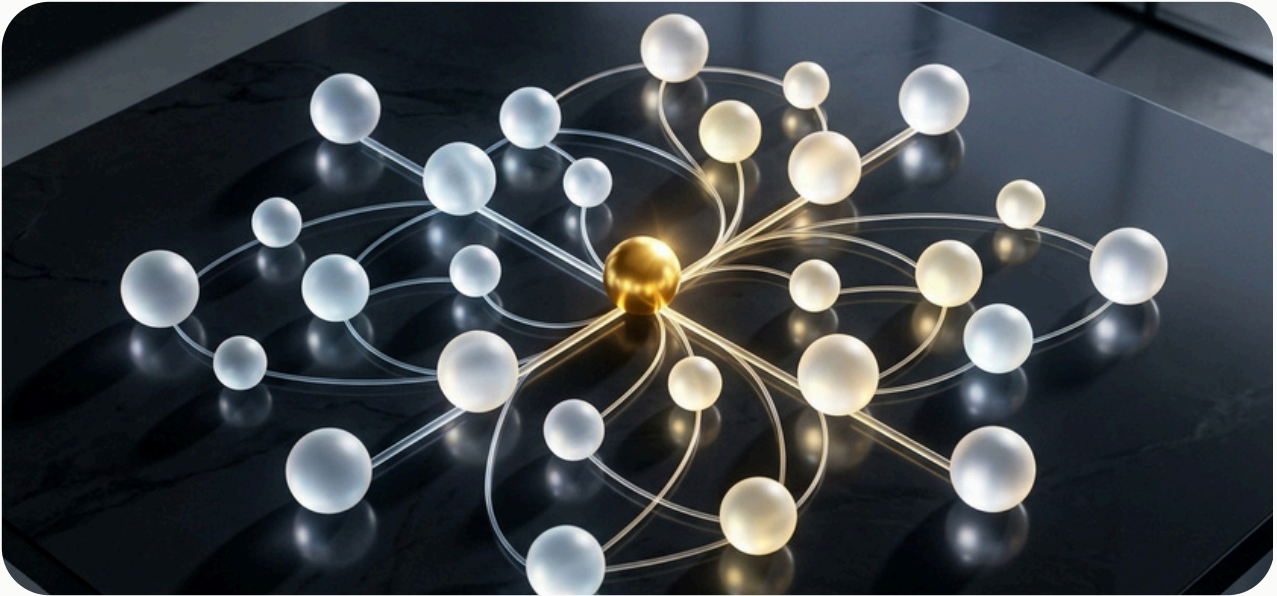
Uses credibility and access to advocate.
Visibility and opportunity

"A mentor prepares you for the room.

A coach improves how you perform in the room."

"A role model shows what is possible.

A sponsor puts your name in the room before you enter it."



Chapter 5

Political Skill as Workplace Literacy

Political Skill as Workplace Literacy

Political skill helps professionals read systems, build rapport, use networks and maintain credibility without surrendering ethics.

Politics exists wherever interests, scarce resources, ambitions, relationships, decisions and consequences exist. The professional question concerns ethical competence.

Ferris, Davidson and Perrewé identify political skill as an important workplace capability. The Political Skill Inventory measures four dimensions that help explain how people read situations, build rapport, use networks and maintain credibility.



Social Astuteness

Ability to read motives, interests, hidden concerns and the emotional temperature of a room.



Interpersonal Influence

Ability to gain cooperation, communicate with ease and build rapport without relying on force.



Networking Ability

Ability to build and use formal and informal relationships to mobilise support.



Apparent Sincerity

Ability to preserve trust because people experience influence as genuine.



Chapter 6

Instruments of Influence

Instruments of Influence

Behavioural, relational, symbolic, strategic and structural mechanisms shape perception, timing, access, meaning, value and decisions.

Nine Instruments of Influence

01 Silence

Law of Unannounced Power

02 Unreadability

Law of Signal Denial

03 Patience

Law of Time Asymmetry

04 Leverage

Law of Disproportionate Force

05 Narrative

Law of Meaning Control

06 Replacement

Law of Structural Inevitability

07 Illusion

Law of Perceived Reality

08 Extraction

Law of Value Capture

09 Withholding

Law of Deferred Fulfilment

Instruments of Influence adapted from the Weapons of the Wealthy. Source: Oludayo, Instruments of Influence.

Ethical warning

These instruments create value when they clarify, enable, protect, align and improve outcomes. They damage trust when people use them for deception, exclusion, intimidation, hoarding or private advantage against institutional interest.



Chapter 7

Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Require Different Forms of Legitimacy

Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Require Different Forms of Legitimacy

Everyone may contribute to problem-solving. Not everyone has the legitimacy to decide.



Problem-solving

- Can involve many contributors
- Diagnoses what is wrong
- Uses ideas, evidence, experience and perspective
- Expands options
- Can operate informally



Decision-making

- Requires legitimate authority
- Commits the organisation to what will be done
- Uses mandate, judgement, risk ownership and accountability
- Selects direction
- Must carry institutional validity

A person can shape a decision without pretending to own the decision. The authorised person or body must still carry the decision.

How to influence decision-making ethically

Professionals who want to influence decisions should build the case before they ask for the commitment.

Sense the issue

Define the problem

Map stakeholders

Build evidence

Shape options

Secure sponsors

Read the room

Respect authority

Frame the recommendation

Support implementation

**Do not confuse access
with authority.**

Being close to power does not mean one carries the mandate to decide.

**Do not confuse advice
with approval.**

A recommendation remains a recommendation until authorised.

**Do not confuse consensus
with legitimacy.**

Many may agree, but only the right authority can commit the organisation.

**Do not confuse silence
with consent.**

Silence may mean fear, resistance, calculation, indifference or lack of clarity.

**Do not confuse influence
with manipulation.**

Influence clarifies and enables. Manipulation distorts and traps.

**Do not confuse speed
with wisdom.**

Urgent decisions still require proper authority, evidence and accountability.



Chapter 8

The Influence-Legitimacy Grid

The Influence-Legitimacy Grid

The healthiest organisations do not eliminate influence. They move influence towards legitimacy.

The Influence-Legitimacy Grid

The grid evaluates people and power centres across two dimensions: influence and legitimacy. Each dimension can be high, moderate or low.

	Low Legitimacy	Moderate Legitimacy	High Legitimacy
High Influence	Shadow Power Shapes outcomes without mandate or accountability.	Informal Power Broker Has influence with unclear authority boundaries.	Trusted Authority Combines influence, mandate, credibility and accountability.
Moderate Influence	Noisy Operator Can distort attention without adequate legitimacy.	Emerging Influencer Needs development, guidance and alignment.	Credible Contributor Deserves platform in problem-solving and implementation.
Low Influence	Peripheral Voice May signal exclusion, grievance or disengagement.	Underutilised Actor Needs visibility, confidence and network access.	Formal Holder Without Pull Has role legitimacy but weak practical influence.

The healthiest organisations do not eliminate influence. They move influence towards legitimacy.



Chapter 9

Diagnostic Questions for HR Leaders

Diagnostic Questions for HR Leaders

HR leaders must read the invisible organisation by asking sharper questions about access, sponsorship, culture, legitimacy, influence and decision rights.

HR leaders must learn to read the invisible organisation. They need sharper questions, better evidence, ethical political skill and the courage to align informal influence with formal purpose.

Q1

Where do decisions get shaped before formal approval?

Q2

Who can quietly stop an initiative without appearing responsible?

Q3

Who gets heard quickly and who struggles to gain attention?

Q4

Whose name enters rooms they did not attend?

Q5

Who knows critical information early?

Q6

Who defines acceptable behaviour?

Q7

Where do alliances, fear, silence or loyalty distort judgment?

Q8

Who must cooperate before work can move?

Q9

Where does the organogram say one thing while practice says another?

These questions move HR from administrative structure management to organisational intelligence. McKinsey (2024) links organisational health to sustained performance and highlights the role of management practices and employee perceptions in shaping outcomes.



CLOSING THOUGHT

**Make Influence Visible,
Ethical and Accountable**

Make Influence Visible, Ethical and Accountable

The future-ready HR professional must read both the organogram and the influence map. Structure explains order. Influence explains movement.

Invisible power structures do not disappear because leaders refuse to name them.

They become healthier when leaders identify influence, test legitimacy, strengthen ethical political skill and align informal power with formal organisational purpose.

The future-ready HR professional must read both the organogram and the influence map.

The organogram shows structure.

The influence map shows movement.

The best organisations align both.

Final Institutional Imperative

"Make influence visible, ethical and accountable."

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Note: This article also draws on Dr. Oludayo's proprietary frameworks: the 30 Postures of Influence, the Six Influence Families, the Instruments of Influence and the Influence-Legitimacy Grid.

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Published by Nathan Leadgate

