

NEWS LESSON

Confidence Is Not Evidence

BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Is fluency evidence of understanding, or only of practice?
2. What used to make a reputation reliable, and does anything replace it now?
3. Can a society teach scepticism without producing cynicism?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**anecdote**	☐	A	moving from place to place instead of staying in one
2	**nomadic**	☐	B	ways of fixing a problem
3	**reflex**	☐	C	with nothing or no one alongside
4	**incompetence**	☐	D	the way that something is designed and built
5	**unaccompanied**	☐	E	connected with life as a citizen of a town or country
6	**civic**	☐	F	a short story about something that happened
7	**remedies**	☐	G	lack of the skill needed to do something well
8	**architecture**	☐	H	an automatic reaction you do not plan

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Charisma used to be tested by daily contact. Online, it is tested by nothing at all, and that may be the real change.

1 The uncomfortable thing about being persuaded is how little of it feels like persuasion. We rarely notice ourselves deciding to believe a confident speaker. We simply find that we have stopped weighing what is being said and started enjoying the way it is being said. The psychiatrist Alex Curmi, writing in the Guardian, argues that this reflex deserves to be treated as a warning rather than a pleasure.

2 He opens with a deflating anecdote. In a bar, a stranger held his attention on unstable economies, commercial space travel and the likelihood of a coup in Russia. Curmi, by his own account, leaned in and asked questions, feeling he had something to learn. The spell broke when the man observed that some people even believe the Earth is round. Nothing about his manner had changed; only Curmi's estimate of what lay behind it.

3 The argument that follows rests on a deflation of its own. Charisma is not an inexplicable quality some people possess, but a describable set of behaviours: certainty in posture and gaze, variation in pitch and pace, narrative, well-placed moral feeling. Curmi notes that creators are coached in exactly these techniques, his own flat delivery having been diagnosed as a problem by every expert he consulted. If charisma can be taught, it can be adopted by anyone, including people with nothing of substance to offer.

4 His explanation for our susceptibility is evolutionary, and it is the most interesting part of the case. Human beings spent the overwhelming majority of their history in small nomadic bands, where high status plausibly went to those who displayed the traits we still read as charismatic. Crucially, those displays were continuously audited. You observed the same twenty people daily, often in conditions where incompetence was lethal, so charm unaccompanied by judgment was exposed quickly. The signal was reliable because it was expensive to fake over time.

5 What has changed is not the signal but the audit. A curated clip offers the display without any of the surrounding evidence, and our instincts were not built to discount it. This is the strongest version of his point, and it does not require anyone to be deceitful: the mechanism misfires even when the speaker is sincere but simply wrong.

6 Where the piece is weakest is in its headline. Treating charisma itself as a red flag risks a different error, since the ability to explain something well correlates with understanding it, and a rule that distrusts fluent people would discard a great deal of genuine expertise. Curmi's own remedies are more measured than his framing: teach critical thinking as a civic skill, seek the counter-argument when you feel most pulled, and ask what the speaker's experience is and what they gain from your agreement.

7 Perhaps the usable version is narrower. Confidence is information about the speaker's manner and almost none about the claim. Keeping those two judgments apart is a small discipline, and it is one that the architecture of a feed is designed to collapse.

Sources: The Guardian, Why you should treat charisma as a red flag. Picture: .

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. Curmi's opinion of the stranger changed although the man's behaviour stayed the same. T F NG
2. The writer believes that people who explain things clearly usually understand them less well. T F NG
3. Curmi has been criticised by other psychiatrists for his views. T F NG
4. Early charisma was a reliable signal because it was hard to fake for long. T F NG
5. The writer finds Curmi's recommended remedies harsher than his headline. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

coached	correlates	discard	lethal	misfires	plausibly	sincere	susceptibility

1. The carvings _____ date from the earliest settlements, though no inscription confirms it.
2. Advertisers exploit our _____ to flattery, which makes us trust anyone who praises us.
3. It would be foolish to _____ every claim simply because it is delivered with theatrical flair.
4. In most professions, the amount of practice _____ strongly with the quality of the final work.
5. Even a perfectly _____ apology may fail to repair trust once the damage is done.
6. When a joke _____ , the speaker usually notices at once from the silence in the room.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The charity was criticised for its lack of _____ in how donations were spent. (TRANSPARENT)
2. Critics dismissed the claim as _____ , with no evidence behind it. (SUBSTANTIATE)
3. A single exaggerated claim can destroy a writer's _____ . (CREDIBLE)
4. The speaker's _____ made even a flimsy argument sound convincing. (ELOQUENT)
5. The scam depended entirely on its victims' _____ . (GULLIBLE)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Ask whether a close synonym would work in the same slot. Often it does not, and that is the point of a collocation.

carry	dispel	draw	hold	pose	shape	weigh

1. A skilled storyteller can _____ an audience's attention for an hour.
2. Judges must _____ the evidence from both sides before they give a verdict.
3. It is easy to _____ the wrong conclusions from a single polished clip.
4. A candid reply can _____ rumours before they spread.
5. These tools _____ a serious threat to ordinary readers.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. The article's title calls charisma a red flag. Is that fair, or too strong?
2. If charisma can be taught, should it be taught, and to whom?
3. What would genuinely improve the way we evaluate people we only meet online?

9 Role-play: should I trust this expert?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the excited friend

You watched a video by a very confident online coach. He explained how to make money in one clear minute. You want to pay for his course. Tell your friend why you trust him.

Student B · the careful friend

You think the coach sounds too sure. Ask about his experience, what he gains if people agree, and whether there is another side. Do not call your friend silly.

Useful phrases

He sounds very sure, but what's his experience?
What does he gain if I agree?
I'm not saying he's lying, but I'd check first.
Is there another side to this?
That's a fair point, I hadn't thought of that.
Let's look for some evidence before we pay.

Afterwards, tell the class: did the friend decide to pay, and what changed their mind?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 F · 2 A · 3 H · 4 G · 5 C · 6 E · 7 B · 8 D

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 plausibly · 2 susceptibility · 3 discard · 4 correlates · 5 sincere · 6 misfires

6 Word forms

1 transparency · 2 unsubstantiated · 3 credibility · 4 eloquence · 5 gullibility

7 Language focus

1 hold · 2 weigh · 3 draw · 4 dispel · 5 pose

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