

Barack Obama

'Yes We Can' was the slogan that helped Obama Barack to become president of the United States in 2008. "It is time again for a new generation of leadership" said Senator Kennedy during Obama's election campaign¹, simply foretelling the president's leadership qualities. The leadership model helps to analyze these qualities and consists of five inter-connected elements: the leader, the leadership process, his followers, the context, as well as the performance achieved.

The Leader

Born in Hawaii in 1961, Mr. Obama studied law at Harvard University and became a Democrat Senator in 2004. The fact that he describes his Kenyan father as a Muslim is possibly one reason why the president feels comfortable about addressing crowds with a non-US cultural background. Also, the four years he spent in Indonesia during his childhood have certainly contributed to his inter-cultural leadership skills.

Leadership Process

Mr. Barack can certainly be characterized as a leader. According to Zaleznik, a leader identifies long-standing issues and discovers innovative solutions². Tackling environmental issues, improving education and reforming health care can be considered as long-standing issues. Also, his oratory skills have similarities to Martin Luther King, writes *Business Week*³. In his speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention Mr. Barack told the American people "you're on your own"⁴ and that they have to stand up because change does not come from but to Washington. He leads the people by giving them hope ("I've seen it [change]") and by telling them that they need to act. In the end, appearing to be in control might have made him president, as it says in an article in the Washington Post⁵.

Followers

"We love you, Obama" was the greeting Mr. Barack received on his way to the inauguration ceremony⁶. His followers seem to faint regularly during his appearances⁷ while expressing their admiration and excitement about the president. Bligh and Kohles⁸ talk about a bonding among Mr. Obama's followers not only as a result of his charismatic leadership but also causing an augmented perception of the leader himself. Consequently, Mr. Barack's ability to stimulate

¹ The New York Times. (28. January 2008). *Kennedy Calls Obama 'New Generation of Leadership'*. Retrieved 16. September 2009 from The New York Times:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/28/us/politics/28cnd-dems.html>

² Zalzenik, A. (2004). *Managers & Leaders: Are They Different?* Harvard Business Review.

³ Gallo, C. (3. March 2008). *How to Inspire People Like Obama Does*. Retrieved 16. September 2009 from http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/mar2008/sb2008033_156351.htm

⁴ The New York Times. (28. August 2008). *Barack Obama's Acceptance Speech*. Retrieved 18. September 2009 from The New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/28/us/politics/28text-obama.html>

⁵ Achenbach, J. (6. November 2008). *In a Heated Race, Obama's Cool Won the Day*. Retrieved 17. September 2009 from The Washington Post: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/05/AR2008110504484.html>

⁶ CNN. (17. January 2009). *Obama to crowds: 'I love you back'*. Retrieved 18. September 2009 from CNN Politics: <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/01/17/obama.train/index.html>

⁷ Taranto, J. (14. February 2008). *We Shall Be Overcome*. Retrieved 18. September 2009 from The Wall Street Journal: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120300929392268785.html>

⁸ Bligh, M. C., & Kohles, J. C. (2009). The enduring allure of charisma: How Barack Obama won the historic 2008 presidential election. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 483-492.

feelings of togetherness among his followers transformed the way that he is perceived by the public.

Context

Adapting leadership style to different audiences is essential especially in the case of heterogeneous followers. In his speech in Cairo, Mr. Obama addressed the public with “Assalaamu alaykum” , thereby earning a loud applause⁹. In the United States, the president usually ends his speeches with ‘God bless the United States of America’. Your way of addressing your audience is merely an example of how well you understand your listeners; yet, Mr. Obama has obviously a talent for choosing the right words to please the public. Furthermore, he appeals to both white and black US citizens, the latter giving him 95% of their vote in the presidential elections in 2008^{10,11}. Still, there have been several racially tinged debates since Mr. Obama’s inauguration, suggesting that racial barriers still exist in US politics.

Performance

As Ulrich et al. have noted, “Effective leaders must connect attributes to results”¹². Even though Mr. Obama was able to convince the majority of US citizens of his skills (his approval rating stood at 70% after his inauguration), the rating has fallen to merely 50%, according to the *The Economist*¹³. Especially his fight over health care reform might bring him down to his knees. Mr. Barack obviously has not yet been able to lead the United States where he had planned to; the followers are not fully convinced of his leadership. Yet, his recent speech before Congress might transform the case of health care reformation into a success¹⁴. Hopefully, he will manage to do so.

⁹ The White House. (4. June 2009). *Remarks by the President on a New Beginning*. Retrieved 17. September 2009 from The White House: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/

¹⁰ Curl, J. (17. September 2009). *Obama can't escape race card*. Retrieved 18. September 2009 from The Washington Times: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/sep/17/obama-cant-escape-race-card/>

¹¹ Bacon, P. (23. January 2007). *Can Obama Count On The Black Vote?* Retrieved 18. September 2009 from Time: <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1581666,00.html>

¹² Ulrich, D., Zenger, J., & Smallwood, N. (1999). *Results-Based Leadership*. Harvard College.

¹³ The Economist. (5th. September 2009). Why can't they just get on? pp. 51-52.

¹⁴ The Economist. (10. September 2009). *Fired up and ready to go*. Retrieved 17. September 2009 from The Economist: http://www.economist.com/world/unitedstates/displaystory.cfm?story_id=14416706