NEWS LESSON

Why Do We Trust Confident People?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Is charisma something you are born with, or something you can learn?
2. How do you decide whether a stranger online knows what they are talking about?
3. When was the last time you changed your mind about something important?

2 Key words

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

1	**evaluating**	☐
2	**algorithmic**	☐
3	**dishonesty**	☐
4	**collective**	☐
5	**counter-argument**	☐
6	**leadership**	☐
7	**signals**	☐
8	**geopolitics**	☐

A	signs that give information
B	a reason against an idea
C	controlled by computer rules that choose what you see
D	shared by a whole group
E	deciding how good or true something is
F	politics between countries and regions
G	behaviour that is not truthful
H	the act of guiding a group

3 Read

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

A psychiatrist argues that charisma should make us more careful, not less. Online, we judge people on a handful of confident minutes.

1 Most of us know the feeling. Somebody is speaking, and they are so fluent, so relaxed and so obviously in command of the subject that we stop evaluating and start agreeing. Alex Curmi, a psychiatrist and podcast host writing in the Guardian, thinks that moment deserves more suspicion than we usually give it.

2 His own example is small and recognisable. Waiting for a friend in a bar, he fell into conversation with a stranger who talked easily about unstable economies, commercial space travel and the chances of a coup in Russia. Curmi leaned in, asked questions and felt he was learning. Then the stranger remarked that some people even believe the Earth is round, and the whole performance came apart.

3 Charisma, Curmi argues, is not an undefinable X-factor. The psychology of it describes a set of skills and behaviours: eye contact, certainty in the body, variation in pitch, pace and volume, storytelling, well-timed emotion. Some people have them naturally; many more learn them. He says so from experience, having been told by every content expert that his own voice was too flat for an audience.

4 Why does it work on us so reliably? Curmi reaches for evolution. Humans spent most of their history in small nomadic groups, sometimes as few as twenty people, where strong leadership mattered. The traits we now call charismatic were useful signals of status. The difference is that you then watched those people every day, often in genuine danger. Superficial charm did not survive that kind of inspection for long, so charisma only won if it came with judgment and character.

5 That daily inspection has gone. Technology lets anyone present the best few minutes and hide the rest, and the audience has no way to check the remainder. We worry about teenagers being manipulated online, Curmi writes, but algorithmic social media is only about fifteen years old, so in this respect we are all teenagers.

6 His proposed defence is unglamorous: critical thinking, treated as a collective immune system and taught properly in schools. Learn to evaluate a source. Look for the counter-argument precisely when you feel emotionally pulled towards a view. Treat changing your mind as something to be proud of rather than embarrassed by.

7 It is an opinion piece rather than a study, and it is worth noting that charisma is not the same as dishonesty: many people who explain things well also know what they are talking about. But the practical test Curmi offers costs nothing. When someone holds forth convincingly on finance, health or geopolitics, ask what experience they have, what they stand to gain, and what need in you their answer is meeting.

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 stopped taking the stranger seriously because of something the man said. T F NG
2. Curmi believes that charisma makes a person dishonest. T F NG
3. Curmi's podcast has a large audience. T F NG
4. In small nomadic groups, someone who relied only on charm would soon be found out. T F NG
5. Curmi thinks the best defence against online persuasion is stricter rules for social media companies. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

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

convincingly	defence	genuine	inspection	judgment	pace	remarked	unglamorous

1. She is known for her sound _____ , so people ask her before they make big decisions.
2. Her job sounds exciting, but most days it is quite _____ .
3. During the meeting, Tom _____ that the figures looked too good to be true.
4. The shop offered a full refund if the watch turned out not to be _____ .
5. The bridge failed its safety _____ and was closed for repairs.
6. She argued so _____ that even her critics changed their minds.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. By then, he _____ almost everything the man had said. (BELIEVE)
2. Charisma _____ by many people as a natural gift. (SEE)
3. You should _____ a confident speaker's claims before you share them. (CHECK)
4. Many online guides _____ to help people sound more confident. (WRITE)
5. He admitted to _____ the stranger too quickly. (TRUST)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some verbs only work with certain nouns. Say the whole phrase aloud to hear if it sounds right.

change	fall	keep	make	pay	raise	take

1. It is hard to _____ your mind once you have publicly agreed with someone.
2. A good teacher will _____ attention to the quality of your sources.
3. Politicians have only a few minutes to _____ a strong impression on voters.
4. On the train I happened to _____ into conversation with a retired pilot.
5. Over-confident speeches can _____ doubts in anyone who listens carefully.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

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

1. Curmi says we are all teenagers when it comes to the internet. Is he right?
2. What questions would you ask before trusting advice from a confident stranger?
3. Does teaching people to communicate confidently make the problem better or worse?

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

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 judgment · 2 unglamorous · 3 remarked · 4 genuine · 5 inspection · 6 convincingly

6 Verb forms

1 had believed · 2 is seen · 3 check · 4 have been written · 5 trusting

7 Language focus

1 change · 2 pay · 3 make · 4 fall · 5 raise

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