

US presidential election - The power of empathy

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It's official (again) that being able to show empathy is a critical quality desirable in any leader.

For instance, in an exit poll during the recent US presidential election published by the [Washington Post](http://WashingtonPost) on Tuesday 6 November, 'caring about people like me' was shown to be the most important leadership trait among 20% of voters.

And 81% of these voters felt that Barack Obama (Democrat) won over Mitt Romney (Republican) on this score.

But the fact that feeling cared about is at the core of all good relationships and, therefore, engagement and leadership activities, is something that has been known for some time. So why are so many leaders still not getting it?

The single largest survey of US organisations (conducted by Gallup) was undertaken to find out what engaging managers do differently and what makes them so effective.

Answers to nine of the twelve best questions asked revealed people's 'need to feel valued', plain and simple. In other words, if an individual feels valued, they will work harder and more effectively for their employer.

So it is interesting that Obama is said to be quite independent and somewhat of a loner. However, his actions, which include his 'Affordable Care Act', and his stance on women's and gay rights, speak volumes about his ability to empathise and 'speak' to specific demographics.

Notably some 55% of women (67% of whom were unmarried) and three out of five lower income voters (earning less than £30,000 per annum) voted for him.

Building rapport

Add to this situation his empathetic, 'personalised' rhetoric, images of him hugging families affected by Hurricane Sandy and a decision to make an embrace of the three women in his family 'front and centre' of his campaign, and it meant that many people perceived him as more caring than his rival.

Empathy can be powerful when it is used to assert an opinion or justify an action. If someone makes such an assertion without showing empathy, however, other people can feel bulldozed and react badly.

But sweetening opinions and behaviours with empathy can make all the difference. Indeed the strongest conflict-resolution tool is an ability to disagree with someone strongly, but still value and show respect for their opinion.

On the issue of gay marriage, for instance, Romney was said to be 'stone-faced' and robot-like' when confronted back in 2004 with pro-gay marriage plaintiffs trying to persuade him of their arguments. David Wilson, one of the plaintiffs, described him as showing 'no feeling, no expression', which is a concise definition of a lack of empathy.

The exit poll survey during the presidential election, meanwhile, also showed that 93% of black voters went with Barack Obama, which means that he clearly has a phenomenal rapport with this group.

But such a situation is unlikely to be purely down to 'colour rapport'. A few years back, Obama was shown on TV playing a game of basketball with young black youths at a school in Kokomo, Indiana - powerful imagery that supports 'he's just like us' feelings.

And yet he is also known to be an intellectual - the perfect combination of brains and brawn perhaps? Tellingly, he won 40% of the white vote too.

So the power to build rapport (or to like someone because they are like you) by 'speaking to' different groups appears to be a key factor in Obama's leadership style. He is able to be all things to all people.

No wonder that being able to develop rapport is the building block of modern coaching practice as it is clearly the starting point for creating strong relationships.

'I feel your pain'

In hard times, this may seem a difficult trick to pull off. Although the 'American dream' means that people in the US see money differently to people in the UK, personal wealth and privilege weren't issues for a multi-millionaire Democrat like Bill Clinton.

But some commentators felt that they may have harmed Romney and raised question marks over whether he was truly able to empathise with the common wo/man.

Clinton, on the other hand, famously said: 'I feel your pain'. During the 1992 presidential debates against George Bush Senior, he claimed that, as governor, he personally knew the people who were suffering in his 'small' (personal) state of Arkansas.

Clinton, however, is a master at empathy-building and often uses 'feeling' words to connect with people. Ask anyone who has met him - he's big on eye contact and builds strong personal connections very quickly. But he also demonstrates a significant emotional understanding and ability to express himself.

And such an approach can undoubtedly act as a factor in ensuring personal longevity. It's interesting to note that some people can get away with incredible falls from grace, while others come crashing down from their pedestals after relatively minor infractions.

But their treatment by the public is strongly related to their likeability and ability to empathise. So if you can learn from masters such as Clinton, you will find that modelling other people's emotional behaviour is a great way to improve your own.

Bob Monkhouse famously said of sincerity: 'Once you can fake that, you've got it made.' But people usually are aware when empathy is not sincere, which means that the situation is likely to back-fire.

In this context, when leaders complain that they are not getting their message across, it usually means that they are displaying a lack of empathy, which is causing a disconnect. Former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, frequently made this point, but found it difficult to display himself as an empathetic character.

Developing empathy

For instance, in April 2009, he attempted to copy Obama when he visited the UK. As a 'man of the people', Obama shook the hand of the policeman standing outside number 10.

But when Brown tried to follow suit, he couldn't pull it off and, indeed, misread the situation so completely that he left the 'offered' policeman's hand trailing in the wind. There's a disconnect if ever you saw one.

So bear in mind that, while modelling the behaviour of empathetic leaders can be highly effective, it is important to practice until such behaviour becomes part of your own natural leadership style.

Empathy is critical in order to build strong relationships, but is just one of 15 components of emotional intelligence. Others include an ability to express yourself, resist impulsive behaviour, manage stress and solve problems.

But empathy can be built up quickly, if practiced. This is important because, when times are tough economically, the need for empathetic-leadership grows.

As a result, the Democrats may be well-placed to capitalise on this emotional currency in the next presidential election too as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is odds-on favourite to become the Democratic nominee in 2016.

And according to the emotional intelligence inventory measure, women display, on average, 6% greater empathy than men - it's a fact.

Tips to develop empathy

To develop such empathy, however, it is vital to view the world from other people's perspective rather than simply your own. To this end, it can be useful to ask yourself a couple of questions. So grab a blank piece of paper and mull over these suggestions either by yourself or with trusted friends and colleagues:

1. How do people feel about my ability to listen, read them and empathise?
2. What do stakeholders in my work and life need from me?

If your behaviour is led by accommodating others' needs, you will find it is like selling where there is demand so it makes sense to ask what is important to them. If you do this, you will find yourself in a strong position to lead based on a shared vision, values and goals.

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