Why first impressions count for leaders
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We’ve always been told that first impressions count. Cutting edge research is now highlighting just how true that is for leaders. In fact, your leadership success depends on the first impressions you make in the minds of your followers. Impressions that are made in the space of milliseconds can affect your leadership success for months or even years.

The research, which has been appearing over the last few years in places like The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, is fascinating and incredibly relevant to today’s leaders. Many people however will find these papers mind-numbingly boring to wade through, or won’t have the time to read them all.

Instead, let me explain below why this research is so important to your leadership and lay out some key findings and implications.

Leaders Need Willing Followers
Lets start with a basic proposition; leadership is a two way street. To lead, one must be engaged with a group of people that are willing to be led. The quality of the leader is a critical judgment that potential followers make in determining whether they will willingly follow you, do so with reservation, or not follow your leadership at all. These two judgments are concerned with your Strength and your Warmth.

Strength is what a leader is perceived to possess if she is competent, efficient, dominant and intelligent. This is fundamentally a judgment of whether the leader knows what he is doing. Is this person capable?

Warmth is how a leader is experienced when he is open, friendly, sociable, helpful and honest. This is fundamentally a judgment of whether this person has good or bad intentions towards me. Is this person to be trusted?

Followers Make Two Judgments
People are making two judgments when they meet you as a leader for the first time. Their assessment will largely determine whether they
We make these judgments when for the first time we meet those who seek to lead us. If we determine that their intentions are good towards us (warmth), and they are capable of carrying out those intentions (strength), we are much more likely to admire them and willingly follow their leadership.

If we determine that there is a lack of warmth or strength or even a shortfall in both characteristics, other much less helpful emotions like pity, envy or contempt will arise. As you can imagine, these are not emotions that will result in willing followers.

**Incredibly Quick Judgments Beyond Our Awareness**

These judgments of strength and warmth are made extremely quickly, without the potential follower being aware of it. Our brains are hardwired to make these assessments rapidly because it was essential for our evolutionary survival. On the savannah or on the battlefield, we needed to quickly assess whether others wanted to help or harm us, and whether they were capable of carrying out those intentions. Take more than a few seconds to make those assessments and we could be toast.

The survival need for a very fast assessment of warmth and strength explains why we are mostly unaware that we are making these assessments. Broadly speaking, we possess two systems for processing data with our minds – the conscious system and the non-conscious system. One of these systems is much faster than the other. The conscious system or mind is powerful but relatively slow. So this important assessment of warmth and strength is therefore delegated to our non-conscious mind, which is much faster and often more accurate in recognizing patterns in complex data. Whilst we are unaware of this non-conscious process, we often experience its outcomes as a gut feel or intuition about the other person. Are they to be trusted? Are they capable?

**Warmth Is Assessed First**

Warmth is judged before strength. Scientists believe that warmth judgments can occur in milliseconds because the data is available to us through the body language and facial expressions of the other person. Judgments of competence and strength can take a little longer as the data is not often immediately available.

From an evolutionary perspective, the primacy of the warmth assessment is also helpful to our survival. To be able to assess another person’s intention of good or ill towards us is more important than whether the other person can act on those intentions.

This means that potential followers are paying attention to your warmth first. Do you provide any indication of good will and intent like a smile, eye contact, hand extended, open palms and a friendly greeting? Or do you act a little aloof, cold and disconnected, perhaps remaining in your chair or rooted on your side of the meeting table with no greeting or smile, only a perfunctory nod and fleeting eye contact?

These are important questions to ask yourself, because as pointed out in the next section, the leadership consequences are far reaching.
Warmth Carries More Weight

Perhaps most importantly, warmth judgments carry more weight than strength judgments in how people feel about us and behave towards us.

In psychological geek speak, “the warmth dimension predicts the valance of the interpersonal judgment (i.e. whether the first impression is positive or negative), whereas the strength dimension predicts the extremity of that impression (i.e. how positive or how negative)”. In other words, leaders who exhibit warmth are more likely to create a positive first impression in the minds of others. A positive perception of their strength will only reinforce that positive first impression. Likewise, a lack of warmth will most likely create a negative first impression. Being subsequently perceived as strong and competent is unlikely to change that negative first impression, instead merely moderating it.

Put this to your own common sense test. I’m sure you can easily think of very capable people that have been attentive to you when first meeting them, and it is very likely that your impression of them even to this day is positive, much more so than those you have met who were competent but also cold.

This is a trait that former US President Bill Clinton used very well to his advantage. When meeting people for the first time he is renowned for making them feel like they are the only person in the room. It did not matter whether they were visiting heads of state or the average Joe. This evident warmth went a long way to creating fertile conditions for him to have his leadership voice heard when needed.

Confirmation Bias Cements First Impressions

Of course, once those first impressions are created it is difficult to change them. This is because of the phenomenon called Confirmation Bias. This operating rule in our brains means that we are more sensitive and attentive to new data that proves our initial first impressions of others and causes us to ignore new data that disproves our first impressions of others.

What this means is that if you create a positive first impression by displaying warmth and then strength, followers are likely to look for evidence in the future that supports that assessment. If however you initially demonstrate a lack of warmth (maybe you were distracted, tired, or busy) but try make up for it later, you have a long and hard road ahead of you to turn that initial perception around.

Warmth Confers Benefit of the Doubt

What is more fascinating, is that leaders who demonstrate warmth are more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt when their actions could be interpreted in either a positive or negative light. For example, imagine that a leader fails to acknowledge the greeting of a passing colleague in a busy meeting room. If that leader is perceived as warm, she is likely to be given the benefit of the doubt, with the colleague assuming “She mustn’t have seen or heard me. The room must have been too busy or noisy”. A leader who was previously perceived as lacking in warmth is more likely to be judged negatively: “He deliberately ignored me. What an arrogant jerk”.

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We are moving fast in the modern world and technology has made our communication fragmented and short, so it is very easy to have our communication and intentions misinterpreted (which explains why we need smiley faces and other emoticons to explain our intentions in emails and texts). Therefore, it seems that having already created the impression of warmth is a distinct advantage when our words and actions might otherwise be misinterpreted and attributed negatively.

**Leadership is About Everyone Else**

The relevant lesson in all of this is that whilst a leader must be strong competent and capable, a lack of visible warmth may result in fewer people willing to support and follow you and your brilliant plan. Carefully pay attention to others, especially when you first meet them or after a long absence and it will go a long way to creating the conditions for more successful leadership.