

Leader Messages

BY STEVE SIMPSON CSP

When I began my career as a trainer, it was a huge personal challenge for me. I used to literally have sleepless nights prior to the training—worrying about numerous issues, including how I'd begin, how I'd engage people during the training, and how participants would view the training. This stress remained for some time!

In those early days, I used to look at the body language and associated messages people would give during the sessions. I'd notice eyes rolling. I'd look at the way people were seated, and whether this indicated they were bored. And I'd worry about lack of input from people who stayed quiet.

As with most beginning trainers, I learned. After running a number of sessions, I began to gain confidence in myself and my messages. I guess I began to speak with more conviction.

I also learned—although more slowly—not to read **too much** into the body language of audiences. This point was rammed home to me after one particular session. During this training session, one man, seated at the back of the room, seemed to exude negative body language for the entire training. He seemed arrogant and disinterested. At the conclusion of the training, I was stunned when this person came up to me and congratulated me on a great presentation!

With Time Comes Experience

Now, as a more 'seasoned' conference presenter, I know that audiences vary dramatically in the way they respond to my presentations. Some are more conservative—where people enjoy mulling over issues in their own mind and where they remain relatively quiet. Other groups are more engaging—they sit on the edge of their chair, almost physically willing you to continue, keen to participate in conversations, laughter and banter.

I've learned that these polarised responses, and everything that comes in between, is part of the territory. It's not a comment so much on me as the presenter, but rather a function of individual personalities, group dynamics, changes currently happening within the organisation and internal politics.

The Acme Corporation

Recently, I ran a half day presentation for a group of senior managers from one organisation we'll call the 'Acme Corporation'. These senior people meet regularly and on a monthly basis secure an outside expert to shed light on various pertinent issues.

This group was **particularly** quiet. They were not forthcoming when I invited comment, and they seemed to display a level of disinterest in their body language. At the end of the session, they were polite and left.

The gentleman who organises these sessions—let's call him Graeme—stayed behind after the others had left and congratulated me on the session. He shared his view that the session was really valuable.

I then shared my view with Graeme that the group did not seem to display much interest. Graeme then said:

"Steve, what you've got to remember is that these are senior people who like to think things through and who have lots on their minds."

Leader Attributes

Warren Bennis is an American scholar, organisational consultant and author who is widely regarded as a pioneer of the contemporary field of leadership studies. Bennis said that top leaders have seven attributes that make them outstanding in their field. They are...



- Technical Competence
- Conceptual Skills
- Track Record of Achieving Results
- People Skills. Of all the people skills that you need to have to get people working with you, the top three in Bennis's opinion are the ability to communicate, motivate, and delegate
- Taste—an intuitive sense of where talent lies
- Judgment
- Character

It's obvious to most of us that the 'people skills' attribute is imperative. Get this wrong and leaders won't lead.

A Window into Leader Skills

One way we gain real insights into the people skills of a leader is by watching how they interact with people one-to-one. If people are normally respected, genuinely listened to and there is a sense of 'connection', it's fair to assume the leader has high quality people skills. If the leader treats different people differently, then we'll come to an alternative conclusion about that leader's people skills.

Another way we gain insights into the people skills of leaders is how they behave in group contexts. At the Acme Corporation, I think I got a real insight into the people skills of the senior leaders.

These leaders displayed no interest in learning. They displayed no real interest in actively listening. And they showed little interest in respecting an outsider. Now, if that's how they deal with someone with a fair amount of experience, how do they deal with their people—particularly those who have less confidence?

What I didn't say to Graeme was that if these are the behaviours the leadership team displays to their people, they have a serious problem. In all likelihood, employees at the Acme Corporation would be intimidated with all the consequences that flow from that.

A key question for us to consider is whether we as leaders make it easy for people to share their views, or whether we build barriers of the kind created by leaders at the Acme Corporation.

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