



ALAINA LOVE January 27, 2009, 12:14PM EST

## Obama's Leadership Challenge

There's no doubt our charismatic new President can inspire us as a nation. But he must create a team that can do so as well

By [Alaina Love](#)

*Editor's note: [Send questions](#) about leadership and teamwork to Alaina Love*

Along with billions of people around the world, I watched as Barack Obama was sworn in as this country's first African-American President on Jan. 20. I wept at the possibility and promise that this monumental moment in history represents. I wept at the thought of the magnitude of the job this new leader faces.

The political pundits have all offered their observations about the legacy of the Bush years and the abysmal state of our nation's economy, which our new President must find a way to remedy. Some believe that it's a nearly impossible job. For certain, he's inherited the inbox from hell—a country that's fraught with crisis in every imaginable sector. There is enough stacked against Obama to prompt others to ask: "How will he possibly succeed?" My perspective is different. I think the more important question is: "Why will we as a nation succeed?" It's the very question that all organizations or countries fighting to overcome incredible odds must ask and be able to answer.

Obama, like any other organizational leader, must examine what he has working in his favor and determine the key levers that he can utilize to achieve objectives. From my vantage point, the most important leadership strategies that he can employ are as follows:

### 1. Engage the Nation

Obama emerged as a relative unknown Washington rookie and managed to snatch the Presidency from the hands of seemingly more experienced and better-connected contenders. Why? Because he, unlike any other candidate in recent history, has engaged Americans in the struggle to rebuild our country and regain respect on the world stage. He conveyed a strong sense of purpose that no other candidate did as convincingly.

Obama has accomplished that by setting a clear vision, communicating broadly, and inviting voters to share their views and ideas with him. He has been accessible in an unprecedented way, using the Internet as a tool to reach out to voters. Any leader trying to orchestrate a change of this magnitude cannot do so without engaging and inspiring the people, who will ultimately make change happen, be they employees or voters. To his credit, our new President understands this important step.

### 2. Demonstrate Passionate Leadership

Obama seems to understand the passions that he carries and how to utilize those passions to get results. In our work with executives, we've observed distinct passion patterns in great business leaders that I call Passion Archetypes. In the President's case, he would qualify as a Transformer, Healer, and Conceiver.

Conceivers are big-picture thinkers and innovators. They'll push the edges of the envelope and seek out new ideas and better solutions. Transformers thrive in change. The chaos of our current environment, which is a playing field that invites Transformers to construct a better future and empower others in working towards it, is a milieu in which Obama should feel quite at home. The Healer in Obama is the zone of passion that we saw frequently on the campaign trail. It allowed him to connect so deeply with voters—their pain, fear, and lost hopes—in such a profound and meaningful way that he cemented a place for himself in history.

### 3. Hire and Empower Talented People whose Passions, Skills, and Values Balance Your Own

The team the President builds around him will need to be equally passionate—and held to the same standard of high skills and strong values. Without this powerful combination, his Administration will be hard-pressed to overcome what it's up against. The team will need not only to complement the strengths of Obama's passions but also to help overcome his own vulnerabilities. Conceivers, for example, can at times explore possibilities for the pure joy of examining ideas, and fail to create a process that promotes action.

The President will need capable individuals on his team who are passionate about creating structure in the midst of chaos, and interpreting and digesting information to support decision-making. Perhaps we'll see that passion in Cabinet members such as Rahm Emanuel and Tim Geithner, as they operate in their respective roles to establish appropriate

structure for running the Oval Office and unraveling the mess that has become our economy.

As a Transformer, Obama will need capable Connectors on his staff—people who can assist him with tough negotiations both in the U.S. and abroad, while networking with others to keep the nation engaged in the process of change. The job of Secretary of State is an important position in which incorporating a leader with a Connector passion might make a big difference in Obama's success. It's the role for a consummate listener and bridge-builder, who can manage through differences without fraying relationships. We'll be looking for that passion in Hillary Clinton.

Along with the rapid rate of change that the nation will no doubt experience, we can expect more difficulty and pain as we work through issues. This is also the case in organizations undertaking large scale change processes. Having other Healers as part of his staff will keep Obama connected to the plight of average Americans. With their help, the rarefied air of the President's office will not cloud Obama's understanding of the impact that Washington's decisions have on those of us trying to do such things as earn a living or navigate through a broken health-care system. In a health-care czar or Surgeon General, a Healer and Altruist would be a positive addition to the President's staff.

#### 4. Find the Zone and Hold Everyone Accountable

Ultimately, Obama will need the full range of Passion Archetypes to create a powerful, effective, and balanced team. Most important, he will need to create a work environment in which all can perform in a zone where their skills, passions, and values intersect. If he holds himself and others accountable to this robust way of operating, he'll have much better chance of engaging the nation for the long haul and creating a better future for us all.

Given the floundering economy, an unresolved health-care crisis, two wars, a lagging educational system, a planet in ecological peril, an American public with deeply eroded faith in its government—and a gigantic bailout pill that would choke an elephant—being invited to serve on Obama's team might seem more like punishment than a chance for glory. It will require every leadership ability that Obama and his team can muster...and the passion, prayers, and commitment of an inspired nation.

*Alaina Love is a consultant, writer, speaker, and the president of Purpose Linked Consulting, a leadership and organization development firm. Prior to founding PLC, Love spent more than twelve years at Merck & Co., Inc. where she was executive director of human resources (worldwide), a research scientist and clinical researcher. Love now provides a broad range of leadership, team and organization development services to clients around the world, including The Passion Profiler™, a comprehensive tool used by PLC to assess individuals' work-related passions. She is co-author of the soon-to-be-published McGraw-Hill book, The Purpose Linked Organization: How Passionate Leaders Inspire Winning Teams and Great Results. The book identifies and explores the impact of the 'passion archetypes' of great leaders, provides a process for leaders to maximize the individual passions on their teams, and offers free access to the Passion Profiler™ online tool, where readers can discover their own passions and how to apply them to their roles at work.*



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