

# Psychology Today



Larry Stybel, Ed.D. and Maryanne Peabody, MBA

## YOUR STAKEHOLDERS WANT YOU TO BE A CALM, ASSERTIVE LEADER.

We show you how to talk and the talk and walk the walk.



Have you seen the cable television show “Dog Whisperer” starring Cesar Milan? The title of the show would have you believe it is about how Cesar Milan trains dogs. Those of us who watch the program know differently. Cesar Milan trains dog owners to be leaders.

## YOUR LEADERSHIP MISSION: BE PERCEIVED AS CALM/ASSERTIVE.

Cesar Milan observes that dogs are pack animals. Pack animals are attracted to calm/assertive leaders. If dogs sense a non-assertive pack member, they are not taken seriously. This is a key theme of the show, when the dog perceives the owner as calm but not assertive, the dog sees a power vacuum and seizes it. The dog then assumes it is responsible for controlling the family.

On the other hand, if the dog perceives the owner as assertive but not calm, the dog gets nervous.

Are dogs like humans? There is solid research with humans to show that emotions are contagious. Assertive but not calm leaders create nervous and not calm subordinates.

People get nervous around nervous people.

True pack leadership requires being both calm and assertive at the same time. “Dog Whisperer” is about how Cesar Milan trains dog owners to behave in a calm/assertive manner. The fun of this cable show is watching the dog’s behavior change in response to the owner’s new behavior.

## WE TEACH YOU HOW TO MANIPULATE YOUR BRAIN WITHOUT DRUGS,

In New York City’s Columbia Business School and Boston’s Harvard Business School, Professors Amy Cuddy and Dale Carney works with a unique subset of the animal kingdom: business leaders and students. The research team found that effective leaders have high levels of testosterone combined with low levels of cortisol in their blood stream. What does that mean? (2010)

Testosterone is a steroid hormone secreted in both males and females. High levels are associated with assertiveness, confidence, and sexual potency. Cortisol is a steroid hormone

produced in the adrenal cortex. High levels of this hormone are associated with stress and the production of adrenalin. Cortisol helps the body prepare for “fight or flight.”

In other words, high testosterone/low cortisol levels in the blood are associated with Calm/Assertive behavior.

## WHAT CALM/ASSERTIVE LEADERS DO

The brain is but a muscle and it is connected to other muscles in the body. The neuro feedback loops that run in multiple directions at the same time. Do not assume that the brain “commands” and the other muscles “follow.” Their research demonstrates that it is possible to manipulate hormonal levels in the brain simply by posing. The muscles in the pose send messages to the brain to produce the desired hormones.

*One set of muscle positions is called Power Poses.*

A Power Pose is when you make your body as large as possible. For example, notice what athletes do when they win: both arms high up in the air, chest out, head tilted back, and mouth open. This position is automatically assumed by blind athletes when they win in the Special Olympics. And yet they have never seen anyone assume this pose. Baboons assume this position when they triumph or wish to frighten an enemy.

Maintaining this position for two minutes can increase testosterone production and reduce cortisol levels. In other words, the calm and assertive leader can be manipulated by your muscles acting on the brain.

The research team found that two minutes of keeping one’s arms tight by one’s side and one’s legs tightly together will reduce production of testosterone and increase production of cortisol. In other words, you can trigger agitation and lack of assertiveness through the way you position your body.

## LARRY GOES TO THE MEN'S ROOM AND DOES

### A TWO MINUTE POWER POSE

When making a sales call, one of the authors (Larry) I generally arrives 15-20 minutes before the scheduled appointment. What does he do with the extra time? He remains parked in the car and checks emails. But checking emails on a mobile device in a car means that he is spending 10-15 minutes in a “small” posture. According to the research, this position would trigger signals to the brain to secrete more cortisol secretion and reduce testosterone. That is exactly what he does NOT want!

He got out of the car and went to the appointment's office. He asked if I might use the men's room. He went into a stall and did a Power Pose for two minutes.

He then met the company President. During the subsequent sales call, the President asked about fees. Larry gave a figure that was 15% higher than the figure he had in mind when driving up for the appointment. Instead of selling one assignment he sold two.

Much of our work with high potential leaders falls under the framework of “fake it (with your body) until you become it.

Think about how to use this technique before you have a job interview.

## CALM/ASSERTIVE LEADERS USE PROBABILITY STATEMENTS

Evan Thomas' history of the Eisenhower Presidency shows how a calm/assertive leader works under intense pressure in high stakes situations. (2012). One of the fascinating stories about this period was a time when the Central Intelligence Agency recommended that President Eisenhower authorize the use of covert force to overthrow the elected Guatemalan President. The CIA Director was asked by President Eisenhower, “What do you think Castillo's (the U.S. backed leader) chances would be without American supplied aircraft. The Director responded, “About zero.” Eisenhower then asked, “Suppose we supply the aircraft. What would the chances be then?” The Director responded, “About twenty percent.” President Eisenhower

then gave permission for the aid saying, “the figure of 20 percent was persuasive. If you had told me that the chances are 90 percent, I would have had a much more difficult decision.”

Translating this vignette into our model, a statement that there is a 100% chance of success would strike Eisenhower as assertive but not calm. But a 20% chance of success appealed to Eisenhower as both calm and assertive.

Psychometricians use the technical term “predictive validity” to measure the degree to which a score on a scale or test predicts scores on some future measure. In the above example, the CIA Director said that there was a 20% chance Castillo would be victorious if the United States supplied aircraft. This is a measurable prediction. And the criterion was that Castillo would be the President of Guatemala.

Every day, meteorologists make predictive validity statements: the chances of rain are 40% today.

Whether the predictive validity statements are made by the CIA Director, a meteorologist, or a surgeon, they are all delivered in a calm/assertive manner. Eisenhower was correct: a statement that there would be a 100% chance of success would be assertive indeed but not calm.

President Eisenhower was comfortable making a major military commitment with a 20% certainty of success. But Eisenhower was a successful General and know how to operate with those odds.

Our experience is that most leaders are comfortable in the 70-85% range. Above that range, it might be too easy or not perceived as valid. Below 60%, it might be perceived as too risky. Even entrepreneurs like to operate at the 70% level of perceived success.

#### NOW YOU TRY IT

When asked to make a statement of confidence, think like a television weatherman or a surgeon. Here is a typical surgeon statement:

“Based on my experience and the outcome research, I believe there is an 80% success if we do this surgery.”

Now you try it. Think about predictive, measureable statements you can make using this framework.

### OUR LITTLE SECRET: IT'S OK TO BE WRONG

Money managers, psychologists, and weather forecasters make predictions every day. Sometimes these predictions turn out to be valid. And sometimes the predictions are wrong.

In the end you will be judged on the preponderance of the valid or invalid predictions you made. You will not be judged by one prediction.

I remember a senior psychologist told Larry to not be afraid about being bold in making predictions about the leadership success chances of job candidates. "It's nice if you are right but people understand that you may be wrong. What you cannot be is vague or too certain.

### REFERENCES

Dana Carney, Amy Cuddy, and Andy Yap. "Power posing brief nonverbal displays affect neuroendocrine levels and risk tolerance." PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE, 21, 10, 2010, pp. 1363-1368.

Evan Thomas. IKE'S BLUFF: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World. NY: Little Brown, 2012.

###

Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Boston-based Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc., an Arbora Global Company. Clients include 21% of the one hundred companies named "Best Employers in the United States." Its mission is "Leadership and Career Success:" retained search, coaching, and outplacement for senior leaders.

[www.stybelpeabody.com](http://www.stybelpeabody.com). Tel. 617 371 2990.