

Just Because *I'm Nice*, Don't Assume *I'm Dumb*

BY AMY J.C. CUDDY When we encounter someone new, we quickly seek answers to two questions rooted in the evolutionary need to make correct survival decisions: What are this person's intentions toward me? and Is this person capable of acting on those intentions?

Because we lack the brainpower to weigh someone's true merits quickly, we seize on our sometimes mistaken answers to these questions and rate the person high or low on imaginary scales of intention and capability – or, to use simpler terminology, warmth and competence. Recent psychological research involving thousands of people from two dozen nations shows that this way of thinking is remarkably widespread. Moreover, a number of studies show that warmth and competence assessments determine whether and how we intend to interact with others: We like to assist people we view as warm and block those we see as cold; we desire to associate with people we consider competent and ignore those we consider incompetent.

Inevitably, of course, we find clues to warmth and competence in stereotypes based on people's race, gender, or nationality. Thus many of our decisions about whom to trust, doubt, defend, attack, hire, or fire are based on faulty data.

The warmth/competence model, which Susan Fiske, Peter Glick, and I have presented in more than a dozen academic articles over the past few years, illuminates a great deal of behavior – for example, why people disrespect the elderly while feeling positive toward them (elders are seen as incompetent but warm). Such attitudes weren't well explained by the prevailing psychological view of prejudice – namely, that people simply favor “us” and dislike “them.”

Inaccurate warmth/competence judgments can lead managers to trust untrustworthy associates or undervalue potentially important connections with

people. They can also undermine companies' efforts to build effective teams, identify lucrative opportunities, and retain good employees. For example, mothers, like the elderly, are chronically stereotyped as less competent (although warmer) than other workers and as a result are often underpromoted and underpaid.

Our and others' research has yielded another important finding: People tend to see warmth and competence as inversely related. If there's an apparent surplus of one trait, they infer a deficit of the other. (“She's so sweet....She'd probably be inept in the boardroom.”) So how can managers use the warmth/competence model to make better judgments? I recommend a two-part approach.

Don't take shortcuts. Virtually everyone uses stereotypes to make snap judgments. But when facing personnel decisions, managers should push themselves to be aware of how they form impressions. They should avoid sizing people up on the basis of stereotypical perceptions of warmth and competence.

People tend to see warmth and competence as inversely related. A surplus of one means a deficit of the other.

Separate the two dimensions. It's not a zero-sum game: Warmth and competence aren't mutually exclusive. Managers should ask themselves, for example, whether that highly competent technician also has social or customer skills that could be useful to the company.

These simple reality checks can help managers see past social categories and recognize individuals' true talents, thus avoiding the high cost of mistaken judgments. ■