

**A Reflection on Leadership Presence**

Virginia Commonwealth University

EDLP 708

John G. Hendron

Summer 2012

The film *The King's Speech* (2010) focuses upon the relationship between the future king of the United Kingdom, George VI, and his speech therapist, Lionel Logue. The challenge faced by Bertie (as we learn, the king's nickname with family) is centered around his habit of stammering when speaking, especially when faced with stressful situations or personalities. His wife helped him find the so-called Dr. Logue, whose approaches were unconventional and questionable, especially when it is revealed that Mr. Logue is in fact not a medical doctor or therapist.

One might argue that what Bertie really lacked was leadership presence. The portrayal in the movie, at least, pits a weak and ineffective son of King George V against his father and his brother, King Edward VIII. Both have their moments where they put Bertie down, by either yelling at him to “just speak” when he pauses, or when he can get no words out at all.

Throughout the first part of the film, there is no doubt that Bertie is ill-prepared to be a leader, especially for the role of a king, as described by his father as a changing, more public role. The arc of the story wants us to believe that Bertie will somehow overcome these challenges of leadership he faces, and the venue for proving this to us is an important speech he must deliver via the radio announcing that Britain is declaring war upon Germany—igniting World War II.

As a story, the movie convinces us that indeed it is possible to grow, or amplify one's leadership presence. The drama of the second movement of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* is the score by which Lionel Logue's genius enables (now) King George VI to use every bit of his might to speak more naturally and to assume his new role. The fact that this story is a re-telling of real, historic events adds to the viewer's interest. It also further convinces the viewer that presence is achievable with proper training.

Authors Halpern and Lubar (2003) tell us as much with actors, that they must study, concentrate, and focus to achieve presence in their field. It is curious that Lionel Logue was an actor, at least an amateur one, and that his unorthodox therapies had root in techniques for actors. Halpern and Lubar state that presence “comes from within” (p. 4). Logue uses some of the same techniques prescribed by Halpern and Lubar in his therapy for Bertie: humor, breathing, focusing on others. By the end of the film, Bertie delivers the speech at the appropriate time. His closest staff cheers him on, with congratulations. He finds presence through the confidence to speak, likely extinguishing questions about his legitimacy as the new monarch with the public.

The film is a compelling one about leadership because it pits a person literally born into power (yet powerless) with a natural leader in Lionel Logue, who on account of his deception as a trained doctor, likely does not deserve such recognition. Logue nevertheless is overflowing with confidence and presence. He takes on the challenge of a new, difficult customer with attitude, demanding equal status with his monarch. Logue has already achieved the flexibility mentioned by Halpern and Lubar (2003) that is naturally present after one has achieved presence. The developing friendship and empathy Logue provides likely impacted the acquisition of presence that the new king was able to acquire.

The *King's Speech* (2010) is a tale of how one's own personal experiences growing up can adversely affect one's ability to lead. I reflected upon my experience as a musician (as opposed to an actor) when considering my own leadership presence. I think of certain leadership tasks, such as speaking or presenting in front of others, through the lens of a musician on stage. Presentation slides are a new type of musical score. Speaking replaces a musical performance. I approach some of these tasks “as a musician” just as Halpern and Lubar (2003) frame the acquisition of presence in the guise of an actor in preparation. While George VI likely might

frame his role as “the captain” (p. 63), my work in developing presence and confidence needs to focus upon my ability to adapt to different leadership roles. While I most naturally fit as a conceiver role, my own leadership presence can gain from more practice in roles of captain and collaborator.

**References**

Halpern, B.L., & Lubar, K. (2003). *Leadership presence*. New York: Gotham Books.

Hooper, T. (Director). (2010). *The king's speech* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom: The Weinstein Company & Momentum Pictures.