



Leaders Need Both Charisma and Authenticity

Somewhere between the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, the general public became tired of hype and decided that it wanted authenticity instead. It's the most important quality in leadership communications today. With it, you can move people to action. Without it, you can't even get a hearing.

And then there's charisma—the X factor every leader wants, even if some won't admit it. These are the ones who often say something like, "I'd rather just be me. That's more authentic." What they really mean by that is, *I don't want to do the hard work of practice. I'll just wing it.*

Are the two qualities really opposed? It is at the heart of this book to argue that you can have it both ways. In fact, in this era of nonstop communications and demands for authenticity from leaders, you have to be both charismatic

and authentic to lead successfully for any length of time. And you have to practice hard to achieve apparently spontaneous authenticity and charisma. This book will show you how.

I'm assuming that you're a leader, or a leader in training, who wants to make sure that your communications—whether to one or many, formal or informal, prepared or off the cuff—are as persuasive, powerful, effective, authentic, and charismatic as possible. To reach that happy state, you have to be prepared to work on controlling your communications so that they are instrumental for your career and not merely subject to happenstance.

We'll begin with a little work on how people actually communicate, to clear away some common misunderstandings that get in the way of both charisma and authenticity.

EVERY COMMUNICATION IS TWO CONVERSATIONS

The first conversation in every communication is the one you're aware of: the content. The second conversation is the one that you're an unconscious expert on: the nonverbal one. These two always go together. In fact, they are so integral to one another that most people tend to gesture with their hands and change facial expression even when they're talking on the phone. No one else can see them, yet they keep gesturing on regardless. It's not just habit. There's a profound reason that people gesture when they attempt to communicate even when they can't be seen.

We tend to think that the second conversation is merely an accompaniment to the first. As we talk, we might wave our hands in the air, perhaps as a poor substitute or stand-in for content. We believe, if we ever think about it, that the

gestures are just follow-ons: something to do with our hands; something that clarifies the meaning, or emphasizes something being said, or helps keep the other person listening; something that follows the words—maybe a physical flourish to enliven our sometimes less-than-thrilling content.

This way of thinking is profoundly wrong, and a chief aim of this book is to change it. All kinds of insights about how to communicate flow from getting it right.

GESTURE CAN CONVEY MEANING INDEPENDENT OF WORDS

Some people, on reflection, may admit that they sometimes gesture when they can't think of the words, or at least the right words, to say. Oddly enough, that's often sufficient for the other person to get the meaning intended. But rather than giving credit to the gesture for conveying the meaning, we usually give the other person credit for reading our minds, to our relief.

Try the following experiment in this context. Sit in a public place—perhaps a restaurant where the tables are close together and the conversation is lively. Sit with your back to a pair of people who are having an animated conversation. Listen hard, and try to capture as much of the meaning as you can. You will be surprised at how hard it is to follow the conversation. You will hear broken phrases, agreement to something you haven't caught, simultaneous talking, abrupt changes of topic you weren't expecting (but for some reason the speakers were), and apparently incoherent exchanges of information. If one person in the duo is dominating the conversation, perhaps telling elaborate stories, you may get

more of it than you otherwise would. But if it's an average, reasonably equal exchange, you will be astonished at how fragmentary and elusive the communication is.

Why is that? The reason is that the “second conversation” is really the first. For certain kinds of communications, indeed most of the ones we really care about, we communicate first with the gesture and second with the word. This concept is central to this book.

There is a host of interesting implications from this insight, but for now, I'll say just that it means that when people communicate topics of great importance to them, they gesture what they mean a split second before the word comes out.

In fact, one way of looking at the brain contrasts our cerebral cortex with our limbic brain and suggests that certain kinds of gesture originate in the limbic a split second before the cortex fires away with its conscious thoughts. In other words, rather than thinking, *I'm hungry, so I'll pick up the bowl of soup now*, our brains direct the soup to be picked up unconsciously, and then form a conscious explanation of what we're doing (*I just picked up that cup because I'm hungry*).¹

Why should we care about that? Because it turns the commonsense way we think about word and gesture upside down, and because those interesting implications flow from that inversion of common sense.

Gesture comes first. You can confirm this for yourself if you go back to the restaurant, this time keeping your eyes firmly trained on those two people in conversation and listening closely. Focus especially on gestures that accompany the noun phrases. Let's say one person says, “How did you get there?”

and the other responds, “I took an airplane.” Watch the gesture associated with the word *airplane*. Depending on the information being conveyed, the gesture will start before the entire sentence or just before the word *airplane* itself. If there’s strong attitude, such as something like, *Of course, I took an airplane; it’s three thousand miles away over water. How else would I get there, you idiot?* then the gesture may convey all the emotional freight in the communiqué: the *Of course it’s three thousand miles away over water how else would I get there you idiot* part. The person might shrug and turn her palms upward, while raising her eyebrows and looking hard at the interlocutor. She might shake her head and offer a half-smile. Those facial and hand gestures get across all the emotional meaning she wished to convey to her friend—maybe not in precisely those words, but close enough for both parties to get the message.

It’s the nature of most of our communications that they unroll like this one. We use surprisingly few words and convey the emotional colors and tones of the conversation mostly through gesture.

When two people know each other well, gesture can take up a larger part of the communications between them. In this regard, it becomes a kind of shortcut that allows the two to alert one another to important shifts in the conversation or strong feelings or topics to avoid. When two lovers meet, for example (not the ones in movies who have just fallen in love, but those who have had an intimate relationship for a long time), a touch, a few murmured words, and a kiss may convey all that needs to be said about a day, a meeting, or an important issue that has been pending between them.

Love is expressed primarily through gesture: a look, an arch of the eyebrow, a touch, a kiss.

OUR MOST IMPORTANT DIALOGUES WITH OTHERS TAKE PLACE NONVERBALLY

Many of our dialogues with others, and most of our important ones, take place nonverbally. Portions of them are unconscious.

So gesture comes first, and it conveys most of the emotion that a communication intends. In addition to emotion, certain other basic things are conveyed. Relationships, spatial distances between people, physical motion and place in general, basic needs like food, shelter, sex, and so on: all of these are first gesture conversations, then only secondarily, and later, content conversations. Think of it as everything that a smart cave man and woman would need to get along on a typical busy day defending the hearth, slaying woolly mammoths, raising the kids, and creating cave paintings in the few minutes at the end of the day that a cave person can call his or her own.

What else is going on?

This is a good place to talk about a seminal study in the communication world—one that is frequently misquoted and misunderstood. It's time to get it right.

HOW IS INTENT SIGNED THROUGH GESTURE?

Almost forty years ago, Albert Mehrabian, one of the pioneers of communications research, undertook a small-scale study about how people signal and decode the attitude toward the words they were uttering and hearing.² In other words,

if a person says the word *love*, does he say it like someone in love, or someone who has been betrayed by love, or someone who thinks love is for saps? And how do we know?

What Mehrabian found was that in order to decode the emotions underlying words, audiences look to visual cues—the gestures—55 percent of the time, the tone of voice 38 percent of the time, and the content only 7 percent of the time. This conclusion shocked people then and continues to shock today, but the implications are even more important than most typically realize.

What's really going on is that the emotional freight of any communication begins in gesture, is conveyed mostly by gesture, and can even remain as gesture—unspoken and sometimes even unconscious. That's because the limbic brain is where the important emotions originate, and the gestures are our primary way of expressing them. Conscious thought comes later, and words come later still. It's what we mean by "gut feel" and all those moments when we can't articulate something, but we just know it.

UNCONSCIOUS THOUGHT IS FASTER AND MORE EFFICIENT THAN CONSCIOUS THOUGHT

As a species, we're always trying to articulate our feelings and tell people to get in touch with them, and so on, but in fact they're doing quite well unconsciously. Unconscious thought is fast and efficient. It's just that it isn't conscious.

Here's the next implication of this line of research. Two people, or a leader and her audience, can have an unconscious communication that is entirely composed of gestures of various kinds and realize that consciously only later, or not at all.

THE TWO CONVERSATIONS DON'T HAVE TO BE CONNECTED

When I say that every communication is two conversations, both verbal and nonverbal, I mean that precisely. They don't have to have an immediate, obvious connection, although they often do. Think about the exchange between two people where one is bearing very bad news to the other. The bearer may gesture strong signals of comfort, love, and solidarity while quietly stating the shattering news in a simple, unadorned way.

Although the two conversations are connected, they are proceeding along two parallel tracks, and it is easier to see how the gesture is not merely an afterthought to the words. In fact, that kind of communication usually begins with a reassuring gesture or look, which alerts the recipient that bad news is coming.

Think too about when two people are carrying on a flirtation under the noses of their colleagues while talking about meeting the second-quarter quotas, for example. There, the two conversations are unrelated, to the great private amusement of the flirts.

That's rather a lot to get from Mehrabian—more than he did—but it is important to clear the ground of misconception. Mehrabian understood that he was trying to see how emotional subtext was decoded, but his study has been misinterpreted ever since as being about how meaning is decoded. That has led to all sorts of silly commentary along the lines that “it doesn't matter what you say, it's how you look.” That's not what the study showed at all, but that's the way it has been taken.

What the study showed was that people decode emotions primarily through gesture (and tone of voice). What I'm claiming now, based on more recent research and my work with clients, is that the emotional component represents a separate nonverbal conversation that is parallel to the verbal one and typically occurs a split-second before the verbal one.

MASTER BOTH CONVERSATIONS, ESPECIALLY THE SECOND

It's the nonverbal conversation that will make or break you as a communicator. It may confirm you as the top dog, sabotage your authority, connect you with your mate for life, get you in a fistfight (or out of one), win you a game or lose one, blow your chances at getting a raise or get you the big sale, lose you the prize or win it—and on and on through most of the big moments in life.

How can you become more aware of this conversation that your body is having with the other bodies around you? Is it worth the effort? Will you become self-conscious and inauthentic if you do? Can you monitor what everyone else is “saying”? Is that helpful? Will it get you to places you won't otherwise reach?

Understanding the second conversation is key to leadership today, because it's not something that you can leave to chance or the unconscious. There are simply too many decisions to be made, too many inputs to weigh, too many players to manage and lead. In the twenty-first century, the pace of leadership has accelerated, the flow of information has exploded, and the sheer physical and intellectual demands on

leaders have intensified. You can't rely on common sense or instinct or winging it today as you once might have done.

THE CAMERA IS ALWAYS ON YOU

With camcorders and YouTube everywhere, you have to assume that your life as a leader is almost entirely transparent. This relentless scrutiny means that your decisions are subject to endless second-guessing after the fact. Most of life is now subject to the instant replay. How good will you look in slow motion?

Leaders who rely on ad-libbing and improvisation risk looking unprepared and stilted. The irony of leadership in the media age is that winging it looks fake; only the prepared can look authentic.

This raises the stakes on our cave person communication skills. It's time to learn how to control the nonverbal conversation as well as we control the content discussions of our lives. It's time to stop leaving the emotional side of leadership to chance. It's time to make ourselves aware of our own and others' need for the second conversation—the physical messages our limbic brains send out faster than we can think about ourselves, our surroundings, and the others in our lives. If you can accomplish that, you can boost your leadership skills, increase your authority, and intensify your personal charisma.

WHAT IS CHARISMA?

There are a lot of myths and misconceptions about charisma. The dictionary definition is “‘a capacity to inspire devotion and enthusiasm; aura’ from the Greek ‘kharis’ meaning favor

or grace.”³ In practice, people usually take it to mean that a person with charisma is someone you can’t take your eyes off of, someone who’s really interesting.

Charisma is several things. First, there’s awareness that others are looking at you. When you have that awareness, you hold yourself differently. Remember the way you felt the last time you were in front of an audience? That kind of heightened awareness is the trick to exuding charisma when you walk into a room. If you believe that people are looking at you, they probably are.

Second, and most important, it’s expressiveness of a wide array of strong emotions. Think of an actor who exudes charisma. Jack Nicholson, for example, can go from laughter to rage to a terrifying loony scariness in a matter of seconds, and often does.

This is the hard part for most business leaders, who have been trained to keep their cool and not to display emotion. And of course part of leadership is tactfulness: knowing when to act in one way or another. Most leaders don’t have the freedom of Jack Nicholson. Nonetheless, a range of appropriate emotions is an important part of charisma. And it’s also a large part of what we think of as authenticity today. That’s why organizations hire celebrities as spokespeople and put them in the rather ridiculous position of giving their opinions on everything under the sun. We equate expressiveness with authenticity. Precisely because we’re often unconscious of our emotions, when we see a lot of them coming from someone else, with some control nonetheless, we think they’re authentic.

Third, it’s an element of enjoyment at being the center of attention. As I said in my book *Working the Room*, the secret

to good speechmaking is to enjoy yourself.⁴ Of course, that's easier said than done, but if you have no appetite for the lime-light, you have no business in leadership today. The same is true of communications in general. Part of charisma is conveying zest at the game—a wink and a nod to show that you're not taking it all too seriously. Pomposity is fatal for charisma.

And fourth, it's an ability to surprise us. We have no idea what charismatic people will do next. That's why we watch them. Remember Tom Cruise on Oprah's couch. You may have thought he was crazy, but you didn't take your eyes off him. That's charisma, though he had to work pretty hard to get it. A leader wouldn't want to appear that crazy—but nevertheless would want to retain a little of that edginess that goes with the occasional surprise. The alternative is boredom.

WHAT IS AUTHENTICITY?

Authenticity is a little more complicated. A whole range of people, from Barack Obama to the Shoe Bomber, can be said to be authentic. It has to do with the frank expression of emotion of some kind, whether positive or negative. We believe people are authentic when they are open with us in a sense that feels real. It has to do with transparency of motive and intention. We believe people are authentic when we know what makes them tick—because they've told us and their actions bear it out. And it has to do with consistency of action. We believe that people are authentic when they keep the same agenda for a substantial period of time. A more elegant way to say this is that we believe people are authentic when they show us their hearts. Because that's most often with some

strong emotion, expressiveness becomes a proxy for authenticity in our shortcut-prone age.

But if I were to ask you to stand up and be authentic, you would look at me with a mixture of trepidation and annoyance. You wouldn't know how to do it. I know, because I've tried this as an opening gambit in seminars I've taught on charisma and authenticity. Yet by the end of the day, after the participants have learned the four basic steps to becoming authentic and charismatic, when I ask them to stand up and be authentic, they can.

Once you've read this book, you'll know how to accomplish this feat as well. Then it's just a matter of doing it.

