



# Compelling People

## The Hidden Qualities That Make Us Influential

John Neffinger and Matthew Kohut

From COMPELLING PEOPLE by John Neffinger and Matthew Kohut. Summarized by arrangement with Hudson Street Press, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC

304 pages

Book: [getab.li/20582](https://getab.li/20582)

## Rating

8

9 Applicability

7 Innovation

7 Style

## Focus

### Leadership & Management

Strategy

Sales & Marketing

Finance

Human Resources

IT, Production & Logistics

Career & Self-Development

Small Business

Economics & Politics

Industries

Global Business

Concepts & Trends

## Take-Aways

- People evaluate and judge others based on two primary criteria: “strength and warmth.”
- Strength refers to your abilities and will. Warmth is your capacity to express empathy and connect with others.
- Strength and warmth are disharmonious; increased strength means decreased warmth, and vice versa.
- Some company cultures lean toward strength; others emphasize warmth.
- Worthy leaders exercise strength to facilitate performance; they project warmth to create a positive work environment.
- Humans generally make split-second judgments about each other based on appearance, ethnicity, age and gender.
- Gender bias frames men as strong but cold – and women as warm but weak. Working women must fight this stereotype.
- Nonverbal behaviors speak volumes, but you can control them with practice and effort.
- People attribute strength to those with strong speaking skills and rich vocabularies.
- Use “the circle” speaking technique to share and confirm your audience’s views.

# Relevance

## What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) How people make character judgments about others, 2) What you consciously and subconsciously communicate to others, and 3) What strategies you can use to project strength and warmth.

## Review

People celebrate those who know how to project both “strength and warmth,” such as Oprah Winfrey and Bill Clinton, as well as community and business leaders. Communications consultants John Neffinger and Matthew Kohut offer a refined approach for projecting your strength and warmth. They apply their methods to research and knowledge in several areas, including verbal and nonverbal communication, leadership, and relationships. Their goal is to help you become a more appealing, effective leader by giving you strategies to increase your perceived strength and warmth. While the authors’ leadership skills aren’t new, they do provide a fresh context and a handle on understanding how others see you. *getAbstract* recommends this text to leaders, aspiring leaders and anyone who wants to make a good impression.

# Summary

*“Strength and warmth are the principal criteria on which all our social judgments hinge.”*

*“When we get to know people, if they project strength and warmth, we admire them, no matter what other stereotypical notions we otherwise associate with their demographic group.”*

## Strength Plus Warmth Equals Success

People use two criteria to evaluate and judge others: “strength and warmth.” Strength refers to someone’s abilities and apparent resolve. Warmth is a person’s capacity to express empathy and connect with others. Interestingly, the two characteristics oppose each other. Strong people may come off as cold; warm people can seem weak.

Like everyone else, you project unique social cues about the kind of person you are. Speaking forcefully, assuming a serious expression or making a quick decision creates an impression of strength, but not warmth. Acquiescing, smiling and speaking softly may project warmth, but not strength. People who project both strength and warmth are instantly effective.

Strength consists of “ability and will”: the capacity to bring about change, coupled with the determination to make things happen. Strength requires competence – the social skills, technical expertise and experience to achieve a goal. Will is the force of character needed to persevere in the face of obstructions and difficulties.

The “marshmallow experiment,” a well-known study conducted at Stanford University, showed that small children who were able to resist eating a marshmallow for 15 minutes, in exchange for the reward of a second marshmallow, performed better in later life than the children who ate the first marshmallow immediately. The children who displayed strong willpower turned out to be more disciplined and successful in school and work.

Warmth – the ability to make others feel that you share and understand their worries and interests – is made up of “empathy, familiarity and love.” When you express empathy, you demonstrate that you understand someone else’s feelings and share his or her worldview. Familiar places, people and situations make people feel more comfortable. Feelings of love, whether romantic, platonic or filial, are closely associated with warmth.

*“Nearly everything you do to increase your strength diminishes your warmth, and vice versa.”*

*“A stranger who spends just a few minutes in your presence usually walks away with a much clearer sense of the impression you make on people than you have yourself.”*

*“Changing the habits of thought and behavior that define us to the rest of the world is within our control. But that does not mean it is easy.”*

*“The shared secret of most exceptionally compelling people is that they were not born that way – they worked hard at it and continue to.”*

## Love and Power

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites...What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic.” This captures the conundrum of the relationship between strength and warmth. Once you gain someone’s admiration, you benefit from the “halo effect.” When people admire, like or respect something about you, they will attribute other good qualities to you. Exhibit strength and your warmth quotient decreases; show warmth and people perceive you as weak. To lead, you need to exhibit both strength and warmth, which is a challenge.

## The Book’s Cover

Humans evaluate each other in split seconds based on appearance. Physical characteristics such as “gender, body type, looks, ethnicity and age” conjure a quick first impression, whether you want them to or not. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls this quick-take cognitive process “a machine for jumping to conclusions.” While it may not seem fair for other people to judge you this way, you can level the playing field by understanding such universal human tendencies.

Ethnicity offers visual markers that people refer to when they make quick assessments by associating skin color, facial features or accents with certain life experiences and behaviors. People’s age works for them when other people make positive assumptions about their wisdom and experience, but it works against them when others view them as less competent due to seeming old. Good looks instantly affect how others react to attractive people. Beautiful people enjoy the halo effect. Their beauty blinds other people to their faults and invites positive attention. Beauty connotes warmth and bestows social power.

People are usually reluctant to change opinions that spring from these snap judgments. They accept incoming data that support their preconceptions and filter out data that don’t fit. When people act against stereotype, it upsets expectations, causing a “stereotype violation.” However, getting to know people as individuals renders the stereotype moot.

## Gender Bias

Men are supposed to be strong; people encourage them to display traits that show strength, such as assertiveness or dominant behavior. However, people may see strong men as cold. They hang the same stereotype on strong women, whom they also tend to pigeonhole as angry and unlikable. The reverse is that people may stereotype a sweet, soft-spoken woman as incompetent or naïve.

Hillary Clinton offers a case study of this phenomenon. When she put forth a health care plan during her husband Bill Clinton’s first term as US president, the media portrayed her as a cold, conniving bureaucrat. Later when she ran for the US Senate, she warmed up her image by taking a “listening tour” to hear the opinions of groups of voters. In 2008, when pitted against Barack Obama in the presidential primaries, she emphasized her strength. Ironically, the one time she welled up with tears during a campaign interview, voters reacted to her genuine display of vulnerability by raising her popularity ratings in the polls.

Women can employ three useful strategies to project strength and warmth in the workplace:

1. **“Assertive, not angry”** – When a woman becomes angry, others perceive her as losing control of her emotions, and that works against her. Outflank this reaction by explaining the reasons for your angry response.

*“Words enter our consciousness like characters parading onto our mental stage to act out their play, triggering associations that resonate with us.”*

*“Strength is essential to effective leadership, whether the organization is a submarine crew or a school clique.”*

*“Just as body language can tell you how someone feels in the moment, spoken language tells you how that person’s mind works.”*

*“If you want people to take your point of view seriously, you first have to be willing to take their point of view seriously.”*

2. **“Getting tough for the good of the group”** – People excuse an angry mama bear, that is, a woman who becomes angry to protect her work product or employees.
3. **“Dial the warmth up, not down”** – Oprah Winfrey turned her enormous capacity for warmth into strength by showing empathy and clearly defining right from wrong.

### **Nonverbal Communication**

Male or female, you can’t control your general looks, age, gender or ethnicity, but you can control the signals you send others. With effort and practice, you can change your subconscious behaviors. More than the words you speak, your nonverbal behaviors (facial expressions, gestures, eye contact) tell others a lot about you. Unless you are aware of the messages you send, your nonverbal behavior can divulge information about how you are feeling because physicality and emotions intertwine. Knowing the impact of these behaviors allows you to tailor your actions to project the right amounts of strength and warmth.

For instance, the way people inhabit space reveals a lot about them. When you feel strong and self-assured, you claim your physical parameters and call attention to yourself. Strong people occupy a lot of space, move at liberty and assert authority by towering over others or invading their space uninvited. Nonthreatening closeness promotes warmth and connection. An upright posture projects self-confidence, a characteristic of strength. A bouncy walk, swagger or long stride also reflects confidence and energy. Expansive, forceful gestures show strength, while gentle, flowing movements connote warmth. Touch can express sympathy, joy, attraction and other warm emotions. A handshake – the ritualized touch upon introduction in many, but not all, cultures – makes an immediate impression about a person’s strength and ability to connect.

Facial expressions, universal human characteristics understood instinctively around the world, are the most revealing physical signals. People show determination and focus with a “flexed lower eyelid” or “steely eye,” as perfected by the actor Clint Eastwood. Smiles that reach the eyes produce a range of positive associations, such as happiness, attractiveness and success. You can elevate your mood simply by smiling. Open and friendly eye contact promotes connection, but glaring and relentless staring is a display of aggression.

### **Verbal Dexterity**

The way you speak conveys information about you beyond what you say. People see skilled speakers with rich vocabularies as strong and capable. But if you overuse qualifiers such as “like” or “kind of” when you speak, you will project weakness. To get people to listen to you, make sure they see you as strong – someone worth listening to. If others don’t feel you share their interests and concerns, they’ll disregard your message.

Consider using “the circle” technique. On the day of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, then US attorney general Robert Kennedy, brother of murdered President John F. Kennedy, spoke in Indianapolis, Indiana. He shared the devastating news of King’s killing, saying, “For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and mistrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man.” By acknowledging his audience members’ pain and justifiable anger, he connected with them on their terms. Kennedy joined their circle by sharing their worldview. The circle technique works because you confirm your listeners’ viewpoints, appear reasonable and likable, and take a nonconfrontational approach that sidesteps any argument.

*“Everybody stereotypes, and everyone is stereotyped. It is just how our brains work.”*

*“Cold impressions last, which means you are going to have a hard time re-establishing trust after being a jerk.”*

*“At the end of the day, character is a matter of who you choose to be, not the way you happen to be born.”*

Telling stories and using humor convey strength and warmth. People respond to stories better than to facts and figures. Humor bonds you with your audience; they like and respect you for making them laugh.

### **Warmth and Strength Can Get You Hired**

Some corporate cultures are hierarchical and lean toward strength; others are collaborative and emphasize warmth. Understanding the strength-warmth levels in different company cultures enables you to dress, interact and behave appropriately. This dynamic comes into play especially when you seek a position. Job candidates must project strength, beginning with their résumé. Use your cover letter to add the warmth by including personal information. Project warmth during the interview, but first enumerate the strengths you bring that will benefit the organization.

### **Leading with Warmth and Strength**

Leaders must satisfy certain basic needs for their team: exercising enough strength to enable it to work efficiently and achieve its goals, while projecting enough warmth to create a positive work environment. Solid leadership requires dialing strength and warmth up or down depending on the situation and the people involved. The most admired, respected leaders manage this balancing act.

Harvard professor Joseph Nye developed a chart of six primary leadership skills. Think about these attributes through the lens of balancing strength and warmth.

- **“Emotional intelligence”** – Emotional intelligence includes self-mastery, which draws on your strength, as well as reaching out to others, which expresses warmth.
- **“Communications”** – Effectively relating to people requires strength and warmth.
- **“Vision”** – When you create and communicate a powerful, inspiring vision, you engender feelings of warmth among the people you are talking to.
- **“Organizational skills”** – Mastering and implementing everyday management skills is a necessary strength.
- **“Machiavellian political skills”** – Knowing how and when to wield power in pursuit of a goal shows strength.
- **“Contextual intelligence”** – Reading and reacting to a situation appropriately requires having the strength to navigate power dynamics and the warmth to deal well with people.

### **Boys and Girls Together**

The strength-and-warmth dynamic also affects love, relationships and mutual attraction. Women find men who project strength to be sexiest; men react positively to a woman’s smile, which indicates warmth. Flirting and courtship rituals are rife with nonverbal signals, many of which are involuntary. Men adopt strength poses, such as sprawling out to take up more space. Women use warmth signals, such as coyness. When it comes to sex, females attract males by projecting weakness. Assuming a submissive pose is a signals of docility. Gender roles are growing increasingly fluid, with some women now attracting men by showing strength in combination with flirting and other playful displays.

## About the Authors

**John Neffinger** and **Matthew Kohut** are founding partners of KNP Communications, a consultancy specializing in communications and live presentations.