Putting on a Face

by Arthur Hadley

Are you the kind of business or corporate person who shows your true feelings? If you do you can lose out. If you don’t you probably will be at the top. Let’s see how you fare as you check on your progress way up the corporate ladder.

Let me tell you right at the start what I have in mind. The only problem is I am not lying. What we or successful business or corporate persons need is a lot less of truth and a good deal more of wheeling and dealing to soft or loud music as background to our thoughts. Putting on a face is really important. Let us see how you work it out.

A complete business person needs to have a wide spectrum of talent such as that ever bright smile, a solid handshake, facts and figures at his/her fingertips, a capacity for absorbing and retaining information, a stomach for food and drink (whether one relishes what is offered or not), an ability to do with less than six hours of sleep, an equable temper and a willingness to lead when called upon to do so, to follow cheerfully if required and to get out of the way when necessary.

Now, all these are qualities that can safely anchor you only somewhere in the middle rungs of your profession, set in a highly competitive environment. To be able to catch the wind and sail out into the upper echelons of the corporate web or the prosperous areas in expansive business fields you will need something more. It is, quite simply, the ability to appear sincere even in situations where you are perhaps

hard put to carry it off.

To feign sincerity is easy enough for the adroit businessman or businesswoman or the quick- thinking entrepreneur who wants to be ahead of his/her competitors it is part of their flesh and blood. In other more staid professions, the ability to appear to be what you are not, to keep your true feelings hidden and to put on a face may be scorned at. Yet, to be truly successful this trait is essential, even if one has to be falsely true, just to keep in control in situations in which daily activity puts him or her. Those who have a knack get there they are in control. Others don't they are the ones you see giving themselves away in the twinkling of an eye, their true feelings dripping down their faces. *Are you one of these?* Surely not.

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Let us check out your *bogus sincerity* quotient with the multiple-choice quiz set out for you below. Each correct reply will qualify you to move up to the next higher level.

Doing it simply because one has to

You have been invited to a meal with a client whose restaurant you have been assigned to write up. It is a star-class one in town and your hostess is far too charming to be affronted. You have been offered and accept among other things a plate of what the restaurant manager claims to be the best lamb chops in town; you ask for the dish to be well-done. When it comes around you find it is less than underdone and can hardly get your knife into it. You cannot eat it. So you: (a) eat it; (b) push it around on your plate and leave it uneaten making excuses for your bad appetite, disregarding the look of hurt dissapointed-intment on your hostess's face; (c) call the waiter over and ask for something else on the menu; (d) wait for a chance for your hostess to be busy or to go to the restroom and then roll the contents of the dish away into your napkin and thrust it into your briefcase, or dispose it quietly in a restroom bin.

The answer? Well, if you’re stupid, you choose (a). Less adroit persons. who go for sincerity. above all else will opt for (b) and (e). But if you selected (d) and complimented-limented the chef on the lunch, then you have done well. You have neither debased yourself nor wounded your valued companion. You may now go on to the next step.

Cutting it fine

A video presentation is on at an advertising establishment with several persons who were involved in its production being present. The film has to be viewed critically before being given, to the client who must approve. None of the marketing squad who had worked on it enthusiastically are still quite sure as to how it will be received. One of them who had a lead role in the production is determined to prove himself. Somebody asks you what you think of it. You: (a) blurt out saying, “It was great!”; (b) croon amusingly praising the concept and its pleasing features and

keep cool when someone decides to make scoffing comments; (e) say, “Honestly? I don’t think much of it at all. I think we could have done much better.”; (d) scratch your chin or head thoughtfully and say, “It had some good moments, but I am not quite sure. The concept comes through from time to time. But shouldn’t we look at it a little more before we send it out? After which you are given the assignment to work on it all over again. You take your time doing it, delay the whole thing indefinitely until everybody forgets about it.

The answer of course is (d) which leaves the project in limbo without hurting anyone’s pride or reputation in the agency. Very nice work. You have now qualified to enter the (in)sincerity sphere.

Candour or bogus frankness

Now here’s a situation which can crop up in any of the several corporate or business offices in Colombo or elsewhere. She’s a young lady executive, a colleague who has been pushed down the corporate ladder as division manager in an organisation which has gone into a tie-up with another company. She hails you cordially and soon enough confides her anxieties in you, she has to choose between accepting a new position which does not carry the prestige, or financial benefits of her former post or quitting. You know she doesn’t stand a chance. How do you handle her? You: (a) tell her how highly you think of her efficiency in her job and how charming and popular she’d been both on and off the job; (b) advise her how to fight her way through with the Boardroom Managers opening their eyes to how wrong they have been on their decision to move her down the line; (e) suggest she takes up an alternative placement in other outfits with offers of your help; (d) get her to a side, tell her how unhappy you are with the whole affair saying at the same time there’s not much you can do about it. Then edge away fast to join others in the cocktail circuit. After all, you know she’s hardly got a chance.

Well, you choose (d) of course. It’s not being very truthful, but it’s skilful and you have played it well. So you qualify for the next step.

Putting on a false front

You are a top man or woman in your sector of the staff organization. You have to attend monthly staff meetings with your peers, each of whom has a high opinion of himself or herself and can barely conceal the contempt they feel for you and have no responsibility to go along with anything you might say. You are sitting at the

conference table at one such meeting waiting for the arrival of the chairman and suddenly you realize that every single man and woman around the table. is just waiting for a chance to claw the other. You are startled by this revelation, which you find somewhat shocking. You: (a) go around the room saying “Hello how are you?” And dole out pleasantries to every one of them; (b) retreat into a shell and try to deal morosely with your feelings, sinking deep into dejection; (c) pitch into one of the groups needling one of your peers about an uncomplimentary reference that has been made about him in an idiotic personality profile appeared in a company newsletter; (d) smile, drink coffee and talk cricket.

Do I have to tell you? Of course not. And congratulations. You are now a past master at the art of false sincerity, you have proven that you are ready to sit at the big table. May you never change! Because there is only one alternative left to you, the ultimate form of executive insincerity. Read on.

Cruelty

You are the patron of a leading rugger club. The team has come into the finals

playing its heart out but has been badly trounced by a top rival club. You are disappointed but you later meet the team manager at the club house. He has worked very hard and confides in you that his grief at the loss in the big event is only surpassed by his sorrow at his father's death. To deal with this fellow, you: (a) talk to everyone in the club house but him; (b) pat him on the back, invite him for a beer and say something like, "Pull yourself together."; (e) do some loud talking, letting all around in the club know how much you admire the manager of the rival team; (d) refuse to clarify the future of the young man who has had a long stint as manager but might now have to be thrown out.

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The answer, if you're the boss, is (e) all of the above. I know I didn't of fer it. It was a trick question. Who needs such honesty! Do you want your colleagues telling you what they actually think of your performance at the office? Do you want your subordinate's real. opinion of your new haircut? And do you really want to hear unvarnished comments from those whom you might feel like busting up?

No, I do not. I've heard enough. Real unmodulated thoughts and feelings have no place in business. They don't help to keep the atmosphere calm and let things move at an even keel. Besides, frankness mistimed and misplaced can wreck a deal. The effort to produce a false sincerity among a group of people at work or dealing with each other helps to keep things civilized. Beyond its pale lies truth which everyone may not like to hear and which often cannot be managed.

Then, do I believe in brutal frankness in such situations and when edged into an unbearable corner during a meeting tell everyone that I would rather drop dead than stay a minute longer in the room? No, not at all. It would be best I feel to tell the group what a great meeting it was but that I have pressing business ahead that I just can't miss. They won't believe the lie, but they'll appreciate the effort taken to make it. And that's how it should go at all times.