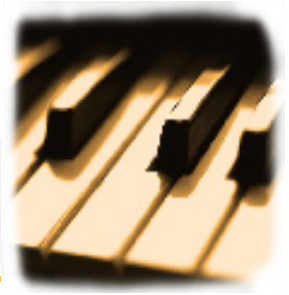


The power of uplifting leadership: Lessons from the American election



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Whether you are celebrating Obama's win or concerned about Obama's win, one thing is clear, there are some stunning lessons we all can learn from Barack Obama, Joe Biden and their campaign organisation — about the power of uplifting leadership..

In the last few days of the American Presidential campaign, we got a different glimpse of John McCain. In those last few days we saw a John McCain who was witty without being sarcastic, assertive without being angry. We saw a John McCain who knew how to laugh, who radiated a tough grandfather's warmth, who talked in positive terms about the country he loved and the reason he worked so hard and gave so much of himself to make the world a better place. Could the election have turned out differently if we had seen more of this uplifting John McCain? We'll never know.

From our perspective at The Courage Institute, this American election was a referendum about leadership that plays to our fears and entitlements versus leadership that plays to our hopes and aspirations. Hope and aspiration won. Many people voted "Yes" about new opportunity and living up to unfulfilled potential. Many people saw past Obama's race, inexperience, and Northern intellectual snobbery. In the end, many people were drawn to the beacon and came to the light.

The lesson of Obama's victory is clear. There's incredible power in what behaviour science professionals call "positive psychology" — the psychology of pride, hope, faith, dedication, altruistic commitment to a cause, confidence that you can make a difference and make things happen. Positive psychology has more power than the psychology of self-interest, greed, protectionism, blame, one-upping your opponent and magnifying fear of "the risk you can't afford to take."

Many organisations — both in business and government — are facing tough times. Success is only possible if we get people to vote, "Yes," and step up — to take a bit more initiative, solve problems faster, and seize opportunities before they get away. Your employees, investors and customers may not vote with machines or ballots but they do vote with their feet, hearts and minds. If our constituents vote positively to put enterprise or community first, we'll see them...

- Talking up the vision — in terms that are hopeful and positive, that can say clearly "what we are trying to achieve and what difference it will make in the world," rather than "what we are opposing and why that shouldn't gain prominence"
- Facing adversity with a positive, can-do attitude — and a willingness to put hard-earned capital and energy on the line to approach the future of the enterprise or the country with "skin in the game"

- A problem-solving orientation — to take initiative, find solutions and keep working until we find the best solution rather than settling for the first solution or waiting to be told what to do
- Exhibiting purpose, candour, will, rigour and risk — the 5 Courage Factors — to seize opportunities, even in a down economy where there are fewer opportunities to seize

Our colleague Joel Katz, of Leadership Acumen, calls this combination of success behaviours “discretionary effort,” and considers that to be the real test of leadership, especially at times of change, adversity or in a diverse and unfamiliar business environment. Our colleagues Rob Cooke and Janet Szumal, at Human Synergistics, call this an “achievement and self-expressive culture,” rather than a “competitive or avoidance culture.” In his recent book, *Sense of Urgency*, change guru John Kotter differentiates between a real sense of urgency that inspires teams to strive for betterment and to seize opportunity before the window closes, and a false sense of urgency based on a fear of failure.

In a business environment where it’s getting harder to raise capital, where it’s harder to differentiate your offerings from savvy competitors, where partners and customers are global and may not respect your national holidays or business hours, we know that you and other leaders are facing unprecedented pressures. Your pressures may equal the gruelling demands of an American presidential campaign. Like McCain and Obama, you may be asked to “show your stuff” under constant scrutiny, a relentless pace, resource limitations, stringent regulatory requirements and unexpected and worsening market conditions.

Make no mistake about it, Barack Obama’s victory wasn’t magic. It wasn’t destiny. It wasn’t just because he out-spent his opponent. It’s because he captivated the hearts, minds and imaginations of so many Americans — and citizens of the world — who took him at his word. Media analysts say that Obama and Biden balanced “attack ads” and “positive, forward-looking, vision-of-the-future” ads; in contrast to McCain and Palin, whose messages were reported to be 90% negative and on-the-attack.

You have the same opportunity, starting tomorrow, in your own organisation or community. You can appeal to fear (e.g., “We’ll be in a deep mess if we don’t do X”) — or you can appeal to pride, passion, values and the universal desire to make a difference and leave a positive legacy.

- What’s the “change you want your stakeholders to believe in” — and help you push forward?
- What’s the one concrete thing you can ask them to do, to help you “get out the vote”?
- How do your employees, customers and investors have opportunity to do more than eke out a living or add to their net worth? How does your enterprise give them an opportunity to make history, to be the best or first in class, to meet unmet needs?
- What makes you believe in their untapped potential — and believe that they can, indeed, help you make success happen?
- Who will amplify your voice, reach out to constituents and stakeholders, and be your grassroots organisation to listen, allay concerns, reassure and prod people along?
- Who will serve as your Colin Powell and your Bill Clinton — and reinforce the compelling message that you are calling on your constituents to execute?

If you can articulate all this to yourself and your constituents, you’re well on your way to being able to recreate Obama’s magic — whether you’re a business leader in Kenya, a

community organiser in Ottawa, a C-suite executive in London or Brussels, or a product leader in Cambridge. Can you create the Obama magic and captivate the hearts and minds of the “voters” you need to win over? We believe that you can. Starting now. And, if you need a sounding board to help you sharpen your message, feel free to contact us @ upliftingleadership@courageinstitute.org



Dr Merom Klein is the principal architect of The Courage Institute’s team mobilization methodology for leadership development and co-author of the book, [The Courage to Act](#), which describes the research and thinking behind the 5 Courage Factors. Merom has over 25 years of experience designing and conducting leadership development programs for clients like Merck, Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer, CIGNA Healthcare, Aetna, ARAMARK, PowderJect, Rafa’el, GE Healthcare, ArQule and Infinity. Merom earned his PhD at Temple University, with a speciality in organization development and leadership. You can reach Merom at merom.klein@courageinstitute.org



Dr Louise (Yochee) Klein is director of The Courage Institute’s executive coaching practice. Louise has personally coached thousands of executives at various levels to bounce back after they have hit the wall and embrace new leadership challenges with a higher level of courage — and has equipped internal HR partners and external coaches to function as courage mentors. Her clients have included ITI, Janssen OrthMcNeil, PrediX, Millennium, GE Financial Services, Methodist Hospital, Solvay and Quintiles.

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