

## Lead with Influence—Secret of an NFL Rookie Coach

By Bonnie Budzowski  
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Fans of the Pittsburgh Steelers held their collective breath as the 2007 season started. Their new coach, Mike Tomlin, was a surprise pick by the Rooney family, who owns the team. Pittsburghers like to win, and Tomlin was an unknown rookie.

According to a *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* article by Ron Cook, the Steeler players had concerns too when Tomlin came on board last spring. Quarterback Ben Roethlisberger reminded the new coach to gain the players' respect and commitment. Chances are Roethlisberger didn't have to remind Tomlin about the players' fierce loyalty to retired coach Bill Cowher. Cowher had led the team for 14 years, one of which featured a Super Bowl win.

By the time the 2007 season actually began, the players were solidly impressed with their new coach—Tomlin stepped up to his new position with confidence and authority. He also, it seems, had a ready knack to lead with influence.

The team responded to their new leader's influence with a blast, decisively winning their first three games. Exactly how did the rookie coach lead with influence?

One secret, according to Ron Cook, was to follow an expected action with an unexpected one.

**The expected:** Tomlin met with each player during the spring minicamp.

**The unexpected:** He followed those meetings with handwritten letters to many of his players.

Tomlin sent his letters via the post office, not e-mail. Each letter was personalized and quoted the conversation Tomlin had had with the player.

In sending these letters, Tomlin extended an old-fashioned lead with influence gesture. It didn't cost a lot, and it didn't take a lot of time, especially considering what was at stake. Tomlin reported, "I've just always been a guy who, if something moves me, I respond to it. And I've always believed a written letter is more meaningful than an e-mail or phone call."

The results of Tomlin's leadership gesture are instructive, especially for those of us who hope to build influence and credibility with others. Hines Ward, the 2005 Super Bowl Most Valuable Player, reported that he carries his letter from Tomlin in his Bible. How's that for influence?!

Linebacker Larry Foote explained his reaction, "He [Tomlin] proved to me that he listened and that he thought what I had to say was important." Defensive end Aaron Smith said the

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letters made a huge statement because the coach took time to write them. Because the letters were personalized rather than mass produced, they meant a lot. Smith filed his letter.

Based on comments from players and performance so far this season, those handwritten letters played at least some part in gaining influence and commitment for the rookie leader. Handwritten letters might help you lead with influence as well. It's a good time to get out your pen.

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