

The influencing skills of Barack Obama

Larry Reynolds reveals the seven critical skills that make the new US president so influential

If you want to get yourself elected as president of the United States, you'd better have some pretty well-honed influencing skills. In fact, the US presidential election process is probably one of the biggest tests of influencing skills in the modern world. Not only do you have to persuade people to give you loads of money to run a gruelling 18-month campaign to get selected as your party's candidate, but you then have to start all over again to win the election for the actual presidency. And if you are starting as a relative unknown – as Barack Obama was when he first stood for the Democratic nomination – your influencing skills had better be exceptional. As anyone who's listened to his major speeches will agree, in Obama's case they are. But what exactly does he do to be so influential?

In this article I'll examine seven critical skills that make Obama a great influencer. They are trust, presence, credibility, herd instinct, avoiding loss, building commitment and storytelling.

Trust

Influencing skill number one is **trust**. We are much more likely to be influenced by someone we trust. How did Obama build a

reputation for trust when he had no track record with the people he was trying to influence? First, he conducted his campaign with ruthless integrity.

A common practice in US elections is to give cash to local community activists and preachers to encourage them to get the vote out on polling day. 'Walking-about money', as it is often called, is sometimes justified as covering legitimate expenses for, say, transport costs in poorer areas; in reality it can sometimes be little more than a thinly-disguised bribe.

Obama flatly refused to pay walking-about money – not



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because he couldn't afford to (he ran the most successful fundraising campaign in US presidential history) but because he knew it was wrong.

Whenever he made a mistake on the campaign, he admitted it and apologised. An ill-judged comment mid-campaign about some Americans "getting bitter and clinging to guns and religion" caused uproar. He immediately apologised – both for the offence caused and also for the fact that this controversy was distracting people from the real campaign issues.

Since politicians are generally not thought to be particularly trustworthy characters, Obama also enhanced trust by deliberately distancing himself from conventional politics. He made a point of saying that his campaign "was not hatched in the halls of Washington. It began in the backyards of Des Moines and the living rooms of Concord and the front porches of Charleston". This reference, with its echoes of the closing words of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, not only helped to disassociate him from politicians (untrustworthy) but associated him with Martin Luther King (trustworthy).

Presence

Influencing skill number two is presence. Partly this comes from physical attributes – Obama is tall and the taller candidate has won the US presidential election in a



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statistically significant 66 per cent of the time. He also often speaks in a slow, deep voice and people with slow, deep voices tend to get listened to in a way that those with fast, high pitched voices don't.

But presence isn't just about your physical attributes – it's about your ability to be absolutely present in the moment. Throughout gruelling campaigns for the Democratic nomination and for the presidency itself, Obama never looked rushed or flustered. Whenever he talked to someone, he always gave them their full attention. Whether he was addressing a crowd of thousands, or chatting to a small group of supporters, he always took the time to make his audience feel that they really mattered.

Credibility

Influencing skill number three is credibility. We generally perceive someone to be credible because of their experience and expertise. Unlike many presidential candidates, Obama had had no

real experience in government – less even than Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who at had least served as governor of Alaska.

How did Obama come across as credible despite this lack of experience? He used two main approaches. Firstly – unlike Palin – he was ruthlessly, obsessively and pedantically prepared for any question put to him during the campaign. Unlike his opponent John McCain, who seemed at one point unsure about just how many houses he owned, Obama mastered all the details.

More importantly, and more cleverly, Obama reframed the debate about his experience. What mattered, he said, was not experience but judgement. Throughout the long presidential campaign, Obama always had a trump card to play when it came to judgement: back in 2002 both Hillary Clinton and John McCain supported the war in Iraq; Obama didn't, and his consistent opposition has greatly enhanced his credibility.

Herd instinct

Influencing skill number four is herd instinct. Like animals in a herd, we are highly influenced by others around us. Most people are influenced more strongly by their friends, family and peers than by a TV advertisement or a politician. Obama understood this brilliantly; although he was obviously highly skilful at influencing people directly, his campaign was even more brilliant at making it very easy for his supporters to persuade their family, friends and peers to become supporters too.

One way in which he did this was to harness new technology. To take just one example, if you were an Obama supporter, you could download a free piece of software to your iPhone that would give you latest campaign information to use when persuading your friends to vote for Obama. It would even suggest which of your friends you should call next, depending on which state was being contested next.



Obama really understood how to make herd instinct work for his campaign, in a way that John McCain and most business leaders don't.

Avoiding loss

Influencing skill number five is where it starts to get really counter intuitive. Let's say you want convince a group of colleagues at work to do something. Would it be more effective to say "do this and good things will happen", or "don't do this and bad things will happen"? Most people tend to go for the more 'positive' approach. They're wrong. Three times out of four, the second approach – the avoiding loss tactic – will be more effective. That's because most people are more motivated to hang on to things they might lose, than to gain things they haven't yet got.

In a classic social psychology experiment conducted at the University of Victoria, in Canada, students were given a coffee mug. After a bit, they were asked if they'd swap it for a big bar of Swiss chocolate. Only 11 per cent agreed to relinquish the mug. In a parallel experiment, students were first given the chocolate and then asked to trade it in for the mug. This time only 10 per cent agreed to the swap.

Once we've got something, we're highly motivated to hang on to it (which maybe explains all those clothes in your wardrobe you never wear but are reluctant to take down to the charity shop).

Since most people are more motivated by the prospect of loss than gain, it makes sense for politicians to use lots of negative campaigning during an election. It's much more of a vote winner to say "vote for my opponent and things will be terrible" than "vote for me and things will be great".

This presented a bit of a problem for Obama – getting away from traditional mudslinging politics was one of the things he wanted to do, both as a way of building trust by distancing

himself from conventional politicians and also, I believe, because he just didn't think it was the right thing to do. So here's what he did. He lavished considerable personal praise on his opponent John McCain, while at the same time reinforcing the message that a vote for McCain was a vote for the policies of George Bush. Call it negative campaigning in a subtle way.

Building commitment

Influencing skill number six is to build commitment. If you succeed in getting someone to make a small commitment, it is much more likely that they will then make the bigger commitment. That's why, at the end of a business meeting, it's much more effective to get participants to sum up, in their own words, what they are going to do as a result of the meeting, rather than the meeting leader doing the summary for them. Making that small commitment – telling my peers what I am going to do – makes it much more likely that I will make the bigger commitment of actually doing it.

Obama's campaign was unusual in many ways, and one of them was his focus on raising money from very small donations – \$5 here, \$10 there. Most career politicians don't bother with small donations – why put in all that effort to raise a paltry sum when just one meeting with, say, a Russian oligarch can net you tens of thousands? But career politicians miss the power of building commitment.

When you persuade someone to make the relatively easy gesture of donating \$5 to your campaign, you make it hugely more likely that they will actually vote for you on polling day. Making a small commitment causes a mental shift that makes bigger commitments more likely.

Story telling

Influencing skill number seven – and this is where Obama

really excelled – is to tell stories. Throughout his campaign, he repeatedly told one big story – the story of the American dream: in America, anyone, from however humble a background, can go on to achieve great things through determination and hard work. He and his family exemplify this story.

Obama began his address to the 2004 Democratic convention – the event that made it possible for him to run for the presidency – by saying:

“Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let’s face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father – my grandfather – was a cook, a domestic servant to the British.

“But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, that shone as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before.”

Arguably, Obama was elected in part because he happened to be the right candidate at the right time. But he only communicated that he was the right candidate by telling the right story at the right time.

His genius as a teller of stories is not only in the stories he chooses to tell, but the way in which he tells them.

Consider this extract from later in that same speech:

“You know, a while back I met a young man named Shamus in a V.F.W. Hall in East Moline, Illinois. He was a good-looking kid – six two, six three, clear eyed, with an easy smile. He told me he’d joined the Marines and was heading to Iraq the following week. And as I listened to him explain why he’d enlisted, the absolute faith he had in our country and its leaders, his devotion to duty and service, I thought this young man was all that any of us might ever hope for in a child.

“But then I asked myself, ‘are we serving Shamus as well as



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he is serving us?’ I thought of the 900 men and women – sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors – who won’t be returning to their own hometowns. I thought of the families I’ve met who were struggling to get by without a loved one’s full income, or whose loved ones had returned with a limb missing or nerves shattered, but still lacked long-term health benefits because they were reservists.

“When we send our young men and women into harm’s way, we have a solemn obligation not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they’re going, to care for their families while they’re gone, to tend to the soldiers upon their return, and to never ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world.”

Let me draw your attention to a few things that make this story so powerful. He makes the link between a specific individual – Shamus – and the broader political point that sending people to war involves certain moral commitments.

He really engages the emotions – “loved ones with a limb missing or nerves shattered”.

He increases his credibility with the details in the story – the number of casualties, and the fact that, because Shamus is a reservist, he is not entitled to the benefits of a regular soldier.

Although there is enough detail to make the story come alive – Shamus is tall, good looking, with an easy smile – some detail is left very vague. This vagueness allows listeners to fill in the details and imagine Shamus is like them, or like their family members.

There’s a lot in these 250 words. If you want to see and hear Obama delivering them, you can do so on the excellent American Rhetoric website at www.americanrhetoric.com.

How much did Barack Obama consciously work at these seven influence skills, and how much did he just do instinctively? I don’t know – maybe he doesn’t either. But what I do know is that you can be more influential by applying them in your organisational context. ■

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