PORTFOLIO / PENGUIN

THE CHARISMA MYTH

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Charismatic First Impressions

YOU NEVER GET a second chance to make a great first impression. **Within a few seconds, with just a glance, people have judged your social and economic level, your level of education, and even your level of success. Within minutes, they've also decided your levels of intelligence, trustworthiness, competence, friendliness, and confidence**.

In fact, people judge your level of charisma based just on how you say hello! For more complex judgments, such as persuasiveness, more time is necessary, but that longer time means only a maximum of sixty seconds.[1] Although these evaluations happen in an instant, they can last for years: First impressions are often indelible.

Is it possible to overcome a bad first impression? Yes, it is. Over the course of several meetings, you can sometimes change a person's initial perception of you. But you'll have to work much harder than if you'd come across as charismatic from the start.

Why do split-second impressions last for so long? One reason is that, according to economist John Kenneth Galbraith, "**when faced**

with the choice between changing one's mind and proving there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof."[2] Behavioral research has since proven him right. Once we've made a judgment about someone, we spend the rest of our acquaintanceship seeking to prove ourselves correct. Everything we see and hear gets filtered through this initial impression.[3]

If you make a favorable impression when first meeting someone, the rest of your relationship will be colored by it, thereby tipping the scales in your favor. On the other hand, an unfavorable first impression can prove impossible to overcome, often deciding the outcome of a meeting even if the rest of the interaction is impeccable. Litigators know just how much a client's first impression on a jury can affect the outcome of the trial and often spend hours preparing them for this first moment. This is why, even if you're really late to a meeting, it's worth taking just thirty seconds to get back into the right mental state and body language. Otherwise you risk giving a very uncharismatic first impression.

The other reason first impressions have such an impact is that often they actually *are* right. In one study conducted at the University of Texas at Austin, people were able to accurately judge nine out of ten personality traits by looking at a single photograph. The traits in question were extroversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, likability, self-esteem, loneliness, religiosity, and even political orientation.

"We have long known that people jump to conclusions about others on the basis of very little information," said one of the researchers, "but what's striking about these findings is how many of the impressions have a kernel of truth to them, even on the basis of a single photograph."[4]

Further studies confirmed that we're often quite accurate in our perceptions of personality, even after meeting someone for only a few seconds.[5] One Harvard research team showed students a two-second silent clip of a teacher they had never seen before and asked them to evaluate the teacher's effectiveness. The researchers then compared these evaluations with those of students who'd experienced this same teacher for a full semester. Both sets of evaluations were impressively similar.[6] This means that without hearing a word from the teacher or

attending one class, complete strangers could predict with fair accuracy the ratings this teacher would receive.

CEOs as well as human resource professionals will often admit that they decide whether they'll hire a job applicant within the first few seconds of the interview. As one senior executive once told me, "The rest of the interview is just window dressing."

The Harvard team realized that first impressions are generated by the fastest part of the brain, which is also the most primitive. This reptilian brain generates our instinctive, primal reflexes and may have been a key to our ancestors' survival. In hunter-gatherer times, we often had only a split second to determine whether shapes entering our field of vision were animate or inanimate, human or nonhuman, friend or foe—in other words, "fight, flight, or relax?" Those able to accurately make these split-second decisions survived, thrived, and multiplied. Those who couldn't ended up as somebody else's crunchy protein snack.

Today, even in sophisticated business settings, we still operate on hunter-gatherer survival instincts. When we first meet someone, our instinctive question is: Friend or foe? How friendly are their intentions likely to be? To find an answer, we still look to the clues that were so useful in tribal times: appearance and demeanor.

If there's any chance the person could be a foe, our next question is: Fight or flight? If they did have ill intentions, would they have the power to enact them? To find the answer, our brain tries to determine which of us would win in a fight. We take into consideration factors such as height and size, age, and gender.

It's only after both of these evaluations have taken place that the content of what we say and how we say it comes into play.

The Golden Rule

So how can you make a fantastic first impression? Our default setting here is actually quite simple: People like people who are like them. During the vast majority of our history, from which our current instincts are drawn, people lived in tribes. In such an environment, the ability to accurately recognize whether or not someone was of your tribe could

have life-and-death implications. If you know how to get these instinctive responses working in your favor, you've won half the battle.

When people are similar in terms of attire, appearance, demeanor, and speech, they automatically assume they share similar social backgrounds, education, and even values. They feel like part of the same tribe.

Overall appearance is evaluated before demeanor and body language. This may be because clothing can be seen from farther away and would help us determine more quickly the likelihood of the other person being friend or foe, fellow tribesman or not. Clothing, essentially, is modern-day tribal wear.

Tribal Wear

Can you imagine a U.S. president delivering the State of the Union address in a bathrobe? Of course not. No matter how hard we try to be objective, clothing matters. The exact same speech will be perceived very differently when delivered in a suit versus a bathrobe.[7]

One Danish manager told me: "I've found that the more formal my clothing is, the more respect my opinions get!" For him, the difference is striking. Presenting the very same opinion in casual clothing one day and in a suit the next produced dramatically different results. In the first case, he says, "people barely listened." In the second, "everyone listened and I got my way."

Our scientific editor notes: "When I was a professor at Kiel University, we had the unwritten rule in the linguistics department that we all teach the first two semesters wearing a proper formal suit and then we switch to the hoodie look from the third semester onwards. First-semester students just don't listen if you teach them in a hoodie!"

There may, however, be an unfortunate gender gap in the perception of charisma and authority: Some studies suggest that female speakers benefit more than male speakers from being introduced with academic titles or other status indicators, and that while male speakers can afford to be on stage in T-shirt and jeans, female speakers do not have the same freedom. At least as of 2021, it seems a suit is al-

most a necessity to be seen as an authoritative female speaker.[8] As our scientific editor notes, however, "Who knows what the future will bring? As women's social roles change, so may their charisma signals. For instance, the last fifty years already saw a significant lowering of women's voices, not because their larynxes grew but because their social roles have changed and women's voices reflect that change."

In the 1970s, when young adults' dress styles tended to fall into either the "hippie" or the "straight" category, researchers experimented with the effects of clothing choice. They approached college students on a campus, sometimes wearing hippie clothes and other times wearing straight clothes, and asked for change to make a phone call. When they were dressed in the same style as the student, the student said yes two thirds of the time. When they were dressed in the opposite style, the student said yes less than half the time.[9]

One company that understood this principle and used it to its advantage was American Express. They made their first good move when they started sending their salespeople to college campuses dressed like college students. They then went one step further. They didn't just *dress* them like students, they *hired* students. And that's when they saw their sales rates soar.

Putting It into Practice: Tribal Wear

Blend in or stand out? The answer depends on your goals. If you want to make others feel comfortable, adapt to their tribal wear. IBM managers, when sending their salespeople to call on traditional corporate clients, were known to tell them, "You can wear anything you want, as long as it's a navy blue suit."

You wouldn't wear a Hawaiian shirt in an investment bank, nor would you wear a three-piece suit in a start-up. Dress codes can vary even within the same industry—a tax lawyer might not wear the same suit as an entertainment lawyer.

If you want to impress others, look at the range of choices within that environment and choose the upper end. There's a reason the phrase "Dress to impress" exists.

It's worth doing your research. If you're going to a party, call the host; if you're going on a job interview, go by the office a few days before to see what people coming in and out of it are wearing.

On my first visit to Oracle, I made the mistake of showing up in a New York–style black business suit. Oracle was not only a West Coast firm (read: casual) but a high-tech one as well; they quickly advised me to lose the suit. These days, I blend in with jeans, while the brilliant engineers who work there slouch around in shorts, T-shirts, and flip-flops.

For neurodivergent individuals, comfort should come first, no matter what, because that will have such an outsize effect on your behavior, abilities, and performance. Since the mental comfort of "belonging" with the right type of clothing can feel like an inseparable part of comfort, it's worth finding out in advance as much as possible about the culture (which varies by geography and industry) and the expectations.

Investing time and money into putting together two or three outfits that meet all the requirements will remove the uncertainty and guarantee sensory acceptability. Cotton is comfortable, corduroy can deliver an exceptional sensory-soothing experience, and velvet can do the same while passing for formal attire.

The Power of a Good Handshake

A Fortune 500 CEO once said that when he had to choose between two candidates with similar qualifications, he gave the position to the candidate with the better handshake. Extreme? Perhaps, but management experts at the University of Iowa analyzing interactions in job interviews declared handshakes "more important than agreeableness, conscientiousness, or emotional stability."[10] Other studies determined that a handshake improves the quality of the interaction, producing a higher degree of intimacy and trust within a matter of seconds.

No matter how expensive your suit, watch, or briefcase, if your handshake is bad, your first impression will take a hit. The right handshake costs far less and will do far more for you than a designer

suit can. Having a great handshake is critical to authority charisma—can you imagine a powerful figure with a limp, weak handshake?

Though it may seem inconsequential, a handshake is indeed a serious step in intimacy. The physical contact involved requires that the personal space barrier be suspended, if only for a moment. It therefore requires trust. If the trust is validated (the handshake goes well), the first step in a relationship is made.

The first commonly known depiction of a handshake was found in Egyptian frescoes dating back to around 2800 BC. To this day, across cultures and hemispheres, the handshake remains surprisingly common—and always features the right hand. Since that was the one traditionally used for wielding weapons, shaking the right hand was symbolic of a suspension of danger, showing that the greeter's weapon hand was unarmed.

In Roman times, the handshake was in fact an arm clasp. Each man would clasp just below the elbow of the other. This gesture afforded a better opportunity to feel for daggers hidden in sleeves. Medieval knights took precautions a step further by adding a shake to the clasp to dislodge any hidden weapons, and thus the handshake was born.

Of the many handshake blunders people can make, let's discuss the worst offenders.

The Dead Fish: This is perhaps the worst. Here, a limp, lifeless hand is extended and just barely shaken. This handshake can ruin a meeting before it even begins. And unfortunately, I have met scores of women with this particular affliction.

The Knuckle Cruncher: This grip may be a demonstration of machismo, but it could also be the result of a person genuinely unaware of his (or her) strength. Alternatively, it might be the result of misguided teachings—some women have been taught that the stronger their grip, the more seriously they will be taken. Hence, they conclude that they should clamp down as if their life depended on it.

The Dominant: In this case, the hand is extended palm down, perhaps conveying the intention of having the upper hand in

the interaction. A variation of this shake would be **the Twisting Dominant**, where the hand is extended innocently straight outward, but twists once the shake is initiated to gain the upper hand.

The Two-Handed: We'll close this woeful list with the classic two-handed handshake. In this case, you'll feel your partner's left hand at work, closing in on your right hand, wrist, arm, shoulder, or neck. It's also known as **the Politician's Handshake**, which gives you an idea of how little regard people have for those who proffer it. The only exception is when the person you're meeting is already a good friend, and even then I'd reserve it for those times when you want to convey special warmth (to be used sparingly).

Check out the box below for the ten components of a gold-star handshake.

Putting It into Practice: The Perfect Handshake

1. First things first: Make sure your right hand is free. Shift anything it may be holding to your left hand well in advance. You don't want to have to fumble at the last moment.
2. Avoid holding a drink in your right hand, especially if it's a cold drink, as the condensation will make your hand feel cold and clammy.
3. Before shaking someone's hand, whether you are a man or a woman, rise if you're seated. And keep your hands out of your pockets: Visible hands make you look more open and honest.
4. Make sure to use plenty of eye contact and smile warmly but briefly: Too much smiling could make you appear overeager.
5. Keep your head straight, without tilting it in any way, and face the person fully.

6. Keep your hand perfectly perpendicular to the floor, neither dominant (palm down) nor submissive (palm up). If you're in doubt, angle your thumb straight to the ceiling.
7. Open wide the space between your thumb and index finger to make sure you get optimal thumb-web contact.
8. Ensure contact between the palms of your hands by keeping your palm flat—not cupped—and by draping your hand across your partner's diagonally.
9. Try to wrap your fingers around your partner's hand, scaling them one by one, as if you were giving a hug with your hand. You will almost have your index finger on their pulse—*almost*, but not quite.
10. Once full contact is made, lock your thumb down and squeeze firmly, about as much as your partner does. Shake from the elbow (not the wrist), linger for a moment if you want to convey particular warmth, and step back.

Practice with friends or family—people who will give you truly candid feedback. Have them read this section. (And remember, everything here is North American specific.)

So you've made a fantastic first impression. You've given a great handshake. You walk up to them and what happens next? You speak. Charismatic conversationalists know how to start conversations easily, make people feel special, and end conversations gracefully. Let's see how you can create positive associations from start to finish, from the way you open a conversation to the way you exit it.

Break the Ice

An easy way to start interactions in a way that both communicates warmth and sends the conversation down the right path is to offer a compliment about something the person is wearing. This would be a great opener when you're aiming to broadcast either kindness cha-

risma or focus charisma. It can also be a good way to balance out the power in your authority charisma if you think a more subdued version of your power is needed.

Continue with an open-ended question, such as "What's the story behind it?" The word *story* has a very strong emotional effect on most people—it sends them straight into storytelling mode, which instantly changes the rapport between the two of you. In addition, because they chose to wear this item, they most likely have a positive feeling about it.

Another good question to break the ice with is "Where are you from?" No matter what the answer, it will encourage further dialogue. Whether they answer "New York" or "New Delhi," if you're not from that area, you can follow up with "What was it like growing up there?" The smaller the town of origin, the more delighted they will be that you have expressed interest.

To keep people talking, simply ask open-ended questions, such as "What brought you here tonight?" or "How are you connected to this event?" Closed questions, by contrast, can be answered by yes or no, and once answered, they land you right back where you started, trying to think of something else to keep the conversation going.

Aim to keep your questions focused on positive subjects because people will associate you with whatever feelings your conversation generates. Instinctively, you would probably know to avoid asking "So how's the divorce going?" Instead, focus on questions that will likely elicit positive emotions. With your questions, you have the power to lead the conversation in the direction you want.

If they start asking about you and you want to refocus the conversation on them, use the *bounce back* technique. Answer the question with a fact, add a personal note, and redirect the question to them, as follows:

Other person: "So where are you moving to?"

You: "To Chelsea [fact]. We fell in love with the parks and the bakeries [personal note]. What do you think of the neighborhood [redirect]?"

Remember, it's all about keeping the spotlight on them for as long as possible. "Talk to a man about himself, and he will listen for

hours," said Benjamin Disraeli. In fact, even when you're speaking, the one word that should pop up most often in your conversation is not *I* but *you*. Instead of saying "I read a great article on that subject in *The New York Times*," try "You might enjoy the recent *New York Times* article on the subject." Or simply insert "You know . . ." before any sentence to make them instantly perk up and pay attention.

To make yourself even more relatable, adjust your choice of words, your breadth and depth of vocabulary, and your expressions to suit your audience: Focus on their fields of interest and choose metaphors from those domains. If they're into golf and you want to talk about success, speak of hitting a hole in one. If they sail, a catastrophe becomes a shipwreck.

One Deutsche Bank analyst told me she couldn't seem to establish a good relationship with her boss. She described him as rather brusque, almost militaristic in his demeanor, "and, in fact, he often uses battle language in our daily interactions." That, to me, was just the clue we needed. I suggested adopting military analogies in which she would liken herself to a "loyal soldier" or a "good lieutenant," and gradually increasing the use of military vocabulary in their conversations. Within a week, she told me that their interactions had significantly improved—he now seemed to regard her as "one of his people" and someone he could count on. This was a high return on investment for just adding a few words to her vocabulary!

Graceful Exits

Just as a first impression can color the rest of the interaction, so can the last few moments. Becoming a charismatic conversationalist means that people will really enjoy being around you, and may be increasingly reluctant to let you go. In fact, the more charismatic you become, the harder it will be to escape your newfound fans. Many charismatic people mention this as one of their biggest challenges. So how can you gracefully exit a conversation?

First, don't wait too long to end it. Otherwise, you and your partner will feel the strain and become uncomfortable. The easiest way to exit

is, of course, to have an official reason for doing so. That's one of the many reasons to be a volunteer or acquire some official duty at parties. When you're "on duty," people will actually expect you to spend no more than a few minutes with them.

Another way to exit a conversation with grace is to offer something of value:

- Information: an article, book, or website you think might be of use to them
- A connection: someone they ought to meet whom you know and can introduce them to
- Visibility: an organization you belong to, where you could invite them to speak
- Recognition: an award you think they should be nominated for

Offering value will often create in others a feeling of warmth and goodwill toward you, and your departure from the conversation will be haloed by the impression of generosity you've created.

Wait until your conversation partner has finished a sentence, and say something to the effect of "You know, based on what you've just said, you really should check out this website. If you have a card, I'll send you the link." As soon as your counterpart gives you a business card, you have the perfect opportunity to say, "Great! I'll email you soon. It was a pleasure meeting you."

Alternatively, if the person has agreed to meet someone in the room, simply say, "Let me introduce you," and bring them together. Because you've just generously given them something, your conversation partner can't help but have positive feelings for you. You can also draw others into the conversation as they pass by—a group of three or four is always easier to take leave of.

What if you're the one breaking up a group? Perhaps you're rescuing someone from a conversation they've indicated they want to leave, or you need to introduce them to someone else, or one of the group is needed for another duty.

In this case, focus all your attention, with particularly warm eye contact (see chapter 9 for this), not on the person you're taking with

you but on the person who is being left behind. This minimizes the chances of their feeling excluded and is particularly important for conveying either kindness charisma or focus charisma.

A good way to phrase things is "I'm *so* sorry, but Christopher is needed to [fill in the blank]. Would you allow me to bring him over there?" This also gives them at least a nominal feeling of having a choice in the matter.

Once a conversation is over, don't waste time worrying about what you said, what you wish you hadn't said, or what you'll say next time. As the MIT Media Lab studies showed, what impacts people isn't the words or content used. Rather, they remember how it *felt* to be speaking with you.

You might not remember the exact content of conversations you had a week ago, but you probably do remember how they felt. It's not the words but the conversation's emotional imprint that remains. And if you use all the tools we've just covered, the emotional imprint will be simply splendid.

READER REPORT

I had the opportunity to read this book a couple of weeks before an interview with a major tech company. Having previously worked primarily at smaller companies, the lengthy interview process was daunting, and I was struggling with impostor syndrome. I was facing eight hours of challenging interviews, with nine different interviewers, meaning I needed to make nine great first impressions.

Absorbing the material from the book felt like gaining a superpower, providing me with the tools to approach the interview process with significantly less nerves. I particularly focused on insights into making a positive first impression; as an example, I practiced my handshake hundreds of times in the days leading up to the in-person interviews.

The responsibility transfer worked really well. I continuously did it in the days leading up to the interview, so much so that when I had the interview I was as calm as a Tibetan monk.

Even the stuff on impostor syndrome helped me. On the way to the interview I found myself negatively telling myself that I wasn't good enough for the role and that the interviewers would take me to pieces. I just stepped back, looked at the thoughts as if I were an observer rather than trying to fight them, and I also reasoned that everybody has these feelings and feels like they are impostors when pushed out of their comfort zone.

On the day itself, the way the handshakes unfolded indicated that some of the interviewers were also experiencing nerves, which surprisingly helped to put me at ease: As I shook hands with people, I felt more in control when they had limp handshakes, as if I knew they had just given me an upper hand, so to speak, like a poker playing reading tells.

Before each of the interviewers walked in, I thought of my son, so that I could greet each one with warmth, and I then found every interviewer was really warm and friendly the whole way through.

I made sure to speak slowly and lower my tone at the end of sentences and waited two seconds to speak before responding. I asked open-ended questions at the beginning of each interview to foster a connection and build rapport, which helped me to feel less like a passive participant and more like an individual engaging in a genuine conversation.

All of these tools helped me to manage my impostor syndrome to have a successful interview process. In fact, it made a stressful interview situation feel more like making new friends.

Wayne
Seattle, Washington, USA

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- First impressions happen within seconds and can affect not only the rest of the interaction but also the rest of your relationship with that person.
- People feel most comfortable with those who are similar to them in some way, including appearance and behavior. Do your home-

work and decide how much you want to adapt your dress and word choice to your environment.

- A good handshake can go a long way. Likewise, a bad one can leave an unfavorable and lasting first impression. It's worth spending some time perfecting the right way to greet someone.
- Great conversationalists keep the spotlight on the other person and make them feel good about themselves.
- Know how to gracefully exit a conversation, leaving others with positive feelings.

7. Charismatic First Impressions

1. For a complete picture of first impressions and "thin slicing," see A. Cullen and N. Harte, N. (2017). "Thin Slicing to Predict Viewer Impressions of TED Talks," in *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Auditory-Visual Speech Processing* (AVSP, 2017), 58–63; C. F. Keating et al., "Charismatic Nonverbal Displays by Leaders Signal Receptivity and Formidability, and Tap Approach and Avoidance Motivational Systems," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): 526288; L. Begrich, B. Fauth, and M. Kunter, "Who Sees the Most? Differences in Students' and Educational Research Experts' First Impressions of Classroom Instruction," *Social Psychology of Education* 23, no. 3 (2020): 673–99; A. A. Fultz, M. D. Stosic, and F. J. Bernieri, "Nonverbal Expressivity, Physical Attractiveness, and Liking: First Impression to Established Relationship," *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 48, no. 2 (2024): 189–211. See A. Caspi et al., "Judging a Book by Its Cover: The Dominance of Delivery Over Content When Perceiving Charisma," in *Group & Organization Management* 44, no. 6 (2019), page 6 for a nice summary, stating the following: "A line of research has demonstrated that people are impressed quite rapidly and accurately by others, even before a meaningful content is delivered. . . . In these studies, perceivers see a presentation of very few seconds and can glean accurate information about the presenters' state, traits, and personal characteristics. This effect was found also for leadership. . . . Benjamin and Shapiro (2009) showed 10-s silent video clips of unfamiliar gubernatorial debates to participants. They found that participants predicted fairly well the actual winner. Benjamin and Shapiro suggested that participants' judgment rests on candidates' personal attributes rather than their policy position. Thus, appearance and presentation can be perceived very rapidly, almost without any mental effort. Surprisingly, this thin slice information seems to be accurate and predictive."
2. John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics, Peace and Laughter* (New American Library, 1971), 50.
3. Dr. Nalini Ambady, *First Impressions* (Guilford Press, 2008).
4. L. P. Naumann et al., "Personality Judgments Based on Physical Appearance," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35, no. 12 (2009): 1661–71.
5. P. Borkenau et al., "Extraversion Is Accurately Perceived After a 50-Ms Exposure to a Face," *Journal of Research in Personality* 43 (2009): 703–6; P. Borkenau and A. Liebler, "Trait Inferences: Sources of Validity at Zero Acquaintance, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*

62 (1992): 645–57; S. D. Gosling et al., "A Room with a Cue: Personality Judgments Based on Offices and Bedrooms, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82 (2002): 379–98; M. J. Levesque and D. A. Kenny, "Accuracy of Behavioral Predictions at Zero Acquaintance: A Social Relations Analysis, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 (1993): 1178–87.

6. N. Ambady and R. Rosenthal, "Half a Minute: Predicting Teacher Evaluations from Thin Slices of Nonverbal Behavior and Physical Attractiveness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 64, no. 3 (1993): 431–41.
7. A high-value formal attire can (partly) compensate for a weaker vocal performance and vice versa, i.e., if you have a great vocal performance already, you probably can afford to wear a T-shirt and blue jeans. Of course, both great voice and great attire is probably even better—but one has to be careful with such statements. Because if there is one thing that charisma studies show us across all signals types, it is that no relationship between perceived charisma and a specific parameter/factor is ad infinitum linear. There is always a kind of overdose threshold above which the charisma effect is quickly reversed. So, while a polished appearance, a straight posture with large gestures, and a great vocal performance can be charisma-supportive on their own, in combination and with all effects adding up they could exceed the overdose threshold. For more on the topic, see A. Brem and O. Niebuhr, "Dress to Impress? On the Interaction of Attire with Prosody and Gender in the Perception of Speaker Charisma," in Benjamin Weiss et al. (eds), *Voice Attractiveness. Prosody, Phonology and Phonetics* (Springer, 2021) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-6627-1_11.
8. A. Brem and O. Niebuhr, "Dress to Impress? On the Interaction of Attire with Prosody and Gender in the Perception of Speaker Charisma," in *Voice Attractiveness: Studies on Sexy, Likable, and Charismatic Speakers*, ed. B. Weiss et al. Prosody, Phonology and Phonetics (Springer, 2021), 183–213, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-6627-1_11.
9. T. Emswiller, K. Deaux, and J. E. Willits, "Similarity, Sex, and Requests for Small Favors," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 1 (1971): 284–91.
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10

Digital Charisma

ON A RAINY Scandinavian spring day in the middle of the semester, the department's entire hiring committee was gathered around a speaker for the last stage of the job interview. The conditions weren't ideal: Interviewee Priya hadn't made it home in time, thanks to worse-than-usual Kolkata traffic, so she was sitting in her car, using a busy shopping mall's Wi-Fi.

Things were not going well, which was both unfortunate and unexpected, as the hiring committee unanimously considered Priya to be the best candidate. But on the phone, she sounded angry and defensive, and the various committee members started to get visibly irritated.

The lead interviewer tried to turn things around by going into more details of the advantages of the position, only to be interrupted by Priya, who wondered why they felt the need to justify the position, as she had already expressed her joy and excitement about it and her appreciation for the salary, and said that now that it was starting to get late, she was hoping they could move on to discussing next steps.

The committee members looked at each other, thoroughly confused. Joy? Excitement? What was going on? Luckily for Priya, that was the moment when the mall's most popular café hit closing time, and dozens of people got off the mall's Wi-Fi as the staff shooed them out the door. Within a few minutes, the impression of an angry Priya disappeared. The interview took a sudden positive turn, it ended well, and Priya is still happily employed at the university six years later.

What happened? As it turned out, **an overly compressed audio signal had led to emotional confusion: in this case, joy and excitement being mistaken for anger**.

Onscreen Charisma

People often instinctively assume they don't need to do anything different in digital interactions than they do face to face and, in fact, often put in less effort than they would in real life. They couldn't be more wrong, on both points.

It's true that these days nonverbal communication can actually come across quite well in the digital world, at least for the major signals: People can hear smiles on the phone and can even hear the other person's gestures, like arm movements.[1]

But the first problem is that in digital settings we automatically tend to reduce our nonverbal communication, which directly lowers our charisma.[2] The second problem is the transmission chain quality, from the speaker's microphone to the listener's speaker. That is what determines which nonverbal nuances reach us and which don't.

Unfortunately, you can control only your end of the situation, but that's still quite a lot: Should you sit or stand? How close do you need to be to the camera? These are just some of the many questions that come into play for digital charisma. And if you're wondering whether charisma matters for engagement metrics, here's one study's example: Just one semitone more in pitch range and just one decibel more in loudness variation mean on average 54,200 more subscribers for established influencers.[3]

The first and most important factor to control is audio quality. For example, studies systematically show that researchers and their research lose credibility when the audio quality is reduced.[4] Witnesses whose audio recordings are of poor quality are rated by juries as less credible, reliable, and trustworthy. Worse yet, the juries have less recall of the facts these witnesses present, and weigh their statements less heavily in the final verdict.[5]

Remember Priya's audio-compression interview situation? Not only does audio compression affect the assessment of a speaker's charisma, but this problem, unfortunately, affects women more than men, studies have shown.[6]

Specifically, at high compression rates, MP3 and Speex codecs demonstrate a higher rate of emotional misclassification and a reduction in perceived charisma, particularly for female speakers.[7] That's right: Women's voices seem to be more affected by the negative effects of compression. And for those who like to have specifics,: MP3 compression caused listeners not to distinguish boredom from fear or anger from an emotionally neutral state.[8]

So, what can you actually do? First, check whether the noise cancellation/suppression option is activated in your setup. If you're in a quiet room, switch it off. In addition, if there is an option for using high fidelity or "music" mode, activate it. You might also have an "original tone" function, which will help. Some systems also allow you to specify whether to use their own settings or the Windows Signal Processing (i.e., sound card) settings. Choose the latter, because there you can further reduce signal compression through Windows' own settings.

Second, let's talk about microphones. A key feature of a microphone's transmission quality is its "frequency response." If you're buying an external mic, always take a look at the frequency response first, and buy a mic with a curve as flat (unbiased) as possible. In general, condenser-type mics offer better results than dynamic-type mics.[9] Ideally, get a "large diaphragm condenser microphone" with phantom power connected to a little USB preamplifier.

Always check your audio and video settings before starting the call—it's really worth investing three to five minutes to check that

everything works, rather than enduring the incredibly frustrating "Can you hear me?" fiasco that can eat up the first five or ten seconds of a call.

Now let's talk body language. First, understand how much your posture matters. Straight posture significantly enhances vocal charisma compared with a hunched or slumped posture, especially when sitting in front of the camera in a video call and especially for female speakers.[10] Find a seat that works for you—whether that's a chair with a high back rest you can lean against to prevent hunching or a saddle stool to tilt your spine into a naturally straight position. Standing helps, too, though this is less a direct effect on charisma and more a boost to your psychology, which transfers to your physiology.[11]

Next, make your face as big as comfortably possible. Studies suggest that the closer you are to the camera, the more present you will seem, the more people will focus on you (especially your eyes), the longer you'll command their attention, and the more you'll be able to influence their emotions.[12]

Ideally, the camera should be placed slightly above you. Straight on is okay, but definitely not from below! Use books under your laptop or raise the table so that the camera is at least at eye level.

Video is one case where silent head nods can work wonders in helping reduce our instinctive need to say "uh-huh" to show that we're following.[13]

Phone Charisma

Some general charisma principles remain valid: Think of the timing, the setting, and the situation the person may be in. Plan your calls from least to most important, to improve with practice. You can also use visualizations before important calls to get into the right mental state so that the right words and tone flow effortlessly.

If you're the one calling, always ask, "Is this a good time for you?" before launching into conversation. No matter how important your information or how pleasant your call, **bad timing means bad results for you**. The person may be under a deadline or in the midst of a crisis.

Once you're in a conversation, pay attention. You need to be as focused as if you were face to face—perhaps even more so. Focus and be quiet. Do you think you can get away with eating, drinking, or working on your computer while talking on the phone? Not so fast. Eating and drinking are out. Even if you think you're being quiet, the person will hear you chewing and swallowing, because receivers are specifically made to amplify sound—especially with headset mics. People will just as surely hear you typing and wonder what it is you're really paying attention to.

And muting yourself isn't the answer: Even if you don't move, silence from being muted can sound different from silence without being muted. As one reader reported, "I've had people ask if I was still there two seconds after muting myself, simply because the silence sounded different."

Reading your email or surfing the web is also inadvisable—too often, this will cause a slight lag in your response time, which will make you sound like your mind is wandering. Delayed vocal response can have the same effect as delayed facial expressions. In fact, there's something known as "the six-hundred-millisecond threshold." If someone asks you, "Can we meet on Monday?" and it takes you longer than six hundred milliseconds to answer, even if that answer is an enthusiastic "Sure!" it will be perceived as being less honest.[14] Six hundred milliseconds is about two syllables, or just about as long as it takes for you to say "blah, blah."

If your mind is wandering, your distraction might show. Being present is at least as important on the phone as it is in person. And it's easier to project presence in person because of the many different ways you can communicate. By phone, you need to work that much harder at it for it to be received.

To communicate presence, Michael Feuer, the founder of OfficeMax, says that he often closes his eyes when listening. I was struck by how good a listener he was: Even on the phone, I could *feel* the intensity of his listening, how well he absorbed everything I was saying.

For best results, get up from your desk and away from all distractions. Stay standing and walk around (your voice will sound more energetic) while focusing entirely on the phone call. Listen to what

the other person is saying and what's going on in the background. If you hear their other phone line ring, ask if they need to answer it, and assure them that it's all right with you. They'll appreciate it, and you don't want their brain split between vaguely listening to you and trying to figure out who the other caller may be.

There is an additional challenge on the phone: our tendency to fall into the "phone voice" trap. People speak as if they must bridge a big distance: Pitch and loudness levels are raised, intonation is flattened, and the mouth opens wider. The effect grows stronger the farther away people think the other person is.[15]

Here's one specific—and surprisingly effective—recommendation for phone charisma, courtesy of author Leil Lowndes: Do *not* answer the phone in a warm or friendly manner. Instead, answer crisply and professionally. Then, only after you hear who is calling, let warmth or even enthusiasm pour forth in your voice. This simple technique is an easy and effective way to make people feel special, and is especially effective because the brain loves contrasts. A warm voice sounds even warmer if it had been cold before. It's the same reason you don't want to smile permanently—just like a perfume you wear to which you become "nose-blind," a permanent smile will no longer be perceived and will simply make your voice "smaller."

SEVEN SECRETS TO GREAT ONLINE CHARISMA

1. Before the call, ensure that you have the best possible signal strength and transmission quality. If necessary, move to a different place and/or change the settings in your call or messenger app.
2. If the connection is poor, turn off the video image. It's often blurry under such conditions anyway. No video means less audio compression, and audio compression is generally bad for charisma.
3. Keep gesturing; it makes your voice livelier and the video image (if there is one) too. Even if the camera doesn't capture your gestures, the other person can still hear them, and

they can increase your charisma through their reflection in your voice.

4. Check your posture regularly. A hunched posture weakens your vocal charisma, especially if you're a woman. Though standing may not directly make you more charismatic, it does tend to give you a greater feeling of control and leads to more gesturing, both of which can increase charisma.
5. Come closer to the screen: How large your face appears on the other person's video screen determines how present, likable, etc. you are perceived as being.
6. Not all microphones are created equal. Get a decent external microphone with the flattest frequency response possible. A directional microphone can also help suppress distracting ambient noise.
7. When you're on the phone with the camera off, keep your volume normal to avoid the "telephone voice effect." Forget about your audience's physical distance: The only one that matters is the one between you and the screen. It can actually help to put a toy on your keyboard and talk to the toy.

Writing Charismatic Emails

When writing emails, you can apply all the tools and principles you've learned in the past sections. Review a few of your past email messages. How often does the word *I* appear, as opposed to the word *you*? Does the email speak about you and your interests first? Don't try to fight your natural tendency (we're hardwired to primarily care about ourselves, after all). Instead, write out the email as you normally would, but before you send it, simply cut and paste so that whatever pertains to the other person appears first *and* most prominently.

You can also do this with your marketing materials, whether it be your website, your brochures, or anything that represents you or your company to the world: Go through your materials (you can do the same with your emails) using two different-colored highlighters, one for things relating to you and the other for sentences that speak to

your potential clients. If the second color doesn't predominate, you have a problem.

Just as in speaking, watch the return on investment of your sentences: Measure the length of your email against the value it is delivering. Read over your emails before you send them, and trim as many extra words as possible until there is nothing left that could be deleted. To paraphrase Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*: Perfection is not when there is no more to add but when there is no more to subtract.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Digital interactions require more effort to be charismatic than in-person ones
- Audio quality is crucial for credibility, trust, and charisma.
- Posture impacts vocal charisma, especially for women. Sit straight or stand.
- Get closer to the camera to seem more present and engaging.
- Use head nods in video calls to show active listening instead of verbal fillers like "uh-huh."
- On the phone, focus as much as you would face-to-face—no multitasking
- Structure emails so the recipient's concerns come first. Minimize the use of "I"; emphasize "you" and the reader's perspective.
- Be concise—cut unnecessary words.

10. Digital Charisma

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