



Smiles give leadership clues

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While I'm not trained in the complex skill of distinguishing fake from sincere smiles, my observation is that some presidential candidates express more genuine positive emotions than others.

Sincere (or "Duchenne") smiles contract both the orbicularis oculi, the muscle that encircles the eye and produces crow's feet, and the zygomaticus major muscles, which raise the corners of the lips. Duchenne smiles are extremely hard to fake and characterize genuinely happy people. In 2005, with Ed Diener and Laura King, I published a meta-analysis (a study of 225 studies) of the benefits of happiness. Happy people are more productive at work, more creative, more charitable, more energetic, friendlier and healthier.

The happier a person is, the more effectively he copes with challenges, the higher goals he sets, the less likely he will suffer burnout and the more likely he will receive favorable evaluations from his supervisor. Presidents may not have supervisors, but they do have constituents and rivals, who are only too glad to offer their opinions.

Of course, being happy doesn't guarantee success -- Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln are examples of unhappy or depressed individuals who realized greatness. Intelligence, integrity, perseverance and social criticism are also critical to success.

Then there's President Bush. In his book "Dead Certainty," Robert Draper describes Bush as professing abundant confidence, even "dead certainty" about his policies. I suspect that Bush's tragic flaw is not so much his happiness, but his overconfidence and lack of realism.

Happiness linked with accomplishment and a justified sense of security and satisfaction is a force for good. Happiness associated with the denial of reality, insecurity and refusal to accommodate beliefs at odds with yours, is not.

I'm rooting for a president who is genuinely happy. Because the campaign trail is not renowned for sincere displays of emotion, personality or behavior, we might look for clues to genuine happiness in the candidates' unscripted Duchenne smiles.

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