

Work Space

Charm: morsels for the mind

Geniality helps make a speaker more engaging and their message easier to digest, writes **Fiona Smith**.

Iwant to marry him now," said physicist Dana Zohar, as she headed back into the ballroom. She wasn't the only one. Educationist Ken Robinson appeared to have charmed everyone he met when he visited from the US this month.

But then Zohar, a promoter of "spiritual intelligence" and director of the Oxford Academy of Total Intelligence in the UK, might have had to fight off 1000 human resources professionals who had joined Robinson at the Australian Human Resources Institute convention dinner in Sydney.

After hearing him talk (as a keynote speaker alongside Zohar) about creativity and the importance of finding your inner passion, it appeared that there was nobody left cold by his mix of self-deprecating humour, warmth and intelligence.

A relative unknown in Australia, he was suddenly a media star as radio and television presenters invited him on to their shows, the ABC's *7.30 Report* running its interview as a two-part series.

Some people are just like that. They seem to effortlessly win people over, as if charm has been written into their DNA.

And, in Robinson's case, it has been a very effective way to spread his message that all people have talents, not always identifiable by the commonly used assessment tests, and that people are much happier and productive when they use and explore those talents.

As one teacher commented, his address about multiple intelligences (as opposed to just IQ) and the way schools tend to kill creativity is not new but the way he talks about it is exciting, giving it new life and relevance.

Charm is extraordinarily useful in doing business, creating alliances and communicating messages. Psychologists say the skills are learned, rather than inherited, so it is surprising there aren't charm

schools within all masters of business administration programs.

Personality psychologist at Macquarie University, Dr Doris McIlwain, says charm is often a set of skills that are learned by children, either benefiting from the parents' example, or as a response to a difficult or uncertain home life.

If the parents are dysfunctional, the children may learn to become keen observers, watching for a raised eyebrow, a change in the tone of voice or any other subtle signal that trouble may be on the way.

They also learn, through trial and error, to make other people happy.

"Sometimes they become exceptionally emotionally skilled," McIlwain says.

By email from his BlackBerry, Robinson demurs. He doesn't think of himself as charming but says he has a genuine interest in connecting with other people.

"That, I think, is in my genes. My brothers and sister are just as engaged by other people as I am, so were my parents. And my son and daughter, like my wife, are wonderful, funny people, who can charm the birds off the trees."

When you meet a charming person you will feel they have been waiting for your arrival all day. They will use your name, hold eye contact and show a high degree of interest in anything you have to say.

They will be less interested in talking about themselves than drawing something from you. As well as listening to your words, they will pay as much attention to the emotion behind them. They will be self-effacing, they will laugh and they may hold your hand a little longer than necessary when they shake it.

It will not enter your mind that they might want something from the interaction. They won't be too slick, and definitely not sleazy.

They raise you up in status, even though they may be more powerful than you are, McIlwain says.

"They impart a quality of

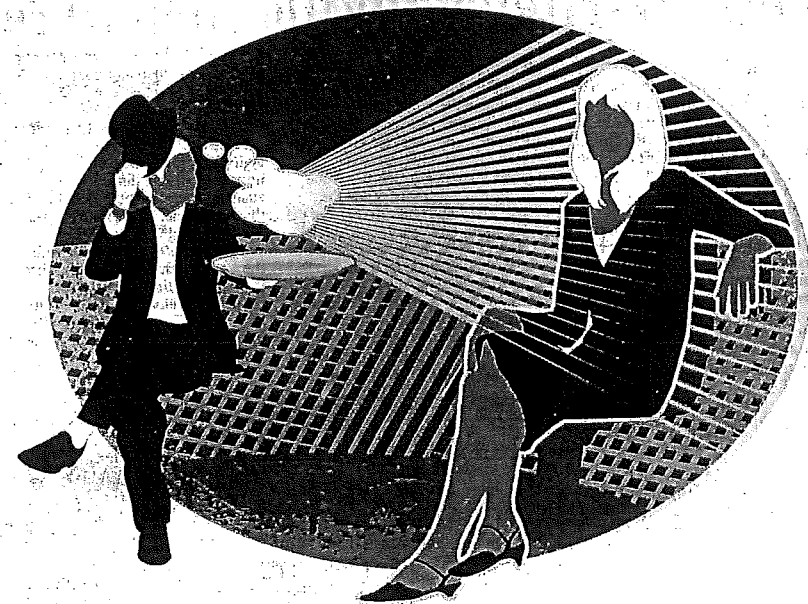


Illustration: KARL HILZINGER

attention which suggests there is something quite unique about you," she says. "They make you feel heard."

People can fake the interest in others but, ultimately, it is difficult to avoid slipping up and exposing yourself as insincere, or a fraud.

You may give yourself away with just a quick glance over someone's shoulder to see if there is someone more interesting to talk to, or a failure to remember them after a recent conversation. In terms of leaving a good impression, you may be worse off than if you had never tried to turn on the charm at all.

"You shouldn't be able to see the machinery, smell the rubber burning or see the cogs turning," McIlwain says.

But, conversely, it seems you might be able to become genuinely charming. By acting the way you want to appear, you may actually become it, says Deakin University psychologist, Dr Helen McGrath, who specialises in the area of personality traits.

"I could teach people to be charming, but the ones who started developing these skills earlier will

find it easier. It's harder if it is not really you and extroverts, who make up about 75 per cent of the population, can do it more readily," she says.

"You can make changes to how you are, but not very big ones."

McGrath says people who are very charming have a motivation to be liked and, as they develop their skills, are constantly studying others' reactions to them to find out

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Helen McGrath

what works and what doesn't. To be able to do this effectively requires a certain degree of emotional intelligence and intellect, she says.

They tend to be people with a positive outlook on life.

Charm and charisma are related but have significant differences, McIlwain says.

"Charisma is the capacity to muster assent, to get you on side, to sacrifice something of yourself and

freely give your labour," she says. Generally, charisma exists only because of the feelings ignited in others. Someone has it only because others confer it on them.

"Charm is a more one-on-one relationship. It is a unique bond."

Of course, once you have managed to be charming in a social situation, there is often the difficulty of breaking that contact and moving on, without leaving the other person feeling discarded.

McGrath says common strategies usually involve the expression of regret: "I'm so sorry, but I have to catch this other person before they leave. I wish we could talk more."

If you have been busy learning people's names, it can be useful to introduce them to each other, mentioning a common area of interest, and then move on.

People often also use the excuse of refilling their glass, finding the food, or heading for the toilet.

A rather clever way is to offer to bring them food, arrive with a platter and then offer it to others, thereby seamlessly entering other knots of people or drawing other people into your group.