

# Not everyone has natural charm – but it may just be possible to learn how to show it

by Nick Jackson, Science Editor Thursday, 3 May 2007

<sup>1</sup> Anyone happening on the conference room at London hotel last month might have thought they had walked in on a cult. Respectable HR (human resources) executives stood enthusing about picnics, heads stock still like a marionette's, others compulsively touched their face, and some stared curiously at people's heads. One pointed to the wall: 'Magic mushrooms,' he said. The cause was not hallucinogenic but charismatic. They were attending a course run by The Spontaneity Shop, to showcase techniques to learn charm.

<sup>2</sup> In 1964 when Sheldon Lee Glashow was looking to name the mysterious fourth quark, he gave it the name of 'charm', and charm has always been a difficult quality to pin down. It is also invaluable. Almost alone it launched the careers of Johnny Depp and George Clooney, Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. Most of us assume charm is something you are born with, you have it or you do not. But now many confidence coaches and business trainers reckon you can learn it.

Which is why last week we were gathered in the Euston Square Hotel enthusing about holidays and trying to keep our heads still. 'We think charm is a behavioural procedure,' says Deborah Frances-White, co-founder of the Spontaneity Shop, an improvisation group that teaches business people how to be more charismatic. 'What George Clooney or Bill Clinton do can be *broken down*.'

<sup>3</sup> The Spontaneity Shop teaches two main charisma techniques: adopting confident behaviours and engaging with whoever you are dealing with. Frances-White identifies behaviours like touching your face, moving your head, failing to make eye contact and umming before sentences with 'low status'.

<sup>4</sup> Developing physical confidence, 'high status' behaviours, is about changing these and replacing them with behaviours that make you seem like someone *to be reckoned with*. High status on its own is not enough. You also, she says, need to raise the status of the person you're with to be charismatic. That

means listening and complimenting, making them feel valued.

Together, Frances-White calls this charismatic package 'happy high status', and it is a technique, she says, which has helped clients deal with colleagues and overcome shyness.

<sup>5</sup> Charisma is so important that some scientists are now studying it. Richard Wiseman, a psychology professor at the University of Hertfordshire and author of *Quirkology*, defines charisma as 'emotional contagion', the ability to infect others with your emotions. Professor Wiseman reckons that like most personality behaviours it is 50 per cent natural and 50 per cent learnt. But he is sceptical about courses like the Spontaneity Shop's. 'Just because it's learnt does not mean you can learn it,' he says. 'It can look horribly manipulative. These signs are so natural and complex, it can look rather weird.'

<sup>6</sup> Professor Wiseman agrees with the *broad brush strokes* of the Spontaneity Shop but says the key is to *keep it subtle*. In his studies ➡

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➡ of the gestures that charismatics use he says that they send out precisely the core signals, rather than trying to enthuse with wild energy. 'They're not *overegging the pudding*,' he says. If you do get it right, charm works. In 2005, Professor Wiseman conducted a study of 200 participants in FameLab, a national competition to find the new faces of science. Those best able to transmit their emotions also did best in the competition.

<sup>7</sup> Recruitment experts agree. One of the big things many recruiters look for is charisma, says Paul Collier, associate director at Marks Sattin, a financial recruitment consultancy. Half of what he looks for in a candidate is personality. 'It's important that candidates show an enthusiasm and passion,' says Collier.

<sup>8</sup> For those of us hopelessly uncharismatic, Collier is reassuring. Many employers are looking to recruit for teams, for the right

mix of personalities, including the quieter as well as the more charismatic. And charm can only take you so far. 'Companies look for *team fit* and technical skills,' says Collier. 'All the charisma in the world, on its own, isn't going to get you a job.'

### Top tips

#### 1. Slow down

Charismatic people aren't in a rush. Take time to consider your replies, move smoothly and deliberately.

#### 2. Don't fidget

Don't shift from foot to foot, arrive where you want to be and stop. When you make a gesture, it should be clear and deliberate. Keep your hands in view and especially don't touch your own face.

#### 3. Smile freely

Be warm and empathetic. Compliment other people freely

and make sure you are not defensive.

#### 4. Maintain eye contact

But stop before this becomes an intimidating stare.

#### 5. Take up the space around you

But beware of invading someone else's space.

Source: the Spontaneity Shop

**'What George Clooney or Bill Clinton do can be broken down.'**  
**'the key is to keep it subtle' ■**