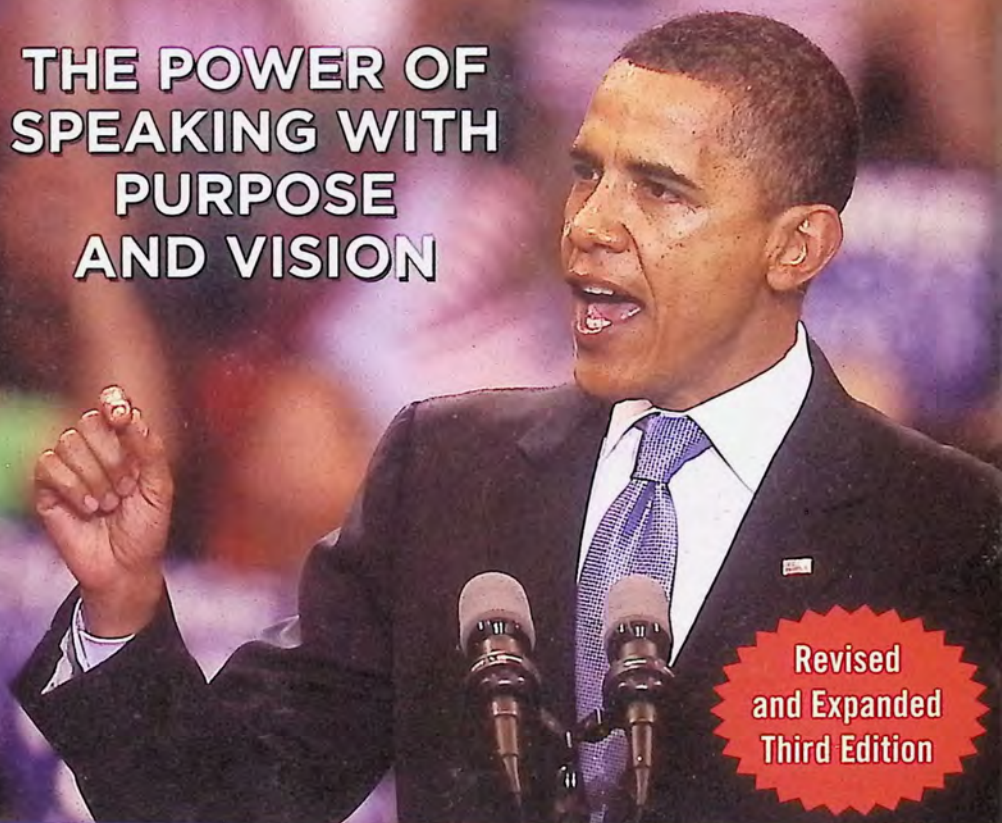


Revised and Expanded to Include the  
Most Powerful Historic Speeches of President  
Obama's First Term in the White House

THE POWER OF  
SPEAKING WITH  
PURPOSE  
AND VISION



Revised  
and Expanded  
Third Edition

# SAY IT LIKE OBAMA AND WIN!

SHEL LEANNE

*author of Leadership the Barack Obama Way*

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ENDNOTES

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the years, I have greatly enjoyed teaching about leadership, focusing on leadership best practices and topics such as building high-performing teams, leading high-performing teams, and building a strong “personal brand.” As I have taught or spoken on such topics in a wide variety of environments, leaders of all backgrounds and levels of achievement—from seasoned CEOs to young emerging leaders—have inquired about President Barack Obama. Regardless as to whether they support Obama’s stances or not, they have universally viewed President Obama as a highly accomplished orator whose strength as a communicator has enabled him to gain the support of millions of people and helped him to make history. “What is President Obama doing?” they have asked. What best practices and techniques enable his success, and what can they learn? This book is intended to address these questions, providing a valuable glimpse into one of the most accomplished speakers in recent years.

Writing this book has been particularly fascinating for me given the depth of my work in South Africa. Since the 1990s, I have had the pleasure of meeting some of South Africa’s greatest leaders—who are indeed among the world’s most esteemed leaders—including President Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Walter Sisulu, and Senator Govan Mbeki. I have greatly benefited from their examples and from



## CHAPTER 1

# THE SPEECH THAT STARTED IT ALL

On a night of the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Barack Obama stepped onstage and electrified America with his keynote address. His discourse, widely hailed as inspiring and eloquent, provides a valuable snapshot of the excellent communication practices Obama employs as he harnesses the power of speaking with purpose and vision. Through his delivery, we learn how substance and style can work together to increase the effectiveness and impact of communication.

This chapter presents the 2004 keynote address in full. Obama's written words are annotated with references to some of the gestures, tone, and pacing techniques he employed in delivering his career-accelerating address. Let's look at what made the 2004 speech such a success.

## ➤ 2004 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION ✧ KEYNOTE ADDRESS, JULY 27, 2004

In the minutes before Barack Obama takes to the stage, Illinois Senator Dick Durbin sings Obama's praises to the Boston audience and to millions of TV viewers. He refers to Barack Obama as a man whose "life celebrates the opportunity of America . . . family reflects the hope of an embracing nation . . . values rekindle our faith in a new generation. . . ." He praises Obama for having "the extraordinary gift to bring people together of all different backgrounds."

Barack Obama walks onto the stage with a brisk, purposeful, confident gait. He makes immediate visual contact with the audience, clapping his hands along with them—the first signs of connection. He stretches his arm toward the audience in an open-palmed wave and then greets Durbin with a warm embrace that signifies the deep respect of dear friends. With applause still ringing, Obama makes his way to the lectern, planting his feet firmly, shoulders squared. He touches each hand to the lectern, possessing it—a posture of confidence and authority. With chin lifted, he bows ever so slightly to the audience, his gesture of appreciation and gratitude. As the applause continues, Obama folds his hands neatly on the lectern and smiles humbly, seeming to gain strength from the crowd's enthusiasm.

As the applause subsides, Obama thanks Senator Durbin. He takes in a breath and the resonant baritone of his voice rolls as he begins his 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address:

On behalf of the great state of Illinois, [*the crowd applauds, and Obama's eyes sparkle with pride at speaking the name of his home state*] crossroads of a nation [*pause*], Land of Lincoln, let me express my deepest gratitude for the privilege of addressing this convention. [*He reaches out to the audience with open hands, conveying his gratitude.*]

Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. [*Obama places his hand over his heart. His intonation underscores the irony of the circumstances.*] My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father, my grandfather, was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. [*He pinches the fingers of his right hand, underscoring his point.*]

But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. [*Obama stretches his palms upward, as if measuring the enormity of the dreams.*] Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place: *America* [*italics added for emphasis*], that shone as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before. [*His inflection conveys patriotic pride and generates applause.*]

While studying here, my father met my mother. She was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas. [*Obama gestures with a hand off in a direction, indicating far, far away. He flashes a bright smile toward the part of the crowd that cheers upon hearing "Kansas" and waves to them in a tender gesture.*] Her father worked on oil rigs

and farms through most of the Depression. The day after Pearl Harbor my grandfather signed up for duty, joined Patton's army, marched across Europe. Back home, my grandmother raised a baby *and* [emphasis] went to work on a bomber assembly line. After the war, they studied on the GI Bill, bought a house through FHA, and later moved west, all the way to Hawaii, in search of opportunity.

And they, too, had big dreams for their daughter, a common dream, born of two continents. My parents shared not only an improbable love; they shared an *abiding* faith in the possibilities of this nation. [Obama speaks the words with pride and reverence; his hand extended to the audience, signifying shared awe in all the United States has to give.]

They would give me an African name, Barack, or "blessed," [he touches his hand over his heart] believing that in a *tolerant* [emphasis] America [he pinches the fingers of his right hand] your name is no barrier to success. [Applause.] They *imagined* me going to the best schools in the land, *even though they weren't rich*, because in a *generous* America you don't have to be rich [he raises a palm to the crowd, a little stop sign, as if to halt any notion that richness is a precursor to success] to achieve your potential. [Applause.] They are both passed away now. Yet, I know that, on this night, they look down on me with great pride.

I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents' dreams live on in my two precious daughters. [Sincerity rings in his tone.] I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story [he stretches a hand to the audience, reaching out to them],

that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible. [*He pinches his fingers with those words, his voice bursting with pride. He pauses as some audience members rise in ovation.*]

Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation, not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy. Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, [*he amplifies his voice slightly, speaking the patriotic words with care and curls his right fingers into a C, motioning in front of him as if setting the words on air*] that all men are created equal. [*Applause.*] That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

*That [emphasis] is the true genius of America, [applause] a faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles. That we can tuck in our children at night and know they are fed and clothed and safe from harm. That we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door. [Obama knocks a balled fist on an imaginary door.] That we can have an idea and start our own business without paying a bribe. That we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution, and that our votes will be counted—at least, most of the time. [He allows his tone to fall flat, disapproving, signaling a wry reference to the disputed 2000 U.S. presidential election results. The audience responds with jeers, sharing his disapproval.]*

This year, in this election, we are called to reaffirm our values and our commitments, to hold them against a hard reality, and see how we are measuring up to the legacy of our forebearers and the promise of future generations. And fellow Americans—Democrats, Republicans, Independents—I say to you tonight: we have more work to do. [*Obama stresses the words, his tone issuing the statement as a challenge. More applause.*] More work to do for the workers I met in Galesburg, Illinois, who are losing their union jobs at the Maytag plant that's moving to Mexico, and now are having to compete with their own children for jobs that pay seven bucks an hour. [*His tone rings with disapproval.*] More to do for the father that I met who was losing his job and choking back the tears, wondering how he would pay \$4,500 a month for the drugs his son needs without the health benefits that he counted on. [*His tone conveys great empathy.*] More to do for the young woman in East St. Louis, and thousands more like her, who *has the grades, has the drive, has the will*, [*he emphasizes the words and his slight pauses add power to the delivery*] but doesn't have the money to go to college.

Now, don't get me wrong. The people I meet in small towns and big cities, in diners and office parks, they don't expect government to solve all their problems. They know they have to work hard to get ahead, and *they want to*. [*Obama stresses the words as he pinches his fingers to further accentuate his statement.*] Go into the collar counties around Chicago, and people will tell you they don't want their tax money wasted by a welfare agency *or by the Pentagon*. [*His amplification of these last four words makes a*

*negative reference to the Iraq War, drawing reaction from the audience.*] Go into any inner city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach our kids to learn. They know that parents have to teach, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations [*he gestures upward as if raising a bar*], and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white. [*He wags his index finger, as if chastising someone for that belief.*] They know those things. [*Enthusiastic applause.*] People don't expect government to solve all their problems. [*He lifts a vertical palm to the audience, as if halting the very notion.*] But they sense, deep in their bones, [*he raises a soft fist and thumps it in air*] that with just a slight change in priorities, [*he moves his right fingers as if turning a knob slightly to adjust it*] we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life, and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all. *They know*, [*he pinches his fingers, underscoring his emphasis of the words*] we can do better, [*a brief pause*] and they want that choice.

In this election, [*Obama raises his index finger in the air, raising it like a staff*] we offer that choice. Our party has chosen a man to lead us who embodies the best this country has to offer. [*Pride rings in his tone.*] And that man is John Kerry. [*His tone is firm and resolute. Applause.*] John Kerry understands the ideals of community, faith, and service, because they've defined his life. [*He pinches his fingers to give each word weight.*] From his heroic service in Vietnam to his years as prosecutor and lieutenant governor, through two decades in the United States Senate,

he has devoted himself to this country. [*He turns both palms upward, as if presenting a gift or offering, underscoring his description of Kerry's devotion and service.*] Again and again, we've seen him make tough choices when easier ones were available. His values and his record affirm what is best in us. [*He varies his tone and amplifies his volume.*]

John Kerry believes in an America where hard work is rewarded. So instead of offering tax breaks to companies shipping jobs overseas, [*Obama motions his hand off dismissively to the right*] he offers them to companies creating jobs here at home. [*He moves both hands to the left as if moving an object to where it belongs, signifying how much more Kerry would give to the alternative of keeping jobs at home. Applause.*]

John Kerry believes in an America where *all* [*emphasis*] Americans can afford the same health coverage our politicians in Washington have for themselves. [*Applause.*] John Kerry believes in energy independence, so we aren't held hostage to the profits of oil companies [*Obama motions his hand like a stop sign*] or the sabotage of foreign oil fields. [*Applause.*] John Kerry believes in the constitutional freedoms that have made our country the envy of the world, and he will never sacrifice our basic liberties nor use faith as a wedge to divide us. [*Pause for applause.*] And John Kerry believes that in a dangerous world, war must be an option sometimes, [*he points his index finger in the air, signifying the importance*] but it should never be the *first* [*emphasis*] option. [*Applause.*]

A while back, I met a young man named Shamus in a VFW Hall in East Moline, Illinois. He was a good-



looking kid, six-two, six-three, clear-eyed, with an easy smile [*the texture of Obama's tone is wistful, conveying admiration*]. He told me he'd joined the marines and was heading to Iraq the following week. As I listened to him explain why he'd enlisted, the absolute faith he had in our country and its leaders, his devotion to duty and service, I thought this young man was all that any of us might ever hope for in a child [*he speaks the words with tender affection*]. But then I asked myself: Are we serving Shamus as well as he's serving us? I thought of the 900 men and women, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors, who won't be returning to their own hometowns. I thought of families I had met who were struggling to get by without a loved one's full income, or whose loved ones had returned with a limb missing or nerves shattered, but still lacked long-term health benefits because they were reservists. [*Disappointment rings in his voice. Applause.*] When we send our young men and women into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation, [*he rests his palm over his heart*] not to fudge the numbers [*he raises his hand in a stop sign*] or shade the truth about why they're going, to care for their families while they're gone, [*he points an index finger, emphasizing the importance*] to tend to the soldiers upon their return, and to *never* [*pause*] ever [*he amplifies his voice greatly*] go to war without enough troops to *win* the war, *secure* the peace, and *earn* the respect of the world. [*He stresses the words, amplifying each to build to a high. Audience members rise in ovation.*]

Now let me be clear. [*Obama motions his index finger up in the air.*] We have real enemies in the world. These

enemies must be *found*. [*He pinches his fingers. A slight pause gives gravity to the words.*] They must be *pursued*, [*his hand gesture underscores the importance of "pursuing"*] and they must be *defeated*. [*He pinches his fingers at these words, highlighting their importance.*] John Kerry knows this. And just as *Lieutenant* [*emphasis*] Kerry did not hesitate to risk his life to protect the men who served with him in Vietnam, *President* [*emphasis*] Kerry will not hesitate *one moment* [*emphasis*] to use our military might to keep America safe and secure. John Kerry *believes* [*emphasis*] in America. And he knows that it's not enough for just some of us to prosper. [*He moves his index finger in the air.*] For alongside our famous individualism, there's another ingredient in the American saga. [*His tone conveys a challenge beneath his words.*]

A belief that we're all connected as one people. [*His tone is filled with wistful, patriotic pride.*] If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that *matters to me*, [*he moves his hand to his chest, stressing the heartfelt words*] even if it's not my child. [*Obama speaks the words with sincerity and evokes applause.*] If there's a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for their prescription drug and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandparent. [*He places his hand tenderly over his heart and draws more applause.*] If there's an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, [*he amplifies his tone*] that threatens *my* [*emphasis*] civil liberties. [*He taps a closed fist at his chest, drawing loud cheers from the audience. He pauses as applause rings on.*] It is that

fundamental belief—I am my brother's keeper, [he raises his volume even more, and his voice rings with moral rightness as he slices a hand through the air] I am my sister's keeper [he cuts his hand through the air again, making eye contact with the other side of the audience]—that makes this country work. [Applause.] It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, and yet still come together as one American family. [His tone grows reflective.] E pluribus unum. [He enunciates each word carefully, curls his right fingers into a C and motions as if placing the words on air for the audience to see, and gives a dramatic pause.] Out of many, one. [He lowers his pitch to emphasize the translation and curls his left fingers into a C, motioning again as if placing the words on air.]

Now, even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a *liberal* [emphasis] America and a *conservative* America [he amplifies his volume, his tone mocking the notions]—there is the *United States of America*. [Obama enunciates each word carefully—U-ni-ted-States-of-A-mer-i-ca—moving his fingers as if writing in cursive. Applause.] There is not a *black* America [emphasis] and *white* America [emphasis] and Latino America and Asian America; there's the *United States of America*. [He enunciates the words carefully again, giving them dramatic impact. Applause.] The pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue states. [His tone mocks the practice.] Red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. [He raises

*his index finger, chastising the pundits.] We worship an awesome God [he stresses the words, raising his hands and amplifying his voice to signify God's greatness] in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states. [He increases his cadence dramatically, underscoring the point. Applause.] We coach Little League in the blue states and yes we've got some gay friends in the red states. [Applause.] There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one [emphasis] people, all of us [emphasis] pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us [emphasis] defending the [pause] United States of America. [He punches the words—U-ni-ted-States-of-A-mer-i-ca—scrawling his fingers as if writing in cursive. Applause. The electrified audience starts chanting "Obama! Obama!"]*

In the end, that's what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism [*his voice falls flat, signaling disapproval*] or do we participate in a politics of hope? [*Obama raises his pitch, sounding hopeful and expectant. The crowd shouts out, "Hope!" as if participating in a "call and response."*] John Kerry calls on us to hope. John Edwards calls on us to hope. I'm not talking about blind optimism here—the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don't think about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about something *more substantial*. [*Emphasis.*] It's *the hope* [*emphasis*] of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; *the hope* [*emphasis*] of immigrants setting

out for distant shores; *the hope* [emphasis] of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; *the hope* [emphasis] of a mill worker's son who dares to defy the odds; *the hope* [emphasis] of a *skinny kid* [emphasis] with a funny name [*he thumps his palm against his chest, indicating he is speaking of himself*] who believes that America has a place for him, too. [*He reaches open palms toward his listeners. The audience goes wild with adulation, the applause extending so long that Obama adds two sentences as the cheers continue.*] *Hope* [emphasis] in the face of difficulty. [*His amplified words signify his approval of the audience's reaction.*] *Hope* in the face of uncertainty. [*He keeps his volume powerful.*] *The audacity of hope!* [*His volume rises.*]

In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the *bedrock* [emphasis] of this nation; *a belief* [emphasis] in things not seen; *a belief* [emphasis] that there are better days ahead. [*Passion resonates in Obama's voice.*] *I believe* [emphasis] that we can give our middle class relief and provide working families with a road to opportunity. *I believe* [emphasis] we can provide jobs to the jobless, homes to the homeless, and reclaim young people in cities across America from violence and despair. *I believe* [emphasis] that we have a righteous wind in our backs and that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices and meet the challenges that face us. *America!* [Emphasis.] *Tonight!* [*The intensity of his tone rings like a challenge, reaching a crescendo.*]

If you feel the *same energy* [emphasis] that I do, if you feel the *same urgency* [emphasis] that I do, if you feel the *same passion* [emphasis] that I do, if you feel the *same*

*hopefulness [emphasis] that I do—if we do what we must do, then I have no doubt that all across the country, from Florida to Oregon, [he slices a hand through the air] from Washington to Maine, [he slices a hand through air again, his inflections rising and falling to convey the breadth of the geography, from coast to coast] the people will rise up in November, and John Kerry will be sworn in as president, and John Edwards will be sworn in as vice president, and this country will reclaim its promise, and out of this long political darkness a brighter day will come.*

*Thank you very much everybody. [He stretches his arm high, waving good-bye.] God bless you. [The energized audience rises in full ovation, with some people chanting “Obama! Obama!”; emphases provided.]*

In this 2004 keynote address, we see many of the outstanding communication practices that have helped make Barack Obama one of the most compelling speakers of our time. Public and media praise for Obama’s keynote address was immediate. “One of the best [addresses] we’ve heard in many, many years. . . . He’s a rising star,” Wolf Blitzer declared. “That’s as good as they come. . . . This is a fellow who is talking beyond the Democratic base to the whole country. . . . It was terrific,” political analyst Jeff Greenfield commented. In the days to come, the press continued to commend the address as a masterpiece of oration. Many of the outstanding communication techniques Obama employed during his keynote address are worth highlighting here.

## ➤ EFFECTIVE USE OF BODY ✧ LANGUAGE AND VOICE

In the delivery of his 2004 keynote address, Barack Obama demonstrated outstanding use of body language. His confident gait, squared shoulders, and commanding stance reached out to the audience, set the tone, and opened a positive dialogue with the viewing public. In short, Obama created a very strong first impression. The deep timbre of his voice, his natural asset, heightened the positive impression. The way he controlled his voice—amplifying it when appropriate, gliding up a half-octave when needed, or allowing it to fall flat to denote disapproval—gave power to his words and helped highlight his key themes. Varying the emotional texture of his tone—making it wistful at times, affectionate at others, and indignant when appropriate—also gave great depth to his words.

Obama's gestures were equally effective—knocking on an imaginary door with a balled fist, pinching his fingers, placing imaginary words on air, holding his palm like a stop sign. They all combined to drive points home. Similarly, placing his hand over his heart at key moments conveyed the sincerity of his words. Obama came across as authentic. His gestures served as masterful elements of delivery.

## ➤ ESTABLISHING COMMON GROUND ✧

In the keynote address, we also see how Barack Obama addressed the “elephant in the room”—his unconventional background, which he skillfully projected as a quintessentially American

story of immigration, hard work, and the American Dream. Obama wove in references to his family and Pearl Harbor, Patton's army, a U.S. bomber assembly line, the GI Bill, and FHA mortgage funding, thereby connecting himself to historic "apple pie" American experiences. The mention of these American hallmarks became his credentials for asserting that, in spite of his "exotic" name, he was just like every American. Obama placed himself squarely in the progression of history, demonstrating that he was dreaming the same dreams as most Americans.

Obama's choice of words also helped establish common ground. *Generous America. Beacon of freedom and opportunity. Faith in the possibilities of this nation.* This language resonated with the audience, tapping into patriotic sentiment. In a masterful way, Obama also wove in references to bible verses: *Belief in things not seen . . . I am my brother's keeper. . . . I am my sister's keeper. . . .* He lauded these references as "simple truth." The biblical words and principles reached across divisions of race, class, and party, helping him to connect with the audience. Simultaneously, Obama demonstrated his talents as he effortlessly transitioned from discussing biblical truths and linking them to America, to relating these truths to what *he* believes, creating the sense of a strong continuum. With these techniques, Obama successfully broke down barriers and built bridges.

### ⇒ **SPEAKING TO AUDIENCE CONCERNS:** ⇐ **WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS**

Obama demonstrated his ability to tap into the prevailing mood, strengthening the impact of his words by providing



details and personalizing his message. When he spoke about the prevailing mood of many Americans who were tired of old-style politicking, he said, “There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America. There’s a United States of America.” Like leaders such as John F. Kennedy, Obama made a meaningful connection with his audience.

As Obama offered specific examples about Americans facing challenges—like a father who had lost his job and needed to pay for his son’s medicine—he connected with the audience, demonstrating that he understood intimately the concerns of middle America and could relate to these challenges. Similarly, as he personalized his message, explaining his deeply held belief in helping the middle class and working families, he won people over by speaking to them directly, almost intimately, and illustrating that their concerns were his concerns too.

### ⇒ CONVEYING VISION THROUGH PERSONALIZATION ⇐ AND WORDS THAT RESONATE

In his keynote address, Obama employed a wide range of techniques to convey his vision. Vivid language, symbolic words, and personalized ideas were among his tools. His language painted pictures in the minds of listeners: *Slice and dicing us . . . We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the Stars and Stripes.* He tied the notion of hope to the experiences of slaves and immigrants and personalized the issue of the Iraq War through references to one particular soldier—Shamus—whose “easy smile” we could visualize instantly. These all provided rich, multilayered communication, conveying vision and ideas excellently.

## ⇒ DRIVING POINTS HOME ⇐

Obama also employed an effective range of rhetorical techniques as he drove his central points home. Repetition was a primary tool. His repeated references to hope, with carefully constructed sentence structures, underscored the theme. Similarly, stating “John Kerry believes” five times in six sentences reinforced the image of Kerry that Obama sought to stress. Obama’s skillful use of repetition focused attention on key themes, making them more memorable.

## ⇒ EXCELLENT PERSUASION TECHNIQUES ⇐

In the 2004 keynote address, we also saw one of Obama’s hallmark practices for persuasion: the use of juxtaposition for comparison and contrast. For instance, juxtaposition helped him crystallize the importance of the country’s founding principles:

Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation, not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy. Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

His use of juxtaposition also crystallized the argument that Americans are one people and should move forward with unity:

“There’s not a *liberal* America and a *conservative* America—there’s the *United States of America*.”

### ➤ BUILDING TO A CRESCENDO AND LEAVING ⚡ A STRONG LAST IMPRESSION

Finally, few people can forget the outstanding ending to the moving 2004 keynote address. Obama skillfully varied the rhythm of his words, emphasizing words at key times and amplifying his voice progressively as he built toward a crescendo. He knew how to ride the wave of applause so as not to stall momentum. Once he reached his high point, he ended his address passionately, issuing a challenge, a call to action: “Tonight! If you feel the *same energy* that I do, if you feel the *same urgency* that I do, if you feel the *same passion* that I do, if you feel the *same hopefulness* that I do—if we do what we must do, then . . .”

This powerful ending further energized the audience, leaving them a strong last impression.

Together, these highly effective communication practices enabled Obama to deliver a masterful speech that greatly accelerated the trajectory of his political career and transformed him into an influential national political figure. Now, let’s delve further into these practices that have made Barack Obama one of the most distinguished orators of recent times.

## CHAPTER 2

# EARNING TRUST AND CONFIDENCE

If you aspire to be a highly effective leader, people must trust your judgment and ethics and have confidence in your leadership abilities, believing that you are worthy of authority. In the absence of trust and confidence, nothing else follows. A first task of every aspiring leader, therefore, is to earn the trust and confidence of those they seek to lead. Barack Obama has done this with great success, gaining the trust and confidence of a broad array of people—everyday citizens, politicians, policy makers, businesspersons, financial supporters, and young people. Before his ascension to the U.S. presidency, he drew on this trust and confidence to capture key opportunities and expand his influence. Since assuming the presidency, the trust and confidence he has earned has allowed him to cultivate

productive foreign relations and retain relatively high personal approval ratings in the United States, even during his most heavily criticized decision-making periods. Key communication practices have helped Obama to earn the trust and confidence of others. Using communication as a tool for gaining support, Obama has displayed great personal charisma. He takes steps to form a strong first impression and to leverage excellent second impressions. He also employs effective gestures, uses props skillfully, gets off to strong beginnings, and conveys admirable ethics. This chapter explores these practices, which have helped Obama to earn the trust and confidence of millions of supporters both at home and abroad.

### ⇒ **CHARISMA OF A LEADER** ⇐

Most people say they know charisma when they see it—that certain fire in the eyes, passion, and command. They point, for example, to political leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Ronald Reagan, John F. Kennedy, and Bhenazir Bhutto, and to popular leaders such as Oprah Winfrey. Dynamic leaders. Not the sort to give humdrum, droning speeches; far from the listless speaker who is unenthusiastic about their topic.

The words often invoked to describe Barack Obama—magnetic, electrifying, energizing, and inspiring—speak of his charisma as a leader. Obama has a presentation and style that enable him to earn the confidence of listeners, inspire them, and move them to action. He manages to captivate audiences. From the moment he steps in front of an audience with his confident gait, people see a blend of passion and authority. He conveys charisma through many nonverbal attributes—the

broad smile; his resonant voice; and body movement suggesting authority. Part of Obama's charisma involves his ability to convey his enthusiasm and passion effectively. He usually appears closely wedded to the things he talks about, cares deeply about the subjects, and is eager to share. His enthusiasm energizes people young and old.

Perhaps as important as having charisma is the ability to use it to establish an excellent first impression. The well-worn saying is true: First impressions last. In rising as fast as he did, from obscurity to his historic 2008 presidential victory, Obama demonstrated and capitalized on a formidable ability to establish a strong first impression.

### ⇒ **CREATING STRONG FIRST IMPRESSIONS** — ⇐ **IMAGE AND BODY LANGUAGE**

A first impression is a critically defining moment. The instant one person first moves into the presence of another, an opinion is formed. Even before you utter any words, you open a dialogue and have spoken volumes through image and body language. The strong first impression that Barack Obama makes reminds us that body movement and image speak a language to the audience as potent as anything said out loud.

Indeed, a highly influential executive coach and author of the book, *CEO Material*, D.A. Benton, once asked a group of young leaders at McKinsey & Company to imagine what they would do if they wanted to make people around them believe they were blind, even though they were not. She prodded them to consider how they would try to look and act. Perhaps they would wear a pair of dark glasses, get a white cane, and use

that cane to feel their way across the floor. They might walk slowly or haltingly, displaying a bit of uncertainty about the path ahead. They might even get a guide dog and allow it to steer them down the street. In short, they would dress the part, act the part, and gather the right props. She then asked the group to consider the implications if they were seeking instead to project themselves as leaders.

The exercise was useful. Persons seeking to present themselves as leaders should dress the part, act the part, and gather the right props around them. This is because—without uttering a word—through first impressions these actions begin a dialogue and can lay an important foundation for commanding authority, gaining trust, and exercising effective leadership.

Barack Obama is adept at establishing excellent first impressions. The purposeful walk. The visual contact he makes with audiences early on, stretching his arm to them in a confident wave, narrowing the physical distance between himself and the audience. These mark the beginnings of a two-way conversation of sorts—it elicits a sit-up-and-listen response from audience members.

Good eye contact also has been valuable to Obama. Like Bill Clinton, Obama is perceived as never hesitating to establish firm eye contact; he thrives on connecting with members of his audience and is energized, not drained, by them. As Obama talks, he looks to one side of the room, sometimes with a slight nod of acknowledgment in that direction, and then to the other side. He varies his gaze throughout his discussions; by doing so naturally and smoothly, he pulls listeners in to his talks and engages audience members more fully. Audiences perceive this as respectful—the behavior of a person welcoming them.

# REACH OUT, FIRE UP, AND MOTIVATE THE OBAMA WAY

**P**resident Barack Obama's remarkable ability to inspire and persuade millions from the podium isn't simply a product of innate ability. It took years of painstaking effort to hone the speaking skills that fueled his rise to the top leadership position on the globe. Using well-practiced public-speaking skills, he not only rouses roaring applause but inspires real change in his listeners.

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