

## Charismatic, Inspiring Performers – What’s Their Secret?

### Description

Dancers elicit emotions through movement.

Writers do the same through their use of words.

As musicians, we speak to our audiences through sound. Where though artful manipulation of melody, harmony, rhythm, dynamics, articulation, and more, we can elicit an emotional experience in our listeners that they may not otherwise encounter on an average day.

But in spending so much time and attention on honing our skill in shaping and crafting the sounds we use to communicate, it can be easy to forget that we also have the ability to communicate with our audience in other ways. That what our listeners see has a significant impact on their experience of our performance too (as in [this](#) and [this](#)).

Perhaps you’ve had the experience of watching a competition like the [Cliburn](#), where some performers have inspired and moved you, while others haven’t? Where the level of playing was all extremely high, but one performer’s charisma and stage presence added something more to your experience?

How does one do this? Can we all become more charismatic and inspiring – and give the kind of performance that elicits an emotional response that our audience remembers for days, weeks, or a lifetime afterwards?

### Charisma...and sleep?

Previous research has suggested that one of the main ingredients in charisma is one’s ability to embody and display positive emotions (e.g. enthusiasm, gravitas) depending on what the situation demands. Knowing this, a [team of researchers](#) wanted to explore this further – by throwing sleep deprivation into the mix.

I know – that sounds totally random. Why sleep deprivation?

Well, others have made a connection between sleep and emotion regulation. So if positive emotions play a central role in charisma, maybe sleep is an underrated, but critical factor in the charisma equation?

Yeah...still seems random, but let’s take a closer look, shall we?

### A commencement address

88 business students were recruited to participate in this study, asked to prepare an inspiring commencement address, and deliver it on camera.

But the night before, half of these students were given a task designed to ensure a poor night's sleep<sup>1</sup>, while the other half were allowed to sleep as they normally would.

## Inspiring? Or not?

Three judges then viewed all of the speeches, and rated each of the speakers on measures of charismatic leadership. None of the judges knew that some speakers had slept poorly the night before, or what the purpose of the study was – only that these were students asked to deliver a commencement address as student body leader.

Nevertheless, the participants in the sleep-deprived group were consistently rated as being *less* charismatic than those who got a good night's sleep.

That may not be so surprising in and of itself, but what is a bit more fascinating is *why* being sleep deprived affected their charisma and ability to inspire.

## Deep acting

The researchers asked the participants a variety of questions both before and after their speech, ranging from how they felt before giving the speech (e.g. Enthusiastic? Excited? Attentive?) to the degree to which they were able to act out the emotions they wanted to convey in their speech (e.g. Did they actually experience the emotions they wanted to show? Or just faked it?).

I would have guessed that being tired affected the speakers' mood or emotional state, which in turn led to a less inspiring speech. But that's not quite how it worked out; the sleep deprived participants' pre-speech emotional states weren't much different than those who were well-rested.

What *was* different, was their "deep acting" ability – the capacity to reach within, authentically feel the emotions they hoped to convey to their audience, and speak directly from that place.

The sleep deprived speakers felt that their ability in this area was compromised. And the worse they felt about their deep acting, the less and less charismatic their speeches became.

## But wait, there's more!

Ok, but what about those times when you feel like you're giving everything you have, and the audience still doesn't seem to respond?

The researchers were curious about this too, and ran a second study to see what role sleep deprivation

has on the *audience*.

They selected three videos from the previous study, representing various levels of charisma – ranging from one of the more uninspiring speakers to one of the most charismatic speakers, as well as one in the average range – and had well-rested and sleep-deprived students watch and rate these speakers on their charisma.

## Not inspired

As you can probably guess, the observers who were sleep-deprived found the speakers to be less charismatic than the observers who had gotten a good night of sleep.

Here too the question of “why” is probably more interesting than the result itself. So why were sleep-deprived participants less inspired by the same speeches?

The answer had to do with emotions, but it played out in a slightly different way than in the first study.

You know how when you’re tired, you tend to be cranky and in a less positive mood? Apparently, being in a crappy mood affects our perceptions of charisma too. Where, like Jabba the Hut, we just aren’t as susceptible to charismatic folks’ Jedi mind powers.

## 3 takeaways

### Takeaway #1: Sleep!

It seems that we have in this study yet another reason to make sleep a priority – and not just the night before, but in general. That way, we can avoid putting too much pressure on that one night of sleep, when we’ve been accumulating a [sleep debt](#) all along.

### Takeaway #2: Deep acting?

This notion of deep acting is intriguing, and I imagine it plays a role in charisma in music performance too. It’s not something I ever did intentionally, but have you ever sought to engage in “deep acting” as a way of adding to the audience’s experience of your music? Though it’s important to note here that simply “feeling the music” is no guarantee that we are playing in a way that actually engenders an emotional experience in our listener – and in some cases can lead to *our* feeling inspired, but our audience not so much (as violinist Pam Frank explains [here](#) ; and as cellist Frans Helmerson [once spoke of](#)).

### Takeaway #3: Don’t take the audience reaction personally

It doesn't matter how well-prepared you are, how beautiful your sound is, how interesting your ideas are, or [how cool your shirt is](#).

A notable portion of your audience just won't find you as charismatic, inspiring, and moving as others will. So don't let that get to you. Especially if you catch a few of them nodding off. Maybe a short power nap during the slow movement is just what they need to be totally inspired by the last movement!

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