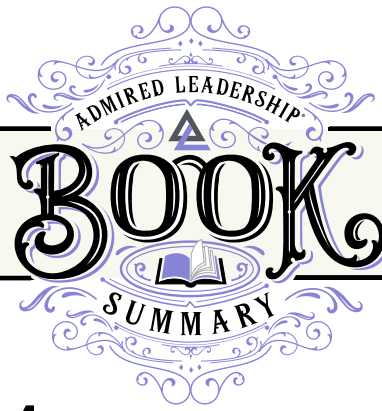




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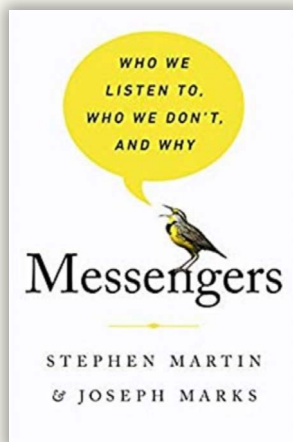
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# Messengers

Who We Listen To, Who We Don't, and Why

AUTHORS: STEPHEN MARTIN AND JOSEPH MARKS

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**“The medium is the message” takes on new meaning in Stephen Martin and Joseph Marks’ Messengers. Employing more than 60 years’ worth of research, the authors propose there are eight fundamental traits that, whether perceived or founded, are held by those communicators to whom most people are predisposed to listen. These traits can be categorized as those with “status-driven” hard effects and “connectedness-driven” soft effects.**

Martin and Marks uncover the subtle features that often convey ownership of these vital traits and warn that a delivered message is unfailingly connected to and strongly influenced by the messenger in the mind of the listener. Who one listens to and believes or disbelieves shapes who one subsequently becomes, and this has implications that span every facet of human life - from the workplace to politics to home and everything in between.

## Key Quote

*The values we hold, choices we make, the politics we follow, what we believe as truth, what we dismiss as fake or irrelevant, our attitudes, the groups we join and the ones we reject - is influenced not only by the content of the message sent, but also by the messengers delivering them” (p. 260).*

## KEY POINTS AND CONCEPTS

### Messengers vs Messages

“Regardless of its source, when a message is delivered, something intriguing happens. The messenger becomes connected to the content of that message, in the listener’s mind” (p. 12). Martin and Marks continue that this association has a “dramatic effect on how the messenger and their messages are subsequently evaluated” (p. 12).

A messenger is defined as “an agent - it could be an individual, a group, a media platform, or an organization – who delivers information.” An audience is “anyone [...] to whom a message is directed.” And the “messenger effect” is the “change in the level of influence or impact that a messenger’s message has on an audience – because they sent it” (p. 11).

Martin and Marks show that said influence or impact is not necessarily the result of the message itself, but rather a result of traits held by the messenger (p. 11).

Martin and Marks have developed a framework built on that of Jones and Pittman (1982) which highlights traits messengers adopt to control an audience’s perception of them; the modern framework offers two categories of messengers that, on different grounds, are more likely to have their messages accepted (pp. 15-16).

The messenger types can be categorized as hard and soft messengers. Hard messengers “are more likely to have their messages accepted because audiences perceive them to possess superior status. Soft messengers, in contrast, win acceptance of their messages because they are perceived to possess a connectedness with an audience” (p. 16).

### **Hard Messengers: Socio-Economic Position**

Status is a “‘hard messenger effect’ and those perceived to possess high status are regarded as having instrumental value [...] seen to be in possession of certain features or qualities that have not only helped them to be successful, but could also be of use to others” (p. 24).

A messenger can signal his or her socio-economic status via many avenues, including conspicuous consumption (p. 41).

Items that signal a person’s status “are known as positional goods because they serve to elevate a person’s position in the status hierarchy” (p. 39).


Martin and Marks offer that socio-economic position allows for a powerful messenger effect in that people like to believe society is a meritocracy - that is, that society rewards talent and hard work (p. 45).

“Those with high socio-economic position are held in high esteem [...] they are presumed to possess superior skills and knowledge, to have control over valued resources, and therefore, to have the ability to inflict costs and endow benefits to others” (p. 56).


### **Hard Messengers: Competence**

When faced with challenging life and business decisions, the easy option is the choice that requires less mental and physical effort: deferring to those messengers who appear to possess expertise (p. 63).

Competence can be illustrated in more than verbal expertise. Martin and Marks provide dress as one example: In Milgram’s infamous studies of obedience, participants were willing to administer electrical shocks simply because a Yale University scientist told them to (p. 65).



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Competence as described by others is also valuable: "People will often be receptive to a recommendation from a third party [...] even when they know that the third party is not a disinterested bystander, but an advocate" (p. 75).

Status assigned to a competent messenger is a result of his or her wisdom or superior skills, or "at least the perception that they possess such qualities [...] competent messengers inform their audience, they do not demand that people should listen to them" (p. 81).

### Hard Messengers: Dominance

Messengers who do demand attention are considered those who possess dominance. Humans have "deep rooted dominance detection," and "use it as a cue to navigate our social environment, and reward (dominance) with increased attention and status [...] therefore, the dominant person will frequently be an effective messenger" (pp. 89-91).

Non-verbal signals of dominance include body posture, eye gaze, head tilt, and physical position. "Dominance has a face, too [...] squarer jaws, more prominent eyebrows, bigger noses, and a larger facial width-to-height ratio than average" (pp. 95-97).

The need for dominance is dependent: "in calm, surer times warm, harmonious messengers tend to be valued. In times of conflict and uncertainty - when people feel anxious, experience hardship, or fear for their security - the motivation to seek out a dominant leader arises" (p. 111).

Relatedly, Martin and Marks note that when organizations are choosing between equally qualified candidates to fill a CEO role, the decision will be influenced by the company's current performance: if the company is doing well, the leader who scores lower on dominant-related measures will be favored. "It seems dominant messengers do particularly well anywhere that conflict, competition, and uncertainty are rife" (p. 115).


### Hard Messengers: Attractiveness

Any magazine, lifestyle periodical, or fitness journal can relay that those "deemed to be physically attractive appear to receive the kind of attention that goes with being an effective messenger" (p. 122).


Attractiveness is not solely physical, though; messengers considered attractive are also those who are warm, likeable, and attract attention and goodwill (p. 123).

Martin and Marks emphasize the physical attraction that hard messengers possess; studies show that one can "make judgements of attractiveness in less than 200 milliseconds" (p. 124).

Studies show that attractive faces are youthful, symmetrical, and more surprisingly, average. "Average faces are attractive to us because they are more likely to have components in common with those of the people we know, share social bonds with, and around whom we feel safe and comfortable" (pp. 127-128).



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“The beauty premium” is the label assigned to the findings that attractive employees are likely to be promoted faster and paid more; “it can be as much as an additional 10-15 percent in annual earnings - about the same as the difference in earnings in American labor markets between those of different races and of different genders” (p. 131).

### **Soft Messengers: Warmth**

The messages of some soft messengers are more likely to be accepted because these messengers possess connectedness. Data “suggests that possession of strong social relationships - or social capital - is the best predictor of human happiness, trumping wealth, income, and material possessions” (p. 146).

Warm messengers “show an interest in others and in doing so bestow importance onto their listeners rather than themselves” (p. 156).

Leaders, thought of as hard messengers, can benefit from taking on the warmer aspects of soft messengers. Martin and Marks reference a study of CEOs across the US and Belgium: “CEOs who genuinely attend to their employees end up with a work force that feels more valued, with a more effective top management team, and with enhanced financial performance” (p. 163).

Messengers who exude warmth reward with kindness, offer positivity, offer compassion, and show humility. Specifically, they show “appreciative humility,” where one shows “an appreciation and celebration of other people, and thereby exhibits an increased desire to affiliate” (pp. 167-168).

### **Soft Messengers: Vulnerability**

Martin and Marks assert it is vulnerability in the messenger, for example the employer, that allows for a strong, emotional connection with his or her employees (p. 182).


“Residing at the core of any social connection is some form of vulnerability. Social connection involves a willingness on our part to put aside the protective mask we often wear and to be genuinely honest and open” (p. 182).

“The expression of vulnerability can actually be interpreted as a sign of openness and confidence [...] messengers who do make themselves vulnerable by revealing insecurities or potential weaknesses to others typically end up having more enjoyable social interactions and form closer connections as a result” (p. 184).


People are “more sympathetically disposed to the vulnerable messenger,” and thus the messages from messengers exuding vulnerability will be accepted in the form of offered help (pp. 187-188).

There are limits to the vulnerable messenger. Martin and Marks argue that what determines how one will respond is context and one’s own particular instincts. “People seem able to automatically regulate their empathy [...] and can inhibit an empathetic response to vulnerable groups” (p. 199).

“The expression of vulnerability can increase a sense of connectedness towards a messenger because it has the power to evoke compassion, guilt, or fellow feeling” (p. 205).



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## Soft Messengers: Trustworthiness

Trust “underlies every human transaction,” and it “influences how a messenger relates to others, how they are perceived, and therefore how strong their personal relationship is” (p. 211).

There is an important distinction between truth and trust: “truth is fact-based and requires a weighing of evidence and likelihood; trust is relationship-based and relies on broader and vaguer assessments.” Moreover, sometimes, “being deemed to be trustworthy is more important than being regarded as truthful” (pp. 222-223).

How does one decide to label another as trustworthy? Martin and Marks argue we look for one of three broad types: 1) those we believe will not deceive us, 2) those we think might be tempted to deceive us, but who will not due to their moral code and sense of connectedness, and 3) those who are “devoid of integrity” and will more than likely betray others (p. 221).

Face-to-face communication inspires trust; “is it estimated that the spoken word is more effective than the written word by a factor of 2-3” (p. 231).

## Soft Messengers: Charisma

Charisma is difficult to pinpoint, but those who are deemed charismatic “have an ability to articulate a collective identity and vision [...] they can elicit a sense of awe in those who encountered them [...] they can successfully articulate their view of a future, idealized world,” and can be considered transformative (pp. 248-250).

Studies show statistical evidence “for a link between the use of metaphor and perceived charisma” (p. 250).


Charismatic messengers are emotionally expressive, thus their messages are accepted because audiences are engaged at an emotional level - be it positive or negative (p. 252).

Martin and Marks point to research that describes charisma as a medley of two of their framework’s messenger effects: dominance and warmth. “The charismatic messenger is dominant enough to attract attention and make themselves heard [...] (but) rather than rule by coercion, charismatic people rule by charm” (p. 258).


## The Messenger is the Message

“The values we hold, choices we make, the politics we follow, what we believe as truth, what we dismiss as fake or irrelevant, our attitudes, the groups we join and the ones we reject - is influenced not only by the content of the message sent, but also by the messengers delivering them” (p. 260).

Martin and Marks comment that though we think we will not be fooled by messengers and can make rational choices and beliefs based on messages alone, the data is clear: no human is immune (p. 270). Thus, what are individuals to do? Martin and Marks offer two ideas:



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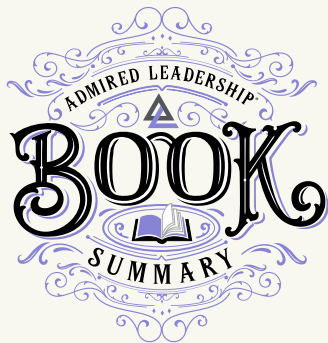


- “It should pay to be truthful and trustworthy [...] trust-labels and algorithms could be combined with policies that incentivize media platforms to publish honest facts and credible stories (pp. 271-272).
- “A better understanding of how our minds respond to these potent messenger traits may lead us to becoming more aware of the pitfalls that await us.” Suggestions are offered for an education curriculum to target basic psychology at an earlier age (p. 272).

Generally, hard messengers have a greater impact on audiences looking for resources, information, or a leader; soft messengers have a greater impact on audiences looking for a sense of personal bond, loyalty, or mutual respect. To add, “any effect will become more important when those around show a general lack of it” (p. 274).

The eight messenger traits are not ranked; rather, they all have “attention-capturing qualities that (are) automatic and unthinking [...] the way people respond is shaped by the assumptions they simultaneously make about those delivering them,” which in turn shapes how people behave and who they become (pp. 280-281).

Martin, S. and Marks, J. (2019). **Messengers: Who We Listen To, Who We Don't, and Why.** New York: Hachette Book Group.



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