Think about how "exerting influence" is not exactly the same concept as "being a leader." What are the differences? What are the similarities? How does a leader use influence to lead effectively?

Influence can be described as an emanation of spiritual or moral force. The act or power of producing an effect without apparent exertion of force or direct exercise of command. Corrupt interference with authority for personal gain and the power or capacity of causing an effect in indirect or intangible ways.

A leader can be defined as a person who has commanding authority or influence. I would place heavy emphasis on “command authority”. A leader’s job is also to provide a vision for the future. Part of building that vision is also built upon the leader’s ability to be persuasive.

Edward R, Murrow, Journalist and News Commentator once said "To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible, we must be truthful.” Leaders are truthful. They assess the situation as it is, and project where they could be or want to be. When others say “why?” leaders say “why not?” Leaders get others to “buy in”. They are not about telling others what they want to hear, but rather what they need to hear. Leaders are forward thinking, decisive, principled, and consistent. They lead by example.

Regarding the subject of influence, there are people that are influential without having the official title of “leader”. Exerting influence is not exactly the same as being a leader in that a person that exerts influence does not necessarily have to accept responsibility for the outcomes resulting from his/her influence. Also, accountability for ones influence is not usually attached to the influencer. Hence, their influence can be either positive or negative. These people (influencers) are often referred to as insiders, or informal leaders. They can (and often do) exert influence by relationships they have with other influential people and or on the weight of their actual or perceived knowledge, wisdom, or contributions to the organization.

Another difference between being an influencer or leader is that a person can be in a leadership role or position without having the skill or ability needed to lead effectively. At best a decision to employ a new leader is based on a hunch, and past performance is not necessarily an indicator of how a person will do as a new hire. Contrary to that scenario, a person with influence has a basis being an influencer which usually comes from some demonstrated ability in the organization. A wily veteran with lots of experience. A influencer must have a following that is based on something substantive and tangible. Now, pertaining to how an effective leader can best use influence I would say by leveraging his/her time. Ask yourself what would your organization look like if everyone were like you. Quality time spent in mentoring, promoting personal development, and one on one coaching with direct reports has a trickle-down effect that will eventually permeate throughout that unit, department, division, or even the entire organization.

On the subject of similarities between the influencer and leader I would say they are mutually supportive of each other. I really don’t see a person leading effectively without influencing, nor do I see a person influencing without leading. Another similarity or commonality between influencer and leader is respect. People with influence are respected. Effective leaders are also respected for their ability to influence. Another shared characteristic between effective leaders and influencers is the charisma factor. The charisma factor weighs heavily on one’s ability to convince others of perceived value in shared beliefs and visions of a brighter future.

Reference:

Essentials of Contemporary Management (Laureate Education, Inc. custom ed.) Jones, G.R, and George, J.M. (2008). New York: McGraw-Hill