

Warmth and Competence in Leadership: The Balancing Act That Defines Trust

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In every social interaction, we are judged — often unconsciously — on two dimensions: **warmth** and **competence**. This insight originates from the work of **Professor Susan Fiske at Princeton University** and it has profound implications for leadership. Though our interactions, everyone we meet instinctively assess whether we have *good intentions* (warmth) and whether we have the *ability* to carry them out (competence).

Together, these dimensions determine whether others **trust us**. In business this is essential to success. Whether you are leading a large team or selling services to customers, trust is the single most influential factor in getting a positive outcome.

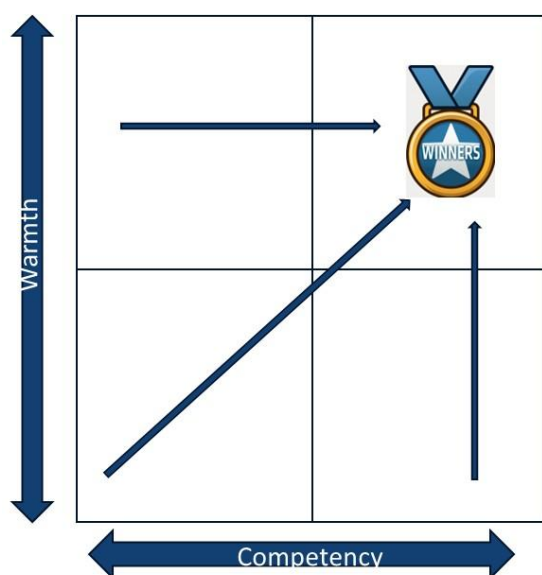
Understanding the Two Dimensions

Warmth is about showing empathy, care, and authenticity.

It's conveyed through how you listen, how you respond under pressure, and how you make others feel. A warm leader creates psychological safety — a space where people can speak openly without fear of embarrassment or punishment.

Competence, on the other hand, signals capability, confidence, and credibility.

It's demonstrated through clear thinking, sound judgement, and consistent delivery. Competent leaders are respected because they inspire confidence in their ability to lead, decide, and execute.



Where do you think your leadership sits?

The most effective leaders integrate both. When either dimension is missing, the impact can be striking:

Leadership Profile	Warmth Competence		Team Perception
The Nice but Ineffective Leader	High	Low	Liked but not respected; trust erodes when promises fall flat.
The Expert but Unapproachable Leader	Low	High	Respected but feared; people withdraw, speak less, and disengage.
The Emotionally Intelligent Leader	High	High	Trusted, credible, and motivating — a leader people choose to follow.

Why Balance Matters

Leaders who lean too heavily on competence can unintentionally trigger defensiveness or fear. Teams may deliver what's asked — but rarely more. Conversely, leaders who over-index on warmth risk losing credibility when tough decisions need to be made.

Trust sits at the intersection. It's not built by being the smartest in the room, nor by being endlessly kind — it's built by showing that you **care and can deliver**.

Where Leaders Go Wrong

Even the most experienced leaders can sometimes misjudge the balance. In our coaching practice, we frequently see patterns such as:

- **Over-emphasis on expertise** — leaders who equate credibility with control.
- **Avoidance of conflict** — leaders who overvalue harmony at the cost of accountability.
- **Unconscious inconsistency** — leaders who show warmth when things are calm, but revert to command mode under stress.

These habits often stem from **blind spots**, not bad intentions — and they can be unlearned through self-awareness, feedback, and emotional regulation.

Building Your Warmth–Competence Profile

Improving the balance starts with honest reflection:

1. **Seek feedback** from trusted peers on how you're perceived — not just what you deliver.
2. **Observe your own responses** in moments of pressure — do you go cold or defensive?
3. **Practice transparent communication** — share the 'why' behind your decisions.
4. **Show genuine curiosity** — especially when people disagree with you.

Final Thought

Leadership isn't about choosing between being liked and being respected. It's about mastering both — **being human and capable** in equal measure.

Warmth earns you trust.

Competence earns you respect.

Together, they make you worth following.

Interested in developing your own leadership balance?

Imago Consulting specialises in leadership coaching that builds trust, emotional intelligence, and performance impact.

♦ Visit imago-consulting.co.uk to explore how our coaching can help you lead with confidence and authenticity.