Imagine that your organization is in the process of selecting a new leader. Which attributes would be most important to you? If you are like most U.S. white-collar workers, you value honesty, integrity, fairness, competence, compassion, and a leader who is approachable and possesses good people skills. Indeed, results from the GLOBE study of leadership in 62 cultures finds that these attributes, along with being intelligent, informed, decisive, and foresighted are leader attributes that are universally valued. Conversely, being noncooperative, egocentric, nonexplicit, ruthless, and dictatorial are leader qualities that are universally viewed as undesirable (House et al., 1999; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

There is evidence that these leader qualities—being perceived by followers as honest, fair, informed, and competent—are associated with both follower satisfaction with the leader and perceived leader effectiveness (Bass, 1990). Similarly, U.S. presidents who are perceived as men of integrity and competence rank high in popularity polls. Because of the recent election, it seems timely to examine whether research in I-O psychology, particularly research on business leaders, can increase our understanding of U.S. presidential elections and how presidential candidates are evaluated.

When I was invited to write this essay, it was a few days before the 2004 election. My first thought was that there must be several, if not many, connections between core I-O concepts and the presidential selection process. But few came immediately to mind. I had the good fortune of attending the 6th Annual Conference of the International Leadership Association in Washington, DC just after the election (Nov. 4–7). The ILA is a meeting that features multidisciplinary approaches to all aspects of leadership, but this particular conference had, not surprisingly, a greater-than-average number of papers, panels, and addresses on the recent U.S. presidential election, including analyses by experts that represented the first analyses of the just completed vote count. Needless to say, I attended a lot of these.

Before the election, I realized that I had been evaluating the campaign as an I-O psychologist. I was using the same standards that I would use to assess any leader of a business or an educational institution (my college is, in fact, currently conducting a search for a provost to lead our faculty). Throughout the campaign, I was looking at the presidential candidates’ experience and the same qualities mentioned earlier that are valued in any leader. Indeed, I probably approach every election that same way and certainly did in 2000.
Many of the universally endorsed characteristics (i.e., integrity, fairness, decisiveness, etc.), along with relevant experience and a history of previous leadership successes, are exactly the same qualities that are essential in selecting a CEO or high-level executive. I doubt that any *Fortune* 500 company would pursue a CEO candidate whose integrity, fairness, or competence was called into question. However, in the months prior to the election, President Bush’s honesty was being questioned because of the reasons his administration gave for invading Iraq. Foreign leaders were calling Bush “noncooperative” (one of the universally undesirable qualities). Democratic nominee John Kerry’s integrity was also under attack, and he was being labeled as indecisive—“a flip-flopper.” Both men were criticized as not having explicit plans (another universally undesirable quality) for ending the Iraq war or rescuing the economy. In short, you probably wouldn’t pick either candidate to lead your corporation.

But perhaps these negative impressions of the candidates are actually perceptions caused by the predominantly negative campaigning of both parties. We know from research on social perception that the constant mudslinging, name calling, and discrediting of the opposing candidate that have become the norm in politics can lead voters to believe that they are picking the “lesser of two evils” rather than the most qualified, most competent candidate. Research on organizational politics has found consistent negative relationships between highly politicized organizations and job satisfaction and organizational commitment (see Riggio, 2003, Ch. 13).

On the flight to the ILA conference, I happened to be seated across the aisle from democratic presidential hopeful, retired General Wesley Clark. I asked him if he thought the outcome would have been different had he been on the Democratic ticket because of his obvious military experience. Clark didn’t think it would have mattered and mentioned the difficulties he encountered in this atmosphere of negative politicking. He said that he didn’t have the resources to counter the well-organized Republican attacks on his credibility and character. “Look what they did to Kerry’s military record,” he said.

Even in the most contentious selections of a corporate CEO, the focus is on promoting candidates’ positive qualities rather than discrediting the other candidates. I’m not so naïve to believe that there is no negative politicking in CEO selection because there certainly is. However, U.S. presidential campaigns seem to have become more and more negative in tone over the years. In fact, according to renowned political scientist, James MacGregor Burns (2004), the Republican mobilization of right-wing and evangelical Christian voters (who turned out in greater than expected numbers) was accomplished by focusing on moral values (e.g., gay marriage) rather than on substantive issues such as healthcare, education, or the economy. This could be viewed as another form of negative politicking. (One might argue that the Democrats used their own negative politicking to mobilize young voters by suggesting that the Bush administration would reinstitute the draft).
If you extend the evaluation of candidate character and competency to earlier elections, you realize that the successful candidates had relatively little experience relevant for the job of president of the United States, and there were questions of character. William Clinton was not particularly qualified for the job before his election in 1992. Like George W. Bush in 2000, Clinton’s principal experience was as a state governor, and even before the Monica Lewinsky scandal, there were concerns about Clinton’s integrity and credibility. Likewise, George W. Bush was plagued by questions about his drug and alcohol abuse and apparent use of connections to avoid Vietnam military service. If experience, character, and prior job performance should be the variables used to select a U.S. president (they certainly are the main criteria for selecting a CEO or other organizational leader), then who among the recent U.S. presidential candidates should have been elected? The obvious answer is Al Gore. Going into the 2000 election, Gore had been a U.S. Senator and had served 8 years in the position one step down from the top in a relatively successful administration (As I write this my wife is reminding me that Al Gore was elected, and that brings up the question of whether a court could ever step in and appoint a CEO).

So what are Bush’s strengths? What might have led to his selection as U.S. president for a second term? Certainly Bush appeared decisive—a valued leadership quality—particularly in comparison to his opponent. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2004) says that “leadership is about confidence even in the advance of results.” If that is the case, then Bush with his steadfast agenda to stay the course in Iraq and in his broader foreign policy does indeed appear confident that he will succeed in the long run. Bush’s commitment to his economic policy, and his continued expectation that large tax cuts in an era of increased deficit spending will win out, sounds a lot like extreme confidence in results that might not come to be for many years (e.g., Bush predicts the deficit won’t be erased until after his second term is completed).

Reflections on President Bush’s First Term

Prior to September 11, 2001, George W. Bush’s presidency was unremarkable. He came into office with questions about his competency and experience and was having difficulty finding direction for his agenda (Lipman-Blumen, 2004). Shortly after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, President Bush became a very directive leader. In all likelihood, this was his preferred leadership style, not to mention the style of Vice President Dick Cheney and other senior members of Bush’s cabinet who also seem to be directive leaders. A substantial body of research suggests that directive, authoritarian leadership is very effective in dealing with an immediate crisis, but a skilled transformational leader who involves followers in the process, will be more effective in the long run (Bass, 1998; Bass & Riggio, in press). President
Bush’s actions were more on the dictatorial side (another of the universally undesirable leadership qualities) than on the inclusive side.

An interesting recent study by Bligh, Kohles, and Meindl (2004) analyzed President George W. Bush’s speeches prior to and after 9/11/01. Their results show that Bush’s speech became more charismatic in content after the terrorist attacks. Moreover, this increase in charismatic speech coincided with more positive portrayals of Bush in the media and a rise in his popularity among voters. Of course, there is evidence that much of a leader’s “charisma” is attributed to the leader by devoted followers (Pillai, Williams, Lowe, & Jung, 2003).

As President Bush’s first term proceeded, with the unpopular Iraq war and little attention given to pressing U.S. domestic issues, Bush’s popularity declined. The administration, however, continued to use fear of future terrorist attacks to maintain an air of impending crisis, and the 2004 campaign portrayed George W. Bush as the most capable candidate for dealing with the dual wars on terrorism and on Iraq. Polls suggested that a slim majority of U.S. voters did indeed believe that Bush would be a better wartime president than John Kerry, but growing discontent with Bush’s policies put his reelection in jeopardy. Post-election analyses suggest that it was indeed the morality issues that led to Bush’s thin margin of victory.

Reflections on President Bush’s Second Term

One way to look at the next term in the Bush presidency is to focus on what political pundits are saying. The first task in Bush’s second term is to bring the divided electorate together again. This is akin to leading a divided work group—a diverse group of followers who possess different goals and different opinions on the best course or direction. The I-O and leadership literatures would suggest that focusing on some superordinate goal—something that all groups of followers could agree on—would help build unity and cohesiveness. Unfortunately, Bush is trying to use the threat posed by global terrorism as a unifying goal, but disagreement about the role that Iraq played in terrorism and the amorphous nature of terrorism itself makes it difficult for many groups of followers to get behind Bush’s plan for combating terrorism.

The literature also suggests that good leadership would involve trying to be responsive to followers who disagree with the leader. Instead of trying to appeal to his nonsupporters, to either try to persuade them to his way of thinking or making concessions to them, Bush seems to view his election as a mandate to move forward ignoring the disconnected minority of followers even though the majority was in reality a razor-thin one.

Another challenge for President Bush is the United States’s image in the world, both in the minds of our historical allies and in those nations that are becoming increasingly hostile toward the U.S. and its policies. This is not unlike trying to restore public faith in an organization whose actions have damaged its reputation. There are numerous examples of restoring public
faith following a company crisis in the I-O and business literature. Perhaps none is as well known as CEO James Burke’s leadership of Johnson & Johnson in handling the Tylenol crisis when cyanide was found in some bottles on store shelves. Burke pulled all of the product off the market until new tamper-proof packaging could be designed—putting the public’s safety over the company’s financial interests, and thereby saving Johnson & Johnson’s (and Tylenol’s) reputation.

For President Bush to unify the fractured nation, strong leadership is called for. It is the leader’s job to set the direction. Surely, cabinet members and others in the administration can help in this regard, but followers’ eyes are on the leader. Moreover, the leader is ultimately responsible (“the buck stops here” to quote Harry Truman, an unpopular president during his term but one who historians consider to be one of the great U.S. leaders).

In his first term, George W. Bush did not display the strong leadership historically associated with U.S. presidents such as Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, Truman, and Reagan. Again, it comes back to his lack of experience. Many viewed others in the Bush administration—the more experienced Vice President Cheney and cabinet members Rumsfeld, Ashcroft, even Colin Powell—as calling many of the shots for the president.

I recall in early 2001 discussing the election of George W. Bush with a group of Australians and South Africans. They were having a hard time understanding why U.S. voters would support a candidate with relatively little experience. Before the 2000 election, I shared these concerns about Bush’s lack of experience. I asked a group of young men who were handing out Bush–Cheney bumper stickers at a shopping mall if Bush’s lack of experience bothered them. They said, “No, it doesn’t. Bush can hire guys who have the knowledge and experience.” When I recounted this to my foreign associates they thought this was appalling. It represented applying a common business strategy (i.e., hiring experts) that did not translate well to the political arena. With all followers’ eyes on the president, he simply cannot outsource the leadership.

Clearly, research in I-O psychology can be applied to the election of U.S. presidents, and multidisciplinary research on leadership includes a significant number of scholars who study both the presidency and the election process. However, thinking about these fundamental differences in how we select our presidents and how we select our business leaders has caused me, as a leadership scholar, to be much more cautious about generalizing the results of studies of presidential leadership to business leadership and vice versa.

References


