

The Influencing Skills of President Obama

What do Presidents Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan all have in common? First and foremost they are among some of the most famous leaders in U.S. History, but what exactly was it that made them so influential? Was it their ability to speak eloquently and inspire the masses? Was it their great wherewithal which led the American people through various times of difficulty and hardship? Was it because they were able to show confidence, instill trust, and at times be aggressive and assertive when necessary? The answer of course is “all of the above.”

As we have seen from earlier course readings, a good leader can adapt his or her style to suit a particular purpose (i.e. the situation) or intended audience (i.e. the individuals involved). Abraham Lincoln took a difficult stand during the Civil War while paying mind that he would inevitably be responsible for reuniting the states after its bloody conclusion. As the first president of our nation, George Washington could certainly have presided over the country as a monarch, but chose to set an example by serving only two terms—a precedent that was kept intact until Franklin D. Roosevelt successfully ran for four terms, spanning a significant portion of both the Great Depression and World War II. Breaking this precedent led to the two-term limit added as the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution. Thomas Jefferson’s understanding of states’ rights seemed to be in contrast to his recognition of the need for some powers to be consolidated under the aegis of the federal government. While the country experienced tremendous economic growth during Eisenhower’s administration, he was also required to be both aggressive and at time combative as Soviet influence rapidly spread throughout much of the globe. Ronald Reagan’s ability to communicate and persuade us with his charm and sincerity earned him the title of “The Great Communicator.” These presidents all faced situations and challenges where the use of a great variety of influential styles was often necessary.

Now, let’s fast-forward to Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States of America. President Obama is recognized as an inspiring and motivational speaker with a distinct personality, charm, and strength. As stated earlier, the key to the power of influence is for President Obama to recognize which influence style will be most effective in any given situation. It is clear that Mr. Obama is aware of his own personal styles of influence and recognizes which styles will be most effective in the many situations to which he frequently encounters.

As a politician, his first use of influence is targeted toward voters. As president, he must also use his powers of influence on members of Congress, heads of state, and business and community leaders. Each of these groups requires a

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unique approach in order for the president to be effective. Let us now look at the many characteristics of President Obama's outstanding influence skills.

Speaking Skills & Ability

Anaphora

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *anaphora* is defined as the "repetition of a word or expression at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or verses especially for rhetorical or poetic effect."

Many of the greatest speakers throughout history have used this technique to build emotion, create vivid imagery, and develop a distinct pattern of memorable wording and passages. Think about Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech. In the middle of his speech, he paints a picture of how he envisions the future and builds emotion by beginning eight separate lines of thought with the phrase "I have a dream." Later on in the speech, he uses the phrase "let freedom ring" in nine separate lines, leading up to his climactic finale. This dramatic use of anaphora created a memorable and groundbreaking speech that has gone down in history and will likely never be forgotten.

In Ronald Reagan's Inaugural Address in 1982, he, too, used the technique of anaphora, beginning seven paragraphs of his speech with the word "*together*". In his very moving speech following the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger, he creates a vision of hope for the future using the word "*more*" several times saying, "There will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews and, yes, more volunteers, more civilians, more teachers in space."

President Obama used the technique of anaphora early in his 2009 Inaugural Address when he talked about the people who first came to the United States:

“For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life.

For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West; endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth.

For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sahn.”

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As we examine other aspects of President Obama's influencing skills, we will see how they are all incorporated into his speaking ability and how they are regularly adapted to specific situations and events.

Humility

Humility comes under a combination of the *Inspiring* and *Friendly Helper* styles discussed in earlier readings. As a reminder, the *Inspiring* style uses emotional appeal and stories, while the *Friendly Helper* style uses openness and trust. Once again, President Obama expressed his humility at the very beginning of his 2009 Inaugural Address. During the course of his speech he stated, "I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors." In this one sentence, President Obama managed to create an emotional appeal, paint a historical picture, and express his gratitude, all while he actively engaged his listeners.

Demeanor & Persona

President Obama is over six feet tall! He has excellent posture and keeps himself in stellar physical condition. He is always well-dressed, polished, and professional. His towering height combined with his finely groomed appearance gives him an air of power, assertiveness, and confidence. He uses this to his advantage in times of crisis and despair, as well as during Congressional addresses and State of the Union speeches. His strong voice, his speaking cadence, and at times his casual delivery are engaging and persuasive. While we are not privy to his style and behavior when not in the public eye, we can assume that he adopts whatever style is necessary to accomplish his goals and objectives.

The 2012 presidential debates between President Obama and Governor Romney brought about much commentary regarding style, appearance, and powers of influence by the general public and the media. In the September 2012 issue of the *Atlantic*, writer James Fallows wrote, "Civics teachers won't want to hear this, but the easiest way to judge 'victory' in many debates is to watch with the sound turned off, so you can assess the candidates' ease, tenseness, humor, and other traits signaled by their body language."

After the first debate, many people felt that President Obama did not exhibit his usual confidence which caused many voters and political pundits to assert that he had failed to fully capitalize on this important campaign opportunity. Had he not improved on his previous performance, the end result of the 2012 presidential

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race may have looked quite different. This brings us to a discussion of our next influencing style...charm.

Charm

Shortly after the second presidential debate of 2012, in which President Obama gave a much more familiar and aggressive performance, both President Obama and Governor Romney appeared at a benefit dinner for the Archdiocese of New York. Though formal in dress (this was a white-tie event), jokes were told by both men. This is where President Obama had the opportunity to express the charming side of his personality, while also tapping into his humility and self-awareness. In one of his remarks, he was able to poke fun at himself, helping to deflect additional commentary about the first debate. He quipped:

“This is the third time that Governor Romney and I have met recently. As some of you may have noticed, I had a lot more energy in our second debate. I felt really well rested after the nice long nap I had in the first debate. Although it turns out millions of Americans focused in on the second debate who didn’t focus in on the first debate—and I happen to be one of them.”

Negotiating & Bridging

As a reminder, these two styles both require a great deal of cooperation, compromise, and team-building. In his 2012 State of the Union Speech, Obama placed a lot of emphasis on the need for improved cooperation across party lines. He talked about how the various branches of the United States’ armed forces work together and said, “Imagine what we could accomplish if we followed their example.”

He employed his powers of influence and attempted to bridge the gaps between parties by saying, “What’s at stake aren’t Democratic values or Republican values, but American values.” President Obama’s politics, policies, credibility, and powers of influence helped to persuade reluctant voters to re-elect him for a second term. His influencing skills have established him as a world leader and model for others to follow.

Summary

- Many of our greatest presidents have possessed a wide range of influencing skills.
- These leaders adopted various styles to suit different situations and circumstances.
- As both president and politician, President Obama uses his influence on voters, Congress, heads of state, and business & community leaders.
- *Anaphora* is a technique that consists of repeating words or phrases within a speech in order to build emotion and create a dramatic effect. Obama and many other presidents have used this technique when delivering speeches.
- President Obama has a unique speaking cadence which enables him to communicate a wide range of emotions and appeals.
- President Obama uses his height, demeanor, and imposing physical presence to his advantage.
- President Obama's influencing skills also include humility, charm, the ability to negotiate, and the ability to facilitate bridge-building.

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