

SOFT POWER, HARD QUESTIONS

A field guide to influence through competence, trust and generosity

The room is not out of play. Neither are you. Influence is not a birthright, a volume knob, or a cheap trick in a better jacket. It is the work of becoming useful, credible, and safe enough to be taken seriously.

FIELD GUIDE / 01

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Reading map

A compact route through the argument

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How to use this guide: read the concepts, compare the fictional cases, then write down one change to a process—not a verdict about a person. Treat the diagrams as prompts. Evidence, interpretation and fiction are deliberately separated.

01 / Influence without force

Influence is the capacity to shape what a group considers possible, credible, or worth doing. It is not the same as command.

The phrase “soft power” is used in different fields and at different scales. This guide uses it in a deliberately practical, local sense: influence that operates through demonstrated contribution, trustworthiness, and help that others can use. This is an editorial definition for the publication, not a universal scholarly definition.

The strongest move is rarely a theatrical claim about being the smartest person in the room. It is to make a real problem easier to understand or solve. Show your work. Say what you do not know. Keep promises small enough to honour. Give other people enough information to disagree intelligently.

Swagger can open the sentence; it cannot close the evidence gap. A confident voice does not establish competence. Generosity does not erase unequal power. Trust is not a demand for unquestioning loyalty. If the method depends on making someone less informed or less free to refuse, it has drifted toward control.

Practical distinction

Influence: someone has reasons to consider your proposal. **Coercion:** someone faces a threat or penalty that sharply constrains refusal. **Manipulation:** influence that relies on deception or concealed leverage. Real situations can blend these; the labels are prompts for careful analysis, not legal findings.

02 / The three-lens framework

Use three questions to inspect conditions—not to assign people a number.

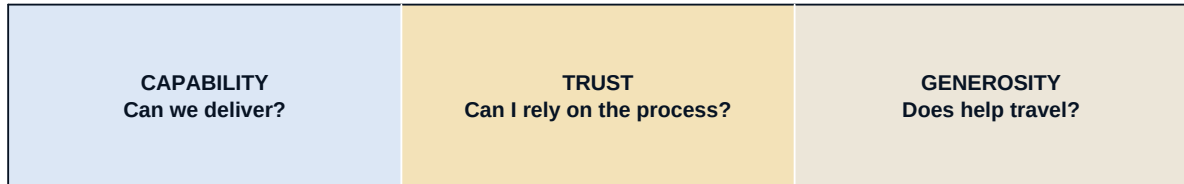


Diagram 1. A three-lens editorial frame. These are prompts, not a validated scale.

Capability asks whether the work can be done with the skills, resources, and follow-through available. A capable person can still make a poor decision; expertise is relevant evidence, not a blank cheque.

Trust asks whether reliance feels reasonable in context. In organisational research, Mayer, Davis and Schoorman proposed a model of trustworthiness that includes ability, benevolence, and integrity. This guide borrows the idea that trust involves more than raw performance, while simplifying it for practical reflection.

Generosity asks whether a contribution benefits others in a way that respects agency and boundaries. Help can transfer know-how, access, time, or credit. It can also create dependency when it conceals recurring failures or makes one person the permanent repair service.

The lenses interact, but they are not a formula. A low value on one cannot always be compensated by a high value on another. A high-stakes technical failure may require capability first; a history of unfair treatment may make process legitimacy the urgent issue.

03 / Trust, process and contribution

A credible action has an observable side and an interpretive side.

Shares a clear plan	May signal capability	Does it work? Who can challenge it?
Explains trade-offs	May support trust	Is the explanation candid and consistent?
Teaches a reusable fix	May build shared capacity	Does it reduce dependency?

Diagram 2. Actions are observable; motives and effects require interpretation.

Research on team psychological safety examines whether people share a belief that interpersonal risk-taking—asking questions, admitting mistakes, or raising concerns—is safe enough. It does not mean every idea is good or every conversation feels comfortable. It helps explain why a team can need both standards and room to surface problems.

Procedural justice research examines how fair process and treatment relate to cooperation. A process can be unpopular yet still feel legitimate if rules are understandable and applied fairly. Conversely, a favourable outcome can leave distrust if people believe the process was rigged or disrespectful.

Generosity is best treated as a practice with a boundary: help that builds another person's ability to act, without requiring repayment in loyalty. Research on prosocial behaviour and reciprocity explores how helping and reciprocation can shape cooperation, but motives and effects vary. Do not turn generosity into a disguised debt ledger.

Use the check column in Diagram 2 to avoid mind-reading. You can observe that someone documented a process. You cannot infer from that alone that they are benevolent, trustworthy in every setting, or owed deference.

04 / Worked case A: the deadline

FICTIONAL DEMONSTRATION — invented for teaching; not a report of real people or an observed experiment.

A small project team has five days to deliver a public-facing report. One member can build the technical model quickly. The decision process is unclear, and quieter contributors are unsure whether they can challenge assumptions. A second member offers to document the model and run a short walkthrough.

Read through the three lenses

Capability: the technical model is promising, but the team still needs a scope check and a deliverable that can be reviewed. **Trust:** the decision rule is invisible, so colleagues may interpret a rushed choice as favouritism.

Generosity: a walkthrough could make the work reusable rather than locking knowledge inside one specialist.

A practical sequence

1. Agree on the minimum deliverable and who can validate it.
2. Publish the criteria for choosing what gets cut.
3. Invite one substantive objection before locking the plan.
4. Document the model and its assumptions so someone else can maintain it.

Interpretation

This sequence does not guarantee agreement or success. It makes the work more inspectable and gives the team a chance to catch errors without turning every disagreement into a referendum on character. The lesson is not “be nice”; it is “make contribution legible, challenge possible, and knowledge shareable.”

05 / Worked case B: the helpful fixer

FICTIONAL DEMONSTRATION — an invented counterexample.

A highly skilled colleague repeatedly repairs a broken reporting workflow. Each rescue helps the deadline. Because the problem disappears, the organisation never funds a permanent fix. The colleague becomes indispensable, tired, and quietly resentful; everyone else has fewer chances to learn the workflow.

The trap

Competence is visible, and the generosity is real. Yet the pattern may concentrate capability and hide the underlying process failure. The colleague's influence rises in the short term while shared capacity stays low. A helpful act can become an unhealthy system if it makes one person the only route to success.

A better boundary

Document the repair. Teach the repeatable steps. Identify the owner of prevention. Make the next rescue conditional on time and scope. The goal is not to punish people for needing help; it is to stop a recurring emergency from becoming an invisible job description.

Alternative explanations matter

Perhaps the colleague enjoys specialist work, or the organisation genuinely lacks resources. Perhaps the reporting tool is unusually fragile. These possibilities change the remedy. The scenario cannot tell us the real motive; it shows why an outcome alone is not enough to infer intent.

06 / The interactive model, on paper

The website's sliders are a narrative selector, not a measurement instrument.

CAPABILITY	TRUST	GENEROSITY
Low: reduce scope; add skill or time.	Low: clarify process; invite dissent.	Low: document, teach, share ownership.
Strong: test a small promise.	Strong: keep commitments and repair breaches.	Strong: preserve boundaries and agency.

Diagram 3. A practical response map. Choose based on context, not a score.

Starting scenario

Capability 65 / Trust 45 / Generosity 55. The site describes this as “Promising, with a live trade-off.” The suggested action is to explain the trade-offs before asking for buy-in. Moving a slider changes the narrative branch; the system does not calculate an overall score.

A worked interpretation

If capability drops below the low threshold, the narrative says the promise outruns delivery and suggests reducing scope. If trust is low, the narrative recommends making the process visible. If generosity is low, it recommends turning one-off help into shared capability. These are authored rules, chosen for the teaching exercise—not thresholds established by research.

Storyboard and edge cases

Trigger: move one of three labelled sliders. State change: the readout selects a narrative and next-step prompt. Outcome: the user sees a tension to examine. Undo/reset: the reset button restores 65/45/55. Edge cases: 0 and 100 remain valid inputs; one low dimension can take priority in the authored branch order; the output remains qualitative. Keyboard: native range inputs use arrow keys; touch: drag or tap. Equivalent noninteractive path: read the starting scenario and the branch descriptions above.

07 / Reflection worksheet

Use a real situation, but remove names and private details. Examine conditions, not somebody's worth.

A. What is the actual task or shared outcome?

B. What capability is already visible, and what is missing?

C. Which decision rule or promise is hard to inspect?

D. Who carries the cost if this plan fails?

E. What kind of help would transfer capacity rather than dependency?

F. What boundary or owner needs to be named?

G. What small, observable action could be tried next?

H. What evidence would make you revise your interpretation?

My next small action: _____

A possible downside or alternative explanation: _____

08 / Failure modes and limitations

The framework is useful only if it remains open to correction.

Capability theatre: polished language and visible busyness can be mistaken for reliable delivery. Ask what has been tested, what remains uncertain, and who can reproduce the result.

Trust as a loyalty test: demanding trust without making conduct inspectable reverses the burden. Trust is a judgement under risk, not an obligation owed to confidence.

Generosity as leverage: a favour with an unspoken price can create obligation instead of agency. Make conditions and limits explicit; respect a no.

Fairness as performance: a process can look tidy while excluding people who bear its consequences. Ask who sets the rules and who has a meaningful route to appeal.

Context blindness: power, culture, incentives, prior breaches, accessibility, and unequal exposure to risk change how the same action lands. Some people cannot safely object, even when a leader says “my door is open.”

Methodological caveat

This is an editorial synthesis and learning tool, not a systematic review, clinical instrument, organisational diagnostic, or causal model. The cited sources are relevant research, but they do not validate this exact three-part framework or its slider logic. The scenarios are fictional, and no data from visitors is collected by the interaction. The model's language can oversimplify disagreement and should not be used to rank individuals.

09 / Method and terms

A small glossary for using the guide precisely.

Influence. The capacity to shape what others consider or do; may be ethical or unethical depending on means, context, and consent.

Trustworthiness. Perceived qualities that make reliance seem reasonable; perceptions can be mistaken and context-specific.

Psychological safety. A shared belief about whether interpersonal risk-taking is safe within a team; not a promise of comfort or freedom from accountability.

Procedural justice. Perceived fairness of the process used to make decisions, including treatment and opportunities to be heard.

Prosocial behaviour. Actions intended to benefit others; effects and motives can vary.

Reciprocity. Responding to another's action with a related action; may support cooperation but can also create pressure or bounded obligation.

Interpretation. A reasoned reading of observations, open to alternatives; not itself a direct observation.

Fictional demonstration. An invented example used to make a concept concrete; it is not evidence of what happens in the world.

Evidence discipline

For any claim, ask: What was studied? With whom and in what setting? What does the source actually conclude? What alternative explanation remains? A source can support one limited proposition without supporting every use made of its idea here.

10 / References and further reading

Traceable research behind selected claims. Links were located through web search; verify access and bibliographic details before academic citation.

Mayer, Roger C., James H. Davis, and F. David Schoorman (1995). "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust." *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709–734. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1995.9508080335>

Claim supported: Supports the discussion of organisational trust and perceived trustworthiness; does not validate this site's framework.

Edmondson, Amy (1999). "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999>

Claim supported: Supports the definition of team psychological safety and its relation to learning behaviour in the studied setting.

Tyler, Tom R., and Steven L. Blader (2003). "The Group Engagement Model: Procedural Justice, Social Identity, and Cooperative Behavior." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 7(4), 349–361. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0704_07

Claim supported: Supports discussion of procedural justice, social identity and cooperation.

De Cremer, David, and Tom R. Tyler (2007). "The Effects of Trust in Authority and Procedural Fairness on Cooperation." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(3), 639–649. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.3.639>

Claim supported: Relevant to how trust and procedural fairness relate to cooperation.

Leimgruber, Kristin L. (2018). "The Developmental Emergence of Direct Reciprocity and Its Influence on Prosocial Behavior." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 20, 122–126. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.01.006>

Claim supported: Review of developmental research on reciprocity and prosocial behaviour; not a general promise that generosity produces returns.

Gray, Kurt, Adrian F. Ward, and Michael I. Norton (2014). "Paying It Forward: Generalized Reciprocity and the Limits of Generosity." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(1), 247–254. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031047>

Claim supported: Relevant to limits and mechanisms of generalized reciprocity; context-specific.

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