

Defend Your Research: We Can Measure the Power of Charisma

by Alex “Sandy” Pentland

The finding: It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it. It’s possible to predict which executives will win a business competition solely on the basis of the social signals they send.

The study: Sandy Pentland and colleague Daniel Olguín Olguín outfitted executives at a party with devices that recorded data on their social signals—tone of voice, gesticulation, proximity to others, and more. Five days later the same executives presented business plans to a panel of judges in a contest. Without reading or hearing the pitches, Pentland correctly forecast the winners, using only data collected at the party.

The challenge: Can we really tell who will succeed in competitive business situations without knowing what they have to offer? **Professor Pentland, defend your research.**

Pentland: This study not only confirms previous research—we’ve used data on social signals to predict the outcome of salary negotiations and even who would “survive” a plane crash in a NASA role-playing game—but takes it further. This time we collected the data well before the event whose outcome we predicted. But in all the situations, these social cues—what we call “honest signals”—were powerful indicators of success.

Key Number

HBR: What exactly are honest signals?

It’s a biological term. They’re the nonverbal cues that social species use to coordinate themselves—gestures, expressions, tone. Humans use many types of signals, but honest signals are unusual in that they cause changes in the receiver of the signal. If we’re spending time together, and I’m happy and bubbly, you’ll be more happy and bubbly. There are biological functions that transfer the signals. If I’m happy, it almost literally rubs off on you.

So your devices measure these signals?

Yes, they measure those things as well as how much you face the people you’re talking to, how close you stand to them, and how much you let them talk.

Interactions Mapping

Is one type of signaler more likely to succeed?

The more successful people are more energetic. They talk more, but they also listen more. They spend more face-to-face time with others. They pick up cues from others, draw people out, and get them to be more outgoing. It’s not just what they project that makes them charismatic; it’s what they elicit. The more of these energetic, positive people you put on a team, the better the team’s performance.

All you're saying is that enthusiastic team players will be more successful. We already knew that, didn't we?

Yes. Attitude, positivity—researchers knew these things mattered; they just didn't want to deal with them because it was squishy, feel-good stuff. But now we can quantify it. Now it's science.

How precise a science is this?

It's getting more precise as we do more experiments. In the salary-negotiation study, we were accurate to within \$1,000 in guessing what salary would be offered without hearing the negotiation. With other researchers at MIT—Ben Waber, Lynn Wu, Sinan Aral, and Erik Brynjolfsson—we're taking these devices into call centers and learning how face-to-face communications affect productivity. We think face time with colleagues is vital, as much as 2.5 times as important to success as additional access to information. Results aren't final, but we think we can increase productivity by 10% at no cost just by rearranging the environment to promote more employee interaction.

In another experiment, Anmol Madan, David Lazer, and I found that 30% of the variation in MIT freshmen's political views was a function of their face-to-face exposure to others' opinions. The more people hung out with their own group, the more they reinforced their own opinions. Again, this all sounds like common sense. But now we're uncovering the basic mechanisms, and in the future this might lead to very different sorts of political campaigns.

This is where it starts to get creepy.

Yes and no. When you think of it, human language is fairly new. Studies say it may be as little as 50,000 years old. Long before we had language, we had the ability to hunt, move, and survive as teams, as all social species do. It makes sense that the communication signals we used for millennia would be so powerful.

Let's be clear: Your data don't actually indicate which pitch will be the best.

Correct. The signals indicate who will win but say nothing about the quality of their ideas. In fact, we've controlled for that by having some judges read pitches while others watched pitches. The two groups gave high ratings to different pitches.

Like the **Kennedy-Nixon debate: Those who saw it rated Kennedy higher. Those who heard it rated Nixon higher.**

Right. We're social creatures. When we see someone we are looking for those honest signals. Are they enthusiastic? Do they look like they know what they're talking about? This is what venture capitalists do, right? They look for buzz. But they also need to understand the substance of the pitch and not be swayed by charisma alone. Over the long term, the content matters more to success, obviously. But both are important. Positive, energetic people have higher performance. We're proving that.

What's next?

We've studied individuals and groups. Now we're examining how people in organizations work together. Once you understand that social signaling is important, you ask, Can I see those patterns writ large? Besides reorganizing the call centers, we're looking at ways to organize large groups to promote positive interactions and boost productivity. We think we can find ways to decrease stress, increase job satisfaction, and make people in large organizations work better together.

You sound excited.

I am. I see what happens to people when they participate in our studies—they become more aware of this signaling behavior, and it makes them work better with others. They realize it's true that you can tell when people are excited about something. You can tell when they're paying attention, when they're on the same page. We all sense it. We all have an intuition about it. But because we can measure it, social intuition is no longer magic; it's now quantitative science.