

# YOU MAY THINK YOU'RE THE WIZARD OF OZ...

So now you know why you're running, but are you prepared for what the process might do to you?

The John Reeves I mentioned in the dedication likes to say the second a candidate throws their hat in the ring, 30 percent of their brain cells go AWOL. I'd put that amount much closer to 66 percent.

I've watched previously rational people dive so far off the deep end in their first campaign week that I feared they'd suffered some sort of psychotic break. Then, when it's all over, they immediately revert back to normalcy.

And if their ego was big to begin with, it can get really bad.

This political ego phenomenon is non-denominational, it harbors no gender bias and it's unflinchingly bi-partisan. Even veteran politicians fall prey to its insidious nature.

Political pundits have done their damndest to determine the cause of this affliction to no avail. The closest I can come is, since the struggle to become a leader is so ingrained on the human psyche, the lizard brain swiftly kicks in and takes over.

Not only that, but your first campaign is a lot like expecting your first child. You think you're ready, but nothing prepares you for that experience but the experience. The second you think you know more than everyone else you're electoral toast!

So, if you take nothing away from this book, please re-read the next sentence until you can recite it in your sleep; Your chances of winning a local election are inversely proportional to the amount of time your lizard brain runs the show.

How does one avoid contracting this malicious campaign malady, you ask? Never forget the following:

## **A. NOBODY LOVES YOU BUT YOUR MOTHER, AND SHE COULD BE JIVIN' TOO!**

To quote the great B. B. King.

We all want to believe our natural charm and charisma will worm its way into the voters' hearts, but the truth is, we're not nearly as lovable as we think we are. And there's nothing like the political realm to disabuse a candidate of that notion.

Unless you enjoy strange relationships, the folks you surround yourself with—friends, family, coworkers—generally support you. But voters, already wary of anyone who runs for office, can't wait to cut you down to size.

So if you think your potential constituents are going to unconditionally leap onto your political bandwagon, you're in for a rude awakening. You have to earn their respect, and that's no easy task.

Repeat after me! Nobody loves you but your mother, and she could be jivin' too! More simply put, take nothing for granted.

## **B. NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR YOUR LIFE STORY**

It always pays to remember that you're not Winston Churchill.

Unless you have a compelling life story like Illinois Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth, New Jersey Senator Cory Booker or Arizona Senator John McCain, the voters really don't care that you graduated third in your class. They don't want to hear you've been married to the same wonderful woman for 30 years. And no one gives a flying bleep that little Janey made the middle school honor roll.

Think about it! How many candidates have gone down in flames for blatantly exaggerating their military service?

Not only will this form of "navel gazing" fail to advance your cause, but it will likely hurt it. No one likes a braggart, and no one wants to hear you drone on about you. Voters want you to listen to them. They want to hear how you reflect their values. They

want to tell you their story because it gives their lives meaning.

The irony is, the politicians who do have a compelling life story rarely talk about it. They understand that a campaign is all about the people they hope to serve.

All things being equal, voters elect candidates they'd like to meet at a backyard barbecue. The night Bill Clinton put on sunglasses and played saxophone on the Arsenio Hall Show was the night he won the election.

There are exceptions to this don't-talk-about-yourself rule. You will be expected to provide a bio on candidate questionnaires and at forums or debates, but even then, keep it short.

You can introduce your spouse and talk about your 30-year marriage at your fundraiser. If it's a school board race, expounding upon your children's success is an appropriate point, but quickly switch the focus back to the district.

## Real-world example

*At the behest of her political patron, a friend asked me to be her campaign adviser in an Aurora, Illinois, aldermanic race. And the first thing she did was compose a two-page autobiography to be distributed to ward voters.*

*I immediately cut that document down to seven bullet points (three too many) and, after a heated discussion in which I pointed out the pitfalls of her autobiographical assertions, her family overruled me and she went with the original version instead.*

*The candidate convinced herself that working-class voters would be thrilled that she'd toiled at "low-wage jobs" and she actually had the time to do the job.*

*She printed it on lavender paper and started going door-to-door.*

*The result? Despite enjoying local name recognition and being the only woman in a four-candidate field, she came in dead last. Her message was, "I'm tone-deaf and I'm more than willing to waste your time."*

*TMI (too much information) is never a good thing. Keep it short, simple, sweet and let the voters do the talking. Remember, nobody loves you but your mother, and she could be jivin' too.*

### **C. YOU AREN'T ENTITLED TO A VICTORY!**

Some say it's the ego required to run for office in the first place. Perhaps it's the "everyone deserves a trophy" movement where no one loses a T-ball game. Maybe it's a symptom of a generation that's never had to make a sacrifice in furtherance of a common national goal.

Whatever it is, I'm always amazed and amused by novice candidates who believe that, with minimal effort, the electoral world will simply unfurl itself at their feet. Then they're utterly confounded when they go down in flames, blaming the cruel political fates for their sad lot in life.

The best way to avoid this kind of egotistical malady is to run scared. We're not talking about shuddering under the sword of Damocles—you have to be reasonably confident to win an election. What I'm saying is, assume nothing!

If you want a real shot, earn the voters' respect. And you earn the voters' respect by refusing to waste their time, listening to what they have to say and running the kind of campaign that lets them know you're serious.

Local voters respect hard work.

### **D. DON'T COUNT ON FAMILY, FRIENDS AND CAMPAIGN MANAGERS TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH**

What's the first thing 99 percent of novice candidates do? That's right! They go to their family and friends for advice, because they only want to hear what they want to hear.

Unless she's Mia Hamm, would you go to your wife to learn how to play soccer? Would you ask your twenty-something son for investment advice? Would you turn to your single friends for parenting pointers?

Of course you wouldn't!

So, it always astounds me when first-time candidates ask their friends and family for

campaign advice, which almost always results in a hearty, “You’re doing great! I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Friends and family WILL NOT TELL YOU THE TRUTH because they either don’t know what the truth is, or they don’t want to offend you. And that’s especially true of spouses who really don’t want to be celibate!

Yes! First-time campaigners always need advice, but please, please, please, ask someone who’s been there. Ask someone who’s actually won an election (or two). Despite the competitive nature of politics, local office holders love sharing their “secrets,” because it wasn’t easy getting there.

Everyone thinks they can run a restaurant. Everyone thinks they can teach. Everyone thinks they can manage a baseball team. And every thinks they can run a campaign. BUT THEY CAN’T. That’s why folks like David Axelrod, Karl Rove and David Plouffe get ungodly sums of money to run major campaigns.

And local campaign managers can be worse than friends and family.

Most—but not all—tend to be “peripheral political players” who win about 33 percent of their races and are always on the lookout for that next sucker—I mean client. They can be better than nothing, but they’re not above playing to a candidate’s ego to collect their fee.

We’ll talk more about local campaign managers later.

## Real-world example

*Back to our Aurora, Illinois, aldermanic candidate and her two-page autobiography: I actually convinced her to go with my abbreviated version, but then she talked to her family who convinced her I was out of my mind.*

*While that’s certainly true on some occasions, it’s not when it comes to campaigns.*

*You already know the end of that story.*

Now, I realize I've been a bit brutal here, but politics ain't a game for sissies! If you really want to win a local election, you have to put your ego aside and lock your family in the basement or it will make Sisyphus look like a rank amateur. (Look it up if you have to!)

## **E. CONCLUSION**

The sad thing is, for all the effort she put into her campaign, our Aurora candidate should have won that race. Being the only woman in a field of four with local name recognition is a huge advantage. But her ego and family got in the way and she finished last.

That's why this is the most important chapter in the book. If you can't keep your ego in check, the chances of winning a local election decrease dramatically.

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## **CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY**

- **Nobody loves you but your mother, and she could be jivin' too.**
  - **Unless you're Winston Churchill, nobody wants to hear your life story.**
  - **No matter what you might think, you aren't entitled to a win.**
  - **Don't go to friends and family for campaign advice unless you really want to lose.**
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