Picking Presidents

What I've Learned From Years of Leadership Research

Every four years, Americans go through a comical spasm of collective emotional incontinence, euphemistically referred to as "electing the President." Then they have four years to discover the consequences of their hypothalamic decisions.

Picking a president has degenerated to just another of the many channels of entertainment that help Americans avoid the discomfort of using their gray matter. The comic theatrical production that passes for the presidential election process is so addictive to all participants – the news industry, the promoters of the candidates, and most of the citizens of the country – that rational thought and discourse seem strangely alien, an unwanted distraction from our amusement.

Any corporate board of directors seeking to fill a vacant CEO position would typically engage a professional search firm to find promising candidates. And the searchers would not even start the process without an answer to one fundamental question: "What *skills* are you looking for?" The board has to decide what *critical competencies* are required to guide this organization, at this point in its history, and into the business environment they expect it to face.

Any board that chose a CEO based on whim, emotion, personal biases, prejudices, or hunches would be considered derelict, and open to severe criticism from many directions. They don't ask "What's his position on employee pay and benefits?" Or, "Would she keep the artwork in the corporate lobby?" Those are tangential to the one big question: Could this particular person lead and manage this particular organization effectively?

Yet, most Americans seem quite willing to choose the most powerful chief executive on the planet by means of a national beauty contest. A very large percentage of them readily admit that they settle for one particular candidate after rejecting all the others they consider less beautiful. Ask T.C. Mits (The Celebrated Man In The Street) why he favors the candidate he favors, and by the second sentence you'll usually hear what he doesn't like about the other ones.

Is There A Better Way?

In the run-up to the 2008 elections, I decided to tap into some of the best minds on the planet to discover a *presidential leadership model* – a set of meaningful evaluation criteria that thoughtful people might use to compare candidates and decide which one they want to run their country.

The idea would be to interview some of the world's top thinkers and experts on leadership, and pin down maybe 6-8 key criteria: What *high-level skills* does a U.S. President need to lead the nation effectively?

This was not a new idea. Many years before, I proposed the idea to one of my editors. It would be a "voter's handbook," a sort of journal that people could use to rate the candidates on some reasonably meaningful criteria other than personality, hairdo, or an attractive wife.

The intent would be to promote this leadership "report card" as a rational basis for choosing a president (and possibly other high-level elected leaders), and the book might be one of the main vehicles.

After he listened to the idea, my editor chuckled and said, "That's a great idea. I'll bet I can sell at least 10 copies — counting the ones your Mom buys." I suppose he was right then, but I never gave up on the idea.

There's No Right Answer to the Wrong Question

Unfortunately, the skills one needs to get elected to a public office are not the same skills needed to do the job. In fact, the two skill sets have almost nothing in common. If we elect our leaders for the wrong reasons, should we be surprised when we discover that they're not up to the job?

Most Americans have typically chosen their presidential candidates – mostly males, so far – based on two questions, the answers to which are pretty much irrelevant to their performance once they get into office:

1. Do I like him? and,

2. What is he promising *me*?

So, the two secrets to getting elected, currently, are *popularity* and *pandering*. On the first count, the candidates are subjected to a never-ending charisma test. How well do they make speeches? How well do they perform on talk shows? How do they handle themselves in debates? Have they mastered the sound bite? Do they have "character?" Are there skeletons in their closets? Are the candidate and his or her spouse a "nice couple?" Would the spouse be an asset to the candidate? Can we visualize them as classy occupants of the White House?

On the second count, the candidates find themselves in the precarious position of trying to pander to a constellation of factional selfish interests. How well does the candidate appeal to women? Blacks? Hispanics? Labor unions? Farmers? The wealthy? Teachers? Industry executives? Religious people? Boomers? Young people? The South? The heartland? The "conservatives?" The "liberals?" The "center?"

Cynical reporters and political commentators tend to perpetuate this self-centered, narcissistic view of voters by assigning each candidate a "base" – a social, economic, or ethnic category of people to whom he or she is obligated to appeal. We seem to have long ago given up the notion that the president is the servant-leader to the whole nation, not the panderer-in-chief to the special

interest groups most likely to deliver the most votes.

Those two cherished selection criteria – popularity and pandering – are virtually useless in predicting how effectively a candidate will actually perform in the office of the presidency, for two simple reasons. One is that "personality," while important in getting along with people and in getting things done, does not equal competence. There are likable people who fail miserably in leadership jobs, abrasive people who perform well, and *vice versa*. There's much more to leadership than getting people to like you or admire you – although it can help.

The other traditional criterion – what a candidate promises – is also a bogus reason for choosing one over another. Simply put: the candidate's capacity to deliver on the promises *cannot be known until after the election*. A would-be president can promise tax cuts, health care reform, or more defense spending, but many uncontrolled factors enter into the political algebra that actually gets things done.

Obviously, for example, a president who belongs to one political party, facing a Congress that's been captured by the other party, will have a very different set of options than one whose party has won control of both houses. And, quite aside from such political realities, cataclysmic events and unforeseen developments can derail a presidential agenda and confront a president with a new reality for which he or she is wholly unprepared.

Consider that Lyndon Johnson's dream for his presidency was to actualize his concept of the "Great Society" – the virtual defeat of poverty within one generation. But as the Vietnam war spun out of control, Americans saw a different president than the one they thought they'd elected. Similarly, the cataclysm of "9-11" presented George Bush, Jr. with a scenario entirely different from anything envisioned by him or by voters in the 2000 election. The rules of the game changed, as they often do.

A distant third question, sometimes posed with knowing aplomb by media commentators is "Does the candidate have the political experience needed to be President?" Most historians seem to agree that prior experience in elective office is a rather weak predictor of success in the presidency. Some presidents have earned high scores in history with little or no elective experience, and some with extensive experience have flunked.

Where does that leave us? With the realization that *we've mostly been asking the wrong questions*. By framing the questions more intelligently, I thought we might be able to elevate the narrative that dominates the public discourse leading up to the elections.

Character and Competence – A President Needs Both

Never having given up on my quixotic idea of picking a president based on the capacity to actually lead, I took up the question again. I combed all the books in my library dealing with high-level leadership, looking for key competencies. I contacted a number of prominent academic experts I know, and asked them to identify key competencies. I considered my own experience of over thirty years

consulting to top executives, and tried to recall the things they'd told me.

Then, of course it was time to "go to the Net." I solicited the inputs of a group of professional consultants in an international online community focused on leadership and organizational performance. Of the 1500 members of this expert diaspora, about 100 decided to play.

First, I presented them with an alphabetical list of about 75 commonly known character traits, and asked them to choose the "top ten" they considered most critical for a President.

Next, I went back to the experts and asked them to describe as many key competencies as they could think of – in any form, any terminology, any degree of generality or specificity. Of about 450 competency terms they submitted, about fifty were actually focused and definitive enough to be useful. I combined these potential competencies with the others I'd collected from interviews and the book research, and narrowed them down to about 20.

By refining the various potential competencies, I finally managed to boil down the list to nine, arranged in an order that seemed to make sense conceptually. The chart below shows the top-nine competencies and the top-ten traits.

Then, I put up a website, *pickingapresident.com*, and provided an online evaluation form, which visitors could use to critique any or all of the current candidates, as they saw them, on the top-nine competencies and the top-ten character traits. They could also view the accumulated scores for each one.

When I looked at the scoring data provided by the website visitors, I was able to draw only one clear conclusion: My Editor Was Probably Right.

To say that people did not exactly stampede to my website would be the understatement of the decade. After placing links on my firm's commercial website, sending out email announcements to several hundred friends and acquaintances, announcing the website on various online groups, informing some of the most influential bloggers, and informing a fairly large list of political media celebrities and news sites, I counted less than 100 visitors who rated any of the candidates. Probably no more than 1000 people even visited the site.

Worse, *almost all* of the ratings skewed heavily in favor of one candidate or another, and heavily against his competitors. It was typically "all 5's" or "all 1's." Apparently most of the respondents mistook the exercise as simply a chance to promote the candidate they already liked. The data were virtually useless for my research purposes.

What I Learned

However, this exercise has helped me enormously in clarifying my own political views. Now I know where I stand: I'm going to vote for the candidate who looks most "presidential" – if they promise not to mess with Social Security.

Presidential Leadership Project

Key Presidential Competencies

(Synthesized from over 400 contributions)

1. Strategic Thinking
2. Promoting A "Grand Vision" For The Country
3. Leading Public Opinion
4. Leading The Executive Team
5. Practical Politics (Getting Others "On Board")
6. Political Autonomy (Freedom from Partisan Obligations)
7. Building Coalitions
8. Advocating America's Highest Values
9. Representing America To The World

Key Presidential Character Traits

(Expert ratings of top ten traits, 86 responses)

Trait	% Who Selected as Critical
1. Trustworthy	77.01 %
2. Intelligent	59.77 %
3. Visionary	58.62 %
4. Collaborative	49.43 %
5. Courageous	49.43 %
6. Authentic	43.68 %
7. Open-minded	43.68 %
8. Compassionate	40.23 %
9. Wise	40.23 %
10. Articulate	39.08 %

About the Author:

Dr. Karl Albrecht is an executive management consultant, coach, futurist, lecturer, and author of more than 20 books on professional achievement, organizational performance, and business strategy. He is listed as one of the Top 100 Thought Leaders in business on the topic of leadership.

His book *Service America! Doing Business in the New Economy* (co-authored with Ron Zemke) touched off the "customer service revolution" in the U.S. and internationally. It sold over 500,000 copies and was translated into 10 languages.

His book *The Northbound Train: Finding the Purpose, Setting the Direction, Shaping the Destiny of Your Organization*, was one of the American Management Association's all-time best-sellers. It has become a popular handbook for business leaders who think strategically about their enterprises.

He is also a recognized expert on applied cognitive neuroscience and the development of advanced thinking skills. His books *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Success*, *Practical Intelligence: The Art and Science of Common Sense*, and his *Mindex Thinking Style Profile* are used in business and education.

The Mensa society presented him with its lifetime achievement award, for significant contributions by a member to the understanding of intelligence.

Originally a physicist, and having served as a military intelligence officer and business executive, he now consults, lectures, and writes about whatever he thinks would be fun.

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