

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Practical Lessons in Leadership and Communication

Barack Obama: The Competitive Advantage of Great Communication

My maternal grandmother, “Nana,” as we all called her, died in 2005, at the age of 97. If she were alive today, she simply would not believe what occurred on election night, November 4, 2008. Nana grew up in a world where the notion of an African-American in the Oval Office was simply preposterous. I never thought Nana would play a starring role in *The Beacon* or *In the Spotlight*, but she is the perfect leading lady to capture the magnitude of November 4.

As a nation, we have come a long way in a short period of time, and the scope of Nana’s 97 years does not capture the rapidity of the progress. Think about the scope of Barack Obama’s lifetime. When he was born, in 1961, there were many states, and not just in the South, that still enforced segregation laws, still banned mixed-race marriages (like his parents’), and restricted voting rights based on race. Indeed, this election was proof that America has made great strides, remaining the only true meritocracy on earth. If you have the stuff to lead, to produce, and to make something of yourself, you can do it here, regardless of where you come from, what your name is, or what you look like. If it isn’t already obvious to you, let me make it so... I am proud of this reality.

But despite the obvious racial historical aspects of this campaign, what really drove President-elect Obama’s success was his skill as a communicator. Everyone I have spoken with, both leading up to and since Election Day, has commented on how much of an impact his ability to communicate and persuade had on their vote. Verbal communication was a significant competitive advantage for him, much like it was for Ronald Reagan and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

More specifically, there were three things worth noting briefly about his communication skills. First, he speaks

to the big issues, and he’s not afraid to tackle those issues. I have yet to hear him get bogged down in the minute details on a topic. He is able to step back and communicate the big picture to his audience. Second, he has an innate ability to make you feel like he is speaking *to* you, no matter how large the crowd. And third (and this is really a subset of the previous point), he almost never speaks in the first person singular “I.” He almost always speaks in the first person plural “we.” This speech pattern was the topic of an entire issue of *The Beacon* (**March 2008**), but it is worth a quick mention again here.

Obama has total mastery of the spoken word – the cadence, the crystal clear articulation, the strategic pause... he has the full arsenal. And he will need it. Our next President will have his challenges. He inherits a world teetering on the brink in many ways. His lack of executive experience may haunt him, and all of us. Remember... it was just four short years ago that he was a first-time US Senator, and there were some who thought at the time that he was too inexperienced for *that* job. He does not enter with any significant mandate. Obama won 52% of the vote – a nice number, to be sure, but this was no Reagan or Roosevelt landslide. Despite an unpopular President, an unpopular war, and the worst financial crisis in 70 years, 46% of the country still voted for the Republican candidate. I remind you of these statistics to simply point out that President-elect Obama has a lot of work ahead of him. He will need every ounce of those vaunted communication skills if he is to lead us to a better place.

He mastered the art of the campaign, but can he master the art of governance? Remember... politicians campaign in poetry, but they govern in prose. He has the poetry mastered. Now comes the prose.

- *Dean M. Brenner*
Wallingford, CT (November 21, 2008)