

# ABAL: LEADERSHIP OBAMA STYLE



During the past year or so, we have witnessed the rise in prominence and the election, as President of the United States of America, of **Barack Obama** – a man of mixed race, from a dysfunctional upbringing, with Muslim roots and from a non privileged background.

An experienced observer of U.S. politics would have given the probability of such an eventuality as very small.

Barack Obama has managed to persuade vast numbers of Americans ... both Democrat and Republican to support his candidacy and the latest Gallup Poll figure show that his approval ratings amongst Republican voters has gone from 27% at the time of the Presidential Election but soared to 42% after his first speech to Congress just one month after he assumed office.

He has also influenced European citizens to the extent that he has 80% popular support here. Similar approval ratings are seen around the world and it would appear that people are willing to cede world political leadership to Obama after 8 years of 'George the Bad' (common perception).

## WHY AND HOW DID THIS OCCUR?

Most pundits suggest that the explanation lies in his '**leadership style**' which matched the expectations and emotional state of voters and arrived at a time of high political dissatisfaction within the U.S. and across the Globe.

## WHAT IS 'LEADERSHIP'?

"Achieving results by inspiring others to follow your lead by creating a compelling vision of the future and the environment where they want to participate in achieving it."

As a means of getting better results from people, leadership is much more effective than Management. Practical studies in the USA have shown that the majority of great (commercially most successful) companies exhibit a strong leadership style – See 'Good to Great' – Jim Collins ISBN 9780712676090.

A Luxembourg Grand Region study of 800 professionals and managers showed that these employees considered that they had untapped discretionary commitment of an average of 35% and that some or most of this could be released if their management adopted a leadership as opposed to a management style. When asked, everyone would like to be led rather than managed.

Attempts to define leadership are constantly evolving but a reasonable list of attributes would include:

**Humanity:** People like their leaders to be human and to show humility when appropriate. Obama has shown these qualities in apologising for mistakes, openly -declaring when he doesn't know, showing deep concern for the plight of disadvantaged people in Chicago, admitting to trying unsuccessfully to give up smoking over a long period and giving his family a very high priority throughout his campaign.

**Charisma:** Charismatic leadership has characterised business and industry



during the recent past but has lately become discredited. We have seen several charismatic leaders fail to deliver .... Enron, WorldCom, Royal Bank of Scotland, Chrysler and it is now considered to be a useful attribute only provided that all other attributes are present. Jack Welch is a good example of a charismatic successful leader and he exhibited most of the leadership attributes described below.

Obama has charisma – “that personal attractiveness or interestingness that enables them to influence others”... People feel attracted to him and this gives him significant power to influence their choices. It would appear that he has most of the other important leadership attributes but time will tell.

**Visibility:** Obama has been extremely visible throughout his candidacy and has used all modern means of achieving such a high visibility... TV, radio, web, e-mail, YouTube, viral videos, SMS texting etc. as well as following the more traditional ‘stumping’ across the USA.

As President Elect he continued to put himself in the forefront but always insisting that “we can have only one President at a time”.

He constantly refers to other popular U.S. role models... JFK, Lincoln, Luther King etc and this strikes a chord with many. Whilst of a mixed race, he has largely managed to make this a non-issue for most, whilst retaining this as an advantage amongst coloured voters.

I'm fascinated by Lyndon Johnson; there's a piece of him in me. That kind of hunger—desperate to win, please, succeed, dominate—I don't know any politician who doesn't have some of that reptilian side to him. But that's not the dominant part of me. On the other hand, I don't know that it was the dominant part of Lincoln. The guy was pretty reflective.

*Men's Vogue, Fall 2006*

His books – he has written three, show a depth of philosophical thinking which intrigues and entertains. Readers feel an affinity with him which is rare in political biographies and it has to be noted that these books were written before he publicly considered standing for high office.

He is an avid basketball player and golfer and rumour has it that a basketball court will replace the bowling alley installed by President Nixon in the basement of the White House. Maybe a golf course on the lawns?

**Results Focus:** This is probably the most critical of all the attributes as the final approval from voters will be that the vision and promises are largely achieved. Obama will have a period of one year plus to start to deliver but if he fails, people will gradually become disillusioned and support will wither.

Obama is a detailed planner and has a strong drive for action, so this will probably lead to some short term successes. He is a calculated risk taker and excellent problem solver using his key leadership team.

His website during his campaign was [www.change.gov](http://www.change.gov) but this is now replaced by [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)... maybe not a smart move from an image perspective.

**Commitment:** He took a long time to decide whether to run for President but then polarised into action and galvanised his campaign team in record time.

He cut his teeth after graduating from Harvard Law School helping disadvantaged people in the Chicago suburbs and working towards civil rights. As a U.S. senator he pushed for open government and social justice and has little patience with rules and procedures which may not endear him to some Washington civil servants.

He demonstrates very strong commitment to his ideas for improving America.

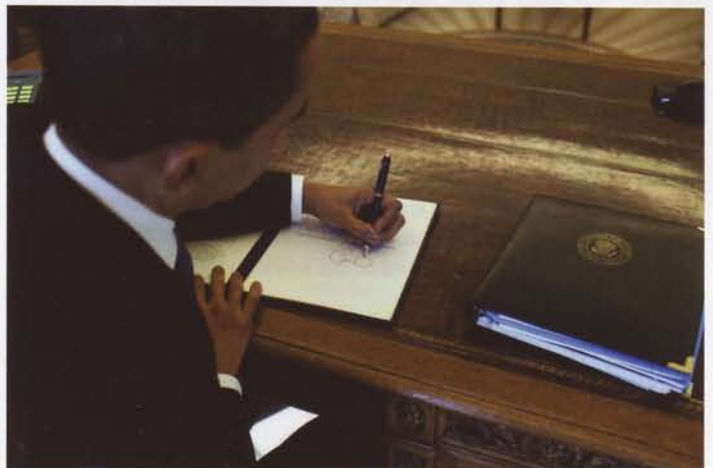
**Integrity:** Obama shows his mid-western roots (his mother and grandmother were from Kansas) by espousing values of fairness, empathy and service as well as a strong Christian ethos. Some people talk about ‘no drama Obama’ which shows his tenacity but coolness in driving towards his goals but in a way which engenders trust in those with whom he engages. Obama has a strong ego but manages to submerge it successfully.... Statements such as “this is not about me” give him a positive image and encourage people to follow him.

He has already demonstrated his integrity by accepting his mistakes with a prompt “I screwed up” admission after three of his chosen team resigned in disgrace.

When talking about well known military scenarios, he talks about ‘success’ in the context of achieving the wider objectives rather than ‘winning’, as did his predecessor.

One measure of his personality is that... people would feel comfortable to buy a second hand car from him (this was a comment made about Richard Nixon in the early 70s “would you buy a second hand car from this man?”).

**Communication:** Obama is a great orator and entrances his audiences by his use of words (every word seems to count), pauses, eye contact, body language, gestures, economy of movement, use of narrative, flattery of his audience, self deprecating humour, reflective stance and he can think on his feet. He recovered from the Oath of Office stumble with a smile and good humour ... the Chief Justice was not so comfortable. Both had clearly rehearsed the words extensively but in different segments and this caused the misalignment “no drama Obama” handled this with ease in front of billions of people around the world.



Audiences have the perception that he is talking to them individually, as equals, and warm to this. His eye contact is very powerful and he seldom seems to blink even under stress, when his anger control is superb.

**Courage:** In his support of the disadvantaged people in the Chicago suburbs, he stood up against City Hall which could have affected his chances at political advancement but he has visibly followed his ideals and values. In this area we can see some shortcomings, as when in office in the Illinois State Legislature he avoided voting on 129 occasions, being marked as 'present' rather than voting for or against.

He seems to handle the unknown with great verve and nothing seems to deflect him from his purpose.

He is reported to have said "I don't tell my mother-in-law what to do... I'm not a stupid man". He has courage but knows when he faces a lost cause!

It remains to be seen how well he will deal with the Washington establishment and the various lobby groups.

**Teamwork:** Here Obama is a master practitioner and has realised that with the complexity of modern life, no one individual has the knowledge or capability to effectively absorb and manage the content surrounding any chosen topic. He relies heavily on his meritocratic team but drives for "group unity around the best possible outcome".

During his campaign, he stated that "I might not be the best candidate but I have the best team!" In doing this, he credits the team but when things go wrong he takes the blame – true leadership behaviour.

Unless expressing a personal opinion, he talks about "We" rather than "I"... another mark of a leader.

His election campaign team was a model of delegation and empowerment and this has carried over into his White House team where he aligns authority with responsibility and focuses on 'collective ability'. There is little evidence of cronyism.

**Self Belief:** From his writings, he appears to have been searching for years but seems to have crystallised his values, principles and beliefs. He is confident, articulate, benevolent, gracious and considerate.

He does not appear comfortable with executive decisions and this could cause some loss of respect, as previous presidents have always used this tool widely. In the real world, team decisions are always better than the best individual in the team so, from a leadership perspective, his approach is sound.

**Vision:** Followers value highly a clear vision of where they are going and Obama's vision is to do what is right for the USA regardless of partisan interest and to bring about change in the best interests of the majority. His socialist programs do not appeal to everyone but most accept the need to address some of the less caring aspects of U.S. society. His view of the future inspires people and addresses some of the 'hunger' of the 80% of citizens who disapproved of his predecessor.

He has been accused of flip-flopping over some issues and this is damaging... He would do well to rely on his team consensus in arriving at controversial positions.

**Personality:** The most common personality test is the Myers-Briggs model, based on the theories of Carl Gustav Jung, which asks the participant to answer questions and then plots their preferences on an eight dimension model... See Figure 1.

Observers have plotted how they believe Obama might respond to these questions and he comes out as having an INTJ personality – one which only 1% of the U.S. population exhibit.

The Myers-Briggs factors are:

From where the person derives their energy-

– Extraversion – from being with people

– Introversion – from inner contemplation\*

How they gather information-

– Sensing – data and detail

– iNtuition- indirectly via people\*

How they make decisions-

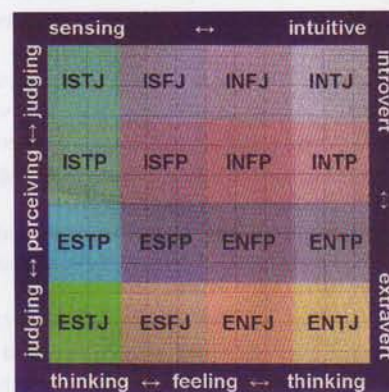
– Thinking – objective logic\*

– Feeling – subjective feeling

How they get things done-

– Judging – planning in detail\*

– Perceiving – flexibility and options



As a side note, only 6 previous presidents were INTJ JFK, Woodrow Wilson, James Polk, Thomas Jefferson, Calvin Coolidge, Chester Arthur. Others from his personality type include Raymond Burr (Perry Mason) and Augustus Caesar – Emperor of Rome.

**Conclusions:** The jury is out but most people are optimistic that the strong leadership shown by Obama will achieve the change they believe is needed.

Good leaders look out for themselves, their stakeholders and their company (country).

Obama does this in good measure but as power tends to corrupt it remains to be seen if the most powerful role on earth does not change him.



European fans need to be very circumspect about Obama's interest in their well being. It may be that what is good for the USA will also be good for Europe but we should remember that Obama's first loyalty and concern is for the USA... Europe needs to work out its own salvation whilst being a good partner with a strong USA led by **Barack Obama**.

**Chris Garratt**  
*Leadership Solutions Europe*