

Charisma: The Art of Classroom Relationships

by Tom Maguire

The goal of this article is to present a practical model as a guide to becoming a more charismatic teacher, that is, one who can influence through relationships. You will learn how to recognise charisma in others and in yourself and how you can adapt that knowledge to improve your own abilities. The concepts and activities presented are based on acquiring non-verbal skills which will enable you to affect the heart of classroom learning: the teacher-student relationship.

Using this model will empower you to create a positive learning atmosphere in your classes, and the results you can expect are: more well-behaved groups, better academic performance by pupils and less teacher stress.

What is charisma?

If you consult the entry for the word ‘charisma’ in a dictionary you will come across definitions like the following:

“...compelling attractiveness or charm that can inspire devotion in others.”

or

“A divinely conferred power or talent.”

This, however, is not very helpful, since you are immediately thrown back to square one: now you have to use the same dictionary to look up ‘charm’ and ‘attractiveness’ and ‘devotion’. It could go on forever...

This article proposes using a simpler and more usable explanation for charisma. It consists of a model based on the analogy of two domestic pets: the dog and the cat.¹

To illustrate the differences between the two animals in the analogy here’s a story. It’s a tale about the Garden of Eden which has never been published. It goes something like this:

“... and God created the world and He saw that it was good. Then He decided to create Man. ... and He saw that he was good.

However, as time went by, God observed that Man was lonely, and He decided to create a companion for him. ... and He created Dog. Dog followed Man around and always did his bidding. Man was happy and smiled. Dog was happy and wagged his tail frequently.

Then it came to God’s notice that Man was becoming proud, strutting around the garden as if he owned everything and fawned upon by Dog, who looked up to him. So God decided to give Man another pet who would teach him humility. ...and He created Cat.

Now Cat paid little attention to Man, sleeping by day and going out at night. Cat was independent and refused to follow orders. Gradually Man learned to be more humble.

... and God saw that it was good. Dog wagged its tail often. And Cat couldn't have cared less one way or the other."

Those of you who possess pets already have an intuitive idea of the differences. For others here is a summary: To dogs you are **family**. To cats you are **staff**.

The goal is to enable you to apply the cat/dog distinctions to managing your behaviour in class and thus come closer to being a charismatic teacher. Of course, all models are wrong, but some are helpful.

How to recognise both modes

So how do we calibrate cat and dog modes in teachers? You can measure your own or others' modes using these parameters:

- Cats manage from their *position*; dogs from their *person*. It is usual for those in cat mode to define themselves as their job title: head teacher, tutor, school teacher, head of department...

Those who prefer dog mode perceive life from a personal perspective using words like: *me*, first name, *I*, *my group*...

- You can also distinguish between dogs and cats by listening to their usual tone of voice. The voice pitch of a person in cat mode is normally flat and dips at the end of a sentence. It sounds like that of the pilot's voice when speaking to passengers on an aircraft. The sound conveys certainty, security and lack of doubt. Just the reassurance you need from your captain. Cats have a credible voice pattern. This is the one you want when instructing and sending clear messages, for example homework to be done for the next class.

The dog, on the other hand, uses a wavy tone of voice which tends to go up at the end. Think of the cabin crew's announcements on a plane about fastening seat belts, refreshments and other services on the trip. They are there for your comfort and announce everything in an approachable voice. This pattern is useful for eliciting answers from students and conducting interactive class sessions.

- Gestures are another way of distinguishing between the two modes. Cats tend to be dominant and send information using a typical 'palms down' gesture when speaking. These are exactly the recommendable movements to accompany and underline the credible voice pattern.

Dogs prefer a more interactive mode of relationship and will often use a 'palms up', inviting movement when interacting. This is even more powerful if coupled with an approachable voice.

- Body language is another indication of both styles. The cat tends to adopt a rigid, upright posture and move in a formal way. The dog is more relaxed and will

put more weight on one leg, leaning to the side in an unbalanced, nonchalant manner.

It is important to recognise that nobody is always either a cat or a dog. Everyone adopts the cat or dog mode depending on circumstances. For example, if your family culture is predominantly cat and you are the youngest person, you may act as a dog, but this is only relative to the rest of the family. Outsiders will probably see you as a cat. Again, a businessman may be a taskmaster at work but a dog with his wife at home.

Are you more cat or dog in class?

Now you can apply this model to your professional life. Are you more predominantly dog or cat when you teach?

To find out, tick the mode you prefer in each of the following categories:

Category	Cat Mode	Dog Mode
1. You operate	<input type="checkbox"/> from your position	<input type="checkbox"/> from your person
2. Power	<input type="checkbox"/> comfortable with it	<input type="checkbox"/> shy from it
3. Conflict	<input type="checkbox"/> back away	<input type="checkbox"/> frightened and confused by it
4. Innate traits	<input type="checkbox"/> just being yourself	<input type="checkbox"/> very aware of others
5. When calm you are	<input type="checkbox"/> seen as definitive	<input type="checkbox"/> seen as seeking information
6. People are	<input type="checkbox"/> held accountable	<input type="checkbox"/> highly accepted
7. Emphasis on	<input type="checkbox"/> issues	<input type="checkbox"/> morale/relationship
8. Self image	<input type="checkbox"/> self selects; from internal	<input type="checkbox"/> dependent on how others see
9. Purpose in life:	<input type="checkbox"/> to dabble and tinker	<input type="checkbox"/> to be happy
10. Intrigue vs. Clarity	<input type="checkbox"/> loves intrigue	<input type="checkbox"/> loves clarity
11. Decision-making process	<input type="checkbox"/> you love to decide	<input type="checkbox"/> you would rather only gather information.

How to become more charismatic

Within this model, charisma is defined as the ability to act like a cat or a dog as the circumstances demand. Now that you have found out which teaching mode you intuitively prefer, it is time to move towards a more charismatic approach, that is, towards enabling yourself to behave in either mode, depending on the occasion.

If you found that you prefer to teach in dog mode, you can increase your ‘catability’ in class by doing the following:

- Seek respect even if it means becoming less popular.
- Recognise that there is a hierarchy in schools and respect the chain of command.
- Avoid what is perceived as ‘unfairness’ by adolescents by announcing disciplinary rules in advance.
- Manage the class group consistently according to clear norms, not individually depending on changing conditions or whimsy.

You can also change your non-verbals to act more like a cat:

- Keep your head still when speaking.
- Move your head down when you finish a sentence (this ensures that you dip your tone instead of finishing on a rise).
- Place your weight evenly on both feet and look balanced, not lop-sided.
- Hold your palms down more when gesticulating. (Note a gender difference: women may prefer to half turn their hand instead of using the full palms-down signal. The effect on the audience will be the same.)

Cats become more charismatic by:

- listening more and maintaining eye contact with the group.
- acknowledging contributions from the students.
- asking for a favour instead of commanding.
- dressing and speaking less formally.
- separating behavioural issues from the person. (When reprimanding pupils, avoid the verb *to be* (“You are...”) and refer to the behaviour you disapprove of (“You did...”).)

As a cat you can increase your non-verbal ‘dog-abilities’ by:

- bobbing your head while speaking.
- moving your head up when finishing speaking (to ensure that your voice pitch ends in a rise).
- placing your weight on one leg (to appear less formal).
- holding your palms up when gesticulating.

The basic ingredients of charisma

Finally let's look at the essential elements that make up a charismatic cat or dog. The most important non-verbal factor is the *pause*. Remember both cats and dogs need 'paws'.

When cats talk without pausing, standing bolt upright, moving rather rigidly and gesturing palms down, they appear to be uptight. However, if they pause from time to time they will seem more relaxed.

When someone in dog mode talks and talks and talks, they will be perceived as garrulous and even blabber-mouthed. This mismanagement of their pauses will lead to class management problems. Dogs would be well advised to pause from time to time so as to appear more intelligent.

The *frozen pause* is an added technique which will help maintain audience attention regardless of the mode the speaker is in. It consists of holding your arm still during a pause in your speech. This has a slightly mesmerising effect on the listeners and ensures they keep paying attention to what you are saying. Having a pen in your hand is helpful since you can use it naturally to emphasise the frozen position of your arm.

What you do with your hands will also affect your communication. If you are in cat mode and have your hands akimbo or folded across your body, the audience will perceive that as anger. In the dog mode, clutching your hands behind your back or putting them in the fig leaf position, will make you appear desperate.

The recommended position is to keep both arms at your side or one arm at belt level and the other parallel to your body. Once again the pen comes in handy as something to clasp naturally in your fingers.

Remember to breathe through your nose and close your mouth at the end of a sentence. Think of the man you saw on an overnight flight sleeping with his mouth open compared to the woman asleep with hers closed. Who looked sillier?

One ingredient that cats do well and dogs would do well to learn: *recovery*. Top athletes are often high cats on field. If a professional football player commits a foul and is caught, he doesn't apologise but usually gets down to attend to his bootlaces then jumps up a new man. He recovers fast.

On the other hand, dogs tend to start apologising profusely and just confuse the issue by drawing everyone's attention to the faux pas and keeping it there. Learn from the cat: breathe, move and forget. In life this translates as:

- Review from your position (it was the footballer's mistake not mine);
- Plan from your person (I'm here now and that won't happen again).

Conclusion

The teacher who has become charismatic has shifted her approach from the influence of power to the power of influence. She no longer dictates to the group but manages it, moving into cat or dog mode as required. She combines the best of both modes: she is credible when necessary and approachable when the circumstances demand. She is sociable when interacting but recognises the need for productivity, too. She can step into the role of facilitator or change it to manager with ease. Above all, she prefers to teach from her person but can work from her position when called to.

Charisma is the ability to influence through relationships. The good news is that you can achieve this influence through behavioural changes.

This model is based on Michael Grinder's book: Charisma (e-book format: <http://tinyurl.com/l614zyj>).

