

For July 22, 2009

By Doc Heide

When do people decide to become accountants? When they realize they don't have enough charisma to be statisticians.

I heard that joke from an accountant who found out Lee Becker and I will be teaching a workshop next week on "charismatic communication" at the Medical College of Wisconsin's Door County Summer Institute. While some accountants are charismatic, professions do seem to vary in how much their practitioners display of this elusive quality.

Politicians can range from the highly charismatic (JFK) to the less so (Al Gore). Astronomers were reportedly worried that if John Kerry met Ralph Nader during the 2004 campaign, it could cause a "charisma black hole."

Actors, however, are mostly charismatic. They have to be. Nobody hires a dull actor.

Conjuring Charisma

Is it possible they know something that could help other professions? That's the premise behind the work Lee and I do.

I got interested in "charisma" several years ago when I heard a guy on NPR claim it was a characteristic shared by all great presidents. I assumed it had never been studied scientifically. I was wrong.

Turns out that over the past 25 years, organizational psychologists have looked at it with a fine-tooth comb. They've concluded that charismatic leaders are significantly more effective than ones who are merely structured or supportive.

The same is true in other professions. Charismatic teachers are much more memorable. Charismatic physicians have bigger caseloads. Charisma has

almost magical qualities, such as making people who have it seem more physically attractive than they really are.

Are people born charismatic, or can they learn to be that way? Both. It's a personality characteristic, but new research shows that people can learn "charismatic behaviors".

Charisma can be either verbal or nonverbal. Verbal charisma is eloquent words conveying an inspiring vision, like "I have a dream". But research shows that the nonverbal part is actually more influential.

Improv Improvement

We teach these nonverbal skills via a modified version of the improvisational theatre games we learned from our brilliant mentor Paul Sills, who passed away in 2008. At the Second City in Chicago and later in New York, Paul used these methods to train a few folks you might have heard of, like Alan Arkin, Mike Nichols and Joan Rivers---not to mention the magnetic Doug Mancheski.

When we do certain things with our voices or bodies, others tend to rate us as more charismatic. But the way Lee and I teach these skills is not mechanical. Instead, we do what Paul did: Encourage people to spontaneously explore the vast personality regions where they often fear to tread.

We don't claim to make a bore into an Obama. Still, people often make noticeable improvements through a method we learned at AFT and are increasingly finding helpful for almost anybody.

See you under the stars.

AFT performs at the Peninsula State Park Theatre Monday-Saturday through August 29. The world premiere ***Cheeseheads, the Musical*** plays Monday at 8 pm, Wednesday at 6 pm, Thursday at 8 pm and Saturday at 8:30pm. ***Sunsets & S'mores***, a centennial celebration of Peninsula State Park, plays 8 pm on

Tuesday and 6 pm on Saturday. ***Muskie Love*** returns on Wednesday at 8:30pm and Friday at 8 pm. Advanced and reserved tickets are available at www.folkloretheatre.com, at 854-6117, at the AFT office in the Green Gables Shops in North Ephraim, or at the box office at the theatre one hour prior to performance. A park sticker is not required in the theatre lot for the show.

Doc Heide is co-founder, playwright, and performer with American Folklore Theatre.