

## Soft Power: An Overview



David Brooks writing in the New York Times in 2008 tells us, “*We have been watching Barack Obama for two years now, and in all that time there hasn’t been a moment in which he has publicly lost his self-control. This has been a period of tumult, combat, exhaustion, and crisis. And yet there hasn’t been a moment when he has displayed rage, resentment, fear, anxiety, bitterness, tears, ecstasy, self-pity or impulsiveness*”.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> New York Times, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2008

What Brooks was writing about was Barack Obama's excellent command of what Joseph S. Nye Jr.<sup>2</sup> has termed 'soft' power skills, in his excellent book, *"The Powers to Lead"*.<sup>3</sup> Nye sees 'soft' skills as the ability to influence others by way of persuasion and personal magnetism – the power to attract others to your point of view. It is that ability to master one's emotions, to reach out and attract others with a clear vision by way of our persuasive communication and attraction.

However, **"soft power"** often needs aspects of its counterpart, **"hard power"**, to be an effective strategy. Nye gives us the example of Hyman Rickover, the father of the American nuclear navy, who successfully combined 'soft' power with a degree of bullying in order to achieve his goals. Bullying for its own sake is absolutely wrong, but Nye points out that many young American naval officers accepted Rickover and his strategy because they believed in what he wanted to achieve.<sup>4</sup> There are also many other examples to call on, such as Tom Watson's strategy at IBM, where soft power was combined with a degree of intimidation.<sup>5</sup> The case of Brendan Bracken, the father of the Financial Times and minister in the Churchill wartime government, is another example of the effective use of soft power to build a notable career on a very shaky background.<sup>6</sup>

**"Soft Power"** is the ability to get what you want through persuasion and attraction. **"Hard power"**, on the other hand, is getting what you want through the use of payments, bonuses, promotions, right across the spectrum to the use of Machiavellian tactics, and even coercion and bullying.

This paper discusses the two components that constitute "soft" power: persuasive communication (meaning a combination of emotional intelligence, vision, rhetoric and aspects of non-verbal communication) and personal magnetism.

---

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Joseph Nye is a former dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Nye, *The Powers to Lead*, Oxford University Press, 2008

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.40

<sup>5</sup> Other examples are George Eastman at Kodak and Robert Noyce of Intel

<sup>6</sup> Leggett, IESE case: DPO-136-E

## Persuasive Communication

Persuasion involves the persuader, through his or her credibility, emotional appeal, and reasoned argument, guiding another or others to a point of view or behaviour that both sides will benefit from. It is interactive and attempts to satisfy the needs of both parties, although not necessarily in equal proportion.<sup>7</sup> To achieve this end, we need to develop our emotional intelligence, our ability to form either a short or long term vision, and master, to the best of our abilities, rhetoric.

### 1. Emotional Intelligence

It is about mastery of the self and outreach to others. Daniel Goleman writes about emotional intelligence as:

*“... the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships”.*<sup>8</sup>

Two American presidents who were masters at projecting confidence and optimism were Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. Both would have, I'm sure, scored high on their use of emotional intelligence.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Richard Nixon showed a lack of such intelligence, although he probably had a far higher level of cognitive skills than either Roosevelt or Reagan. We can certainly see the same traits as displayed by Nixon in some of the fallen big names of the 2009 financial crisis.

In practical terms, emotional intelligence can be divided between **personal** and **social competencies**. On the personal side we have **self-awareness** which helps us to recognise our emotions and the **effect** they have on others. It is to do with self-management. On the social side, we have social awareness and relationship management.

---

<sup>7</sup> Leggett, p.15

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence, Bloomsbury Books, 1996

<sup>9</sup> Nye, p. 71

Howard Thurman, a notable American inspirational leader, described personal awareness in the following way:

*"There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls."*<sup>10</sup>

In self-awareness, we focus our attention on ourselves and we evaluate our motives and behavior by our own internal standards and values. This enables us to stand apart and examine even the way we see ourselves – our self paradigm.<sup>11</sup>

But many of us are not prepared to face this exercise. We often have a comfortable perception about ourselves and don't want it touched. Others may see it as a waste of time, a weakness or even an excuse to avoid doing what is necessary.

But there are benefits for making this effort, the principal one being that the better we understand ourselves and our behavior, the better we are able to accept the need for change. It will help us accept the need for change when we feel we are losing control or the inevitable crisis hits us. It will certainly help us reduce our stress levels and get more out of life. Without some level of personal awareness, Stephen Covey likens our behavior to the stimulus-response model as played out in Pavlov's experiment with dogs.<sup>12</sup> But we as humans need not follow this deterministic path of Pavlov's dogs. We can freely change simply by exercising our ability to reflect on ourselves and on our behavior.

By becoming a bit more self-aware we can gain a greater degree of control over how we are operating in the present, instead of reacting to something conditioned by our past. A second aspect of emotional intelligence is social awareness.

---

<sup>10</sup> [http://thinkexit.com/quotes/howard\\_thruman/](http://thinkexit.com/quotes/howard_thruman/)

<sup>11</sup> Covey, p 67

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.68

*“Empathy builds on self-awareness; the more open we are to our own emotions, the more skilled we will be in reading feelings of others”.<sup>13</sup>*

The capacity for empathy – the ability to know how another feels – is important for all aspects of persuasion, whether in the professional or social domains.

Much of our social awareness depends on our level of empathy. In a nutshell, this is our capacity to understand another’s state of mind. Empathy means moving into the minds and hearts of others and understanding how they see the world. The master of emotional intelligence was, perhaps, Franklin Roosevelt.

People’s emotions are rarely put into words; far more often they are expressed through other cues. This calls for an ability to read non-verbal language. Non-verbal communication is made up of gestures, facial expressions, tonality, movement, and posture. People are very observant of body language, and especially of facial expressions, and are very quick to pick up inconsistencies. But we see and understand things through our own perceptions. Each sees their own reality. If we are to understand others, we must make an effort to see things through the perceptions of these others. This calls for empathic listening.

Relationship management is important to managers, as it gives them the opportunity to influence others, to inspire others, to help them, and manage interpersonal conflicts. The essential skill of any leader involves initiating and coordinating the efforts of a network of people, negotiating solutions, connecting with individuals, and social analysis. Social analysis involves being able to have insights about people’s feelings, motives and concerns.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, it must be stressed that social awareness depends greatly on personal awareness. It is near impossible to be empathic without understanding our own emotional ties first, as these are the lens that we see the world through. After emotional intelligence we have our second dimension, the vision which we want to communicate.

---

<sup>13</sup> Goleman, p.96

<sup>14</sup> Goleman, p.118

## 2. Vision

The Oxford English Dictionary defines vision as the **“ability to plan or to form policy in a far sighted way”**. It is the ability to articulate an inspiring picture of the future which in turn can help to inspire and motivate others. The term only really came into vogue in the 1980s. Before this date other terminology was used in business, such as the company’s mission. The term remains problematic in that it doesn’t provide us with clear specific hypotheses or ideas.<sup>15</sup> The meaning of the term can vary.

Many commentators use the term ‘vision’ to represent three elements: values, mission and goals. In more general language, a vision is a picture of what we want to achieve; it is a curious mixture of utopia and reality. It is built in the imagination, firmly bedded in reality and is deeply felt. It strives to motivate others into imagining what may be possible. It is the skill of articulating a picture that both gives meaning and inspires others. Vision, according to Joseph Nye, is the ability to articulate this picture. An example of such a vision is that communicated by Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines. One commentator put it:

***“... the Southwest airline vision is shaped more by the attainment of certain values around teamwork, friendly service, speed, and competing against industrial giants than it is a social mission”.***<sup>16</sup>

The best examples of inspirational leadership were what happened at Federal Express with Frederick Smith or at Southwest Airlines with Herb Kelleher. Inspirational leadership is part of transformational leadership, and its aim is to inspire and motivate.

But one must be careful of visionary leadership as it can go horribly wrong if the vision is over ambitious and/or it cannot be implemented. Not everyone appreciates the whole idea of visionary leadership. Also it should be noted that not all leadership situations demand such inspirational leadership. Helmut Schmidt, a former German Chancellor, is reported as saying, **“People**

---

<sup>15</sup> Conger & Kanungo, p. 155

<sup>16</sup> Jay Coger & Rabindra Kanungo, Charismatic Leadership in Organization, p.146

*with vision should go to see a doctor”*. Transactional type leaders such as Schmidt would consider inspirational leadership as an over-kill.

Because vision is welded to the future and depends on others, its implementation must be managed well. George W. Bush often spoke about his vision, but he delegated its implementation to others such as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld who did not feel about it the same way as he did. They, in fact, implemented their own interpretations of Bush’s vision. The whole affair went terribly wrong. Inspirational leaders must be good managers as well.

### 3. Communication: verbal and non-verbal

Nitin Nohria wrote, *“Everyone who has managed or studied organizational change has found a clear connection between successful change and successful persuasion. ... This ability to persuade, to win people’s cooperation and confidence, is generally known as rhetoric”*.<sup>17</sup>

Aristotle emphasised that persuasive communication (communicating a vision of what may be possible) depends on the successful use of a 'combination' of these three dimensions of credibility (*ethos*), the emotional aspect (*pathos*), and argument (*logos*).<sup>18</sup> It is not necessary that each proof carries equal weight, but it **is** necessary that all three exist and make up a combination of proofs, although one of these proofs will dominate. This is what he described as Rhetoric.

Brian Vickers, the author of ‘In Defence of Rhetoric’, rephrased Aristotle’s three modes of persuasion:

*“the first depends on the personal character of the speaker (ethos), the second on putting the audience into a fit state of mind (pathos); the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself.”*<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Nitin Nohria, The Rhetoric of Change, HBS, case N9-494-036, 1993

<sup>18</sup> Brian Vickers, In Defense of Rhetoric, Oxford University Press, 1989

<sup>19</sup> Leggett, “Developing your Persuasive Edge”, by p 21

So our model of persuasive communication is centered round the classical persuasive triad of:

1. *Communicating the right level of credibility to our audiences*
2. *Creating the right emotional environment for our particular message*
3. *Inventing the right argumentation to support our message*

The skill of persuasion is for us to identify what matters to people, what the common ground is, and to build our argumentation on that basis, putting it within the right emotional environment. However, this does depend on our ability to empathize, and empathy does not always come easily, as first we have find out what matters to people, and where their interests lie. To achieve this end, we must be imaginative.

However, non-verbal communication is of great importance also. One can be a mediocre speaker but have great non-verbal skills. One example that Joseph Nye uses of excellent non-verbal communication is Ghandi. He was an average speaker but he is remembered as one of the great inspirational speakers of the century. Why? Because he carefully established the circumstances under which he communicated his message and vision i.e. the mode of dressing (this helped his audience to associate more with his message) and how he conducted his meetings. His non-verbal message supported his verbal message. Now we turn to some aspects of non-verbal as a means of attraction and persuasion.

## **Some aspects of Non-verbal communication**

### ***i) Physical Appearance***

Physical appearance does have an impact. Many educational studies have been done into how physical appearance influences the teacher-student relationship.<sup>20</sup> A study was carried out at Harvard that showed to a group of people a number of 'ten-second' silent video clips of politicians in some fifty-

---

<sup>20</sup> Studies have been carried out in the political and judicial domains regarding this relationship

eight elections. The respondents were asked to pick the winner in these two candidate contests. Their predictions explained twenty percent of the variation. When the sound was turned on, these predictions became poorer.<sup>21</sup> A similar study was carried out at Princeton when people were shown pictures of two candidates. Here they could predict the winner in seven out of ten cases.<sup>22</sup> This shows that without knowing what the candidates were saying or which party they represented, the respondents were influenced by the physical appearance of the candidates.

### **ii) Likeability**

Robert Cialdini, in his excellent book, 'Influence', notes six attributes of the concept of likeability which can be applied on an interpersonal level: physical attractiveness, similarity, compliments (agreeableness), association (familiarity), social consensus (linked to social contagion) and co-operation.<sup>23</sup> For example, one person could use physical attractiveness (which includes agreeableness) and cooperation effectively, while another uses association and co-operation to good advantage. Regarding the latter, a subordinate colleague can co-operate with his boss by covering difficulties that his boss faces and taking some of the administrative burdens from his shoulders, while at the same time emphasising what they have in common. In some cases this co-operation could be established by likeability and similarity.

### **iii) Tonality**

Voice, the experts tell us, makes up to 38% of the communication process. It is an important percentage. "The sounds of our voices often help others determine who they think we are and what kind of personalities we may possess".<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the sound of our voices lets the world in on a great deal of information about us.

---

<sup>21</sup> Nye, pp.60/61

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Quill Books, 1992

<sup>24</sup> Ralf Hillman, *Delivering Dynamic Presentations*, p.16

#### **iv) Body Language**

According to Ribbens & Thompson, *“We not only make assumptions about people’s moods and feelings from postures and gestures, but also tend to view those who exhibit a greater variety of body language in a more positive light”*.<sup>25</sup> These authors continue: *“Studies have found that people who communicate non-verbally through active movement tend to be rated as warm, more casual, agreeable and energetic, while those who remain still are seen as logical, cold and analytic”*.<sup>26</sup>

Our audience’s interpretation of our body language is not only very important but also the largest element of the communication process. Non-verbal communication is all forms of communication other than by the use of words. Jules Rose wrote, *“The exact words you use are far less important than the energy, intensity and conviction with which you use them.”*

### **Personal Magnetism**

Joseph Nye describes personal magnetism as *“... the special power of a person to inspire fascination and loyalty”*. The author goes on to say: *“Charismatic leaders are often described as self-confident, with strong convictions, high energy, enthusiasm that they communicate to others, and the ability to manipulate symbols of power and success to create an emotional attraction for followers”*.<sup>27</sup> There are many examples but Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines is one example of a person who can answer Max Weber’s (1864-1920) question, *“How can a leader give a command and have action carried out without coercion in any form?”*

What Weber was trying to find out is where the authority resides in order to have requested actions carried out freely. He identified two relating to positional power and one relating to the character of the person. These can be simplified in the following way:

1. by means of a traditional hierarchical system;

---

<sup>25</sup> Leggett, p.141

<sup>26</sup> ibid

<sup>27</sup> Nye, p. 55

2. by means of a rational bureaucratic system; and
3. by means of charismatic leadership.

It is this third category, Charisma or Personal Magnetism, that interests us directly. This is the ability to influence others positively by way of inducement or attraction without any means of coercion or manipulation. But a number of questions arise from Nye's statement:

1. *Is personal magnetism inherent in the person or the relationship?*
2. *Does personal magnetism work in all circumstances?*
3. *Is it a permanent feature of our personalities?*

Max Weber tells us that charisma lasts "as long as it receives recognition and is able to satisfy the followers or disciples".<sup>28</sup> Weber argues that it is not an individual trait of a leader, but grows out of a special relationship between the leader and his or her followers. An example here could be the case of John Chambers of Cisco. In May 2000, Fortune described him as the greatest CEO ever. One year later the media described him as naïve and believing too much in his own fairy tale. The relationship had changed with the \$400 billion decline in Cisco's market value.<sup>29</sup> He was no longer considered as charismatic.

Finally, our personal magnetism is not only influenced by learnt skills but is greatly influenced by our inherent and developed traits, as well. Some inherent traits include those aspects such as physical appearance, likeability, voice tonality, and body language that we discussed earlier.

### **Final Remarks**

It has been said somewhat cynically that 'hard' power can be equated with twisting one's arm while 'soft' power involves twisting one's mind. Of course, neither of these interpretations is correct within the environment which we are writing about. This is misinterpreting the term 'soft' power.

On the other hand, in other circumstances, it is often quite different, as in the example of Jim Jones and the mass suicide of his followers, where soft power and hard power were equally applied. Most of these had come from the

---

<sup>28</sup> Max Weber, Types of Authority, in Joseph Nye book, *The Powers to Lead*, p.55

<sup>29</sup> Nye, p.59

lower income groups living in the Bay Area of San Francisco. Indeed, many of them were emigrants who found it difficult to fit into regular life in the city. Jones used his soft power skills to provide answers in his paternalistic style for their troubling needs.<sup>30</sup> But later, when the group had moved to British Guyana and the mass suicide plan was developed, he used a mixture of soft and hard power to attain his goal. He used intimidation, fear and bullying alongside his charismatic appeal, to get conformity, and ultimately to convince his followers that mass suicide was the answer. This is an extreme case and does not represent soft power as we understand it here. (Not only were the motives different but the tactics used were also different).

The essence of persuasive communication is that our audiences are free to say no. We don't coerce or manipulate them, but rather persuade them by establishing common ground and appeal to their self interest. Both sides gain, although not necessarily in equal weight.

## References

- Cialdini, Robert, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Collins, 2007
- Coger, Jay & Kanungo, Rabindra, *Charismatic Leadership in Organization*, 1998
- Covey, Stephen, *Principled Centred Leadership*, Simon & Schuster, 2005
- Covey, Stephen, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Schuster, 2004
- Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, 1996
- Hillman, Ralf. *Delivering Dynamic Presentations*, Allyn & Bacon, 1999
- Leggett, Brian O'C. *Developing your Persuasive Edge*, EUNSA, 2006
- Leggett, Brian O'C. A question of personal Credibility, the Case of Brendan Bracken, IESE, DPO-136-E (2008)
- Nohria, Nitin, *The Rhetoric of Change*, HBS, case N9-494-036, 1993
- Nye, Joseph S. *The Powers to Lead*, Oxford University Press, 2008
- Vickers, Brian, *In Defense of Rhetoric*, Oxford University Press, 1989

---

<sup>30</sup> Cialdini, pp.152-156.