

**12@12**  
**What We Can Learn from Jimmy Fallon**  
**March 26, 2015**

I am not a late night television viewer. If I do stay up to watch something it's usually because there is a game on I am interested in. This means I don't see many late night shows like the *Tonight Show* or David Letterman. And frankly there are some things on those shows that aren't to my taste, but every once in a while I find myself tuned in. And the person that I find myself most attracted to is Jimmy Fallon. He has been quite a success. In his first year at the helm of the *Tonight Show*, Fallon's ratings were better than the combined ratings of both of his competitors: Jimmy Kimmel and David Letterman. This last week I read a blog that gave one person's opinion on the factors behind his success,<sup>1</sup> and I believe they were not only accurate but they can teach us a thing or two. And so without further ado, here are five things we might learn from Jimmy Fallon's success.

**1. He is always smiling**

I don't think I have watched more than a handful of hours of the *Tonight Show* since Fallon became the host, but it only takes a few minutes to recognize that Jimmy Fallon smiles a lot. In fact, I would think the image almost everyone has of Fallon is one in which he has a big smile on his face. It is what he does all the time while he is on air. At first, you might say, "That is his job; he is a television host and a comedian, so of course he smiles a lot." But with Fallon you don't get the sense it's just for the cameras; he believes that "Everyone looks so much better when they smile."<sup>2</sup> Those are his words not mine.

Dale Carnegie, whose book on success was originally written in 1936 but still sells millions of copies, counts smiles as one of the most important things we can do to bring about success. He says, "Actions speak louder than words, and a smile says, 'I like you. You make me happy. I am glad to see you.'"<sup>3</sup> I would even say that a smile is the cheapest and easiest way to change the culture of a meeting or encounter. It is true that we need to get down to business at times, and that much of life is not fun and games, but adding a smile is often exactly what's needed to set the stage for the candid but friendly conversations that are necessary to any organization's success.

I have always liked the biblical proverb that says, “When a king’s face brightens, it means life; his favor is like a rain cloud in spring” (Proverbs 16:15). This proverb tells me that a person countenance can change the culture of a situation. Jimmy Fallon does that with his smile, and we can learn a great deal from his example.

## **2. He has got great energy**

Jimmy Fallon always seems to have a lot of energy. Stand-up comedian is hardly the right descriptor for him. The guy dances, sings, throws footballs, jumps, runs, and loses his breath more times than not. If he is going to do something, he doesn’t do it half-heartedly; he goes all out. And beyond that, you can tell he loves doing what he is doing. Now, I understand that very few of us are in positions that call for a big outward display of energy, but that does not mean we aren’t called to come to the table with the kind of energy appropriate for the situation. Don’t you hate it when you go into a meeting, and everyone is checking their cell phones wanting to be elsewhere? Frankly, I don’t find those meetings ever accomplish anything of much value. The times when things get done is when people bring energy to the table.

If you watch the *Tonight Show*, one of the things you recognize is that Fallon’s guests get into whatever he is doing. In many cases, they have been prepped beforehand, but why do they enter in with so much energy? They do so because they know Fallon will come with lots of energy and they need to be on their game. In many cases, it seems that is what we must do in team settings as well. We must come with energy, and when we do others know they need to bring their game as well.

## **3. He is humble**

Jimmy Fallon is following in the footsteps of Jay Leno and Johnny Carson, legends of late night. There were many who did not think he was up to the task. Then came his opportunity as the new host. If I was in his shoes, I would have wanted to come out the very first night and wow everyone. I would want to deliver the funniest monologue I could imagine. And yet that is not at all the way Fallon began his first show. Instead he introduced his parents, and told them he loved them, and said he hoped they were proud of him. He thanked all the hosts before him. He told everyone his band is the best there is and personally introduced Steve Wiggins, his announcer, telling him that he is one of

his best friends and that he could not imagine doing the show with anyone else. He even added “I don’t really know how I got here” and went into talking about his childhood. Now, you can certainly say this is all staged, but considering that Fallon seems to regularly put himself down and lift up his guests it all seems very genuine, and his viewers appreciate it.

Many of you are familiar with Jim Collin’s book *Good to Great* (I have mentioned it before) and are aware of the research behind it. Collins identified the most successful companies over the long haul and then got under the hood to see what made them great. He thought he would find the answer in internal structures or synergies, and yet the commonality that he found among the great companies is that they all had leaders who were doggedly determined and remarkably humble. In regards to humility he found that these leaders regularly looked outside themselves when handing out credit, but when it came to failure they always blamed themselves. They did this even when the evidence clearly indicated otherwise. In many cases they were responsible for their company’s success, but they would never admit that.<sup>4</sup> Instead they chose to lift up everyone around them. This is what Fallon seems to do and as a result he gets the highest profile guests and the highest ratings.

#### **4. He is prepared**

12@12 happens each week, or just about every week. And for it I prepare a 12-minute talk. Many people over the weeks have asked me how I come up with material each week. But what I prepare is nothing compared to what Fallon prepares. He is doing five shows a week that include not only monologues, but singing, dancing, sketches, dialogues, interviews. Now, of course, he has a team that is helping him get ready, but can you imagine having to be funny, engaging, and interesting five times a week? Frankly, what he does is remarkable. One thing for sure, it doesn’t come about because he ad libs each night. It comes about because he makes sure he is prepared.

Sometime people ask me about great tennis players, since that was once my gig and still a love. They ask me if I think the great players are really more talented than everyone else or whether they just work harder. And my answer is yes. They are more talented than everyone else. They are freaks of nature. They can do things we could not do with a thousand years of practice, but at the same time they work crazy at it.

There might have been a time when talent was enough, but not anymore. The competition is too great. And, frankly, for most industries today, the same is true. The competition is too great. We cannot just rest on talent alone, we must put in the time. We must prepare for success as Jimmy Fallon does.

## **5. He is relevant**

It would not be hard to tell if one of Fallon's show was taped tonight or a month ago. And the reason we could tell the difference is because Fallon connects so much of what is said or done with what's going on in the world today. Not today as in a contemporary period of time, but today as in the last 24 hours. The monologues are frequently centered on what has been reported in today's news, whether the behavior of some politician or the latest tragedy. And the interviews of guests are about the latest movie or TV show or book. Fallon knows that if he wants to connect he needs to speak to what is going on in people's world today and to what is important to them.

I believe there are things to be learned in this. We all want to get people on board with our ideas and plans. But to do this we've got to speak people's language and touch on what is important to others. Companies have had to learn this in regards to Millennials. Millennials aren't content with just making money. They want to do something that matters in the big picture. And if you want to connect with them, you need to tie in what you are doing with bigger picture ideas of how the world will be better because of their involvement in the task at hand. And it's not just companies that have had to learn this; churches have as well. Many people have stopped attending church, and the most frequent reason I hear is that it just doesn't seem relevant. That just can't be. I am not saying that companies or churches have to be with it or cool to sell themselves, but they do need to speak the language of their audience and use age old truths and values to meet the deep questions and needs people have.

Perhaps you see other things in Fallon that have led to his success, but the five things I've shared with you today are pretty noteworthy. Know that I don't think Jimmy Fallon is the greatest example of leadership or success, but I am confident that we do well to be people who smile and are energetic and who are humble, well prepared, and relevant.

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- <sup>1</sup> Josh Maze, “5 Reasons Jimmy Fallon Is One of the Best Worship Leaders in the World,” [joshmaze.com](http://joshmaze.com) (March 17, 2015). Each of the five headings here are taken from Josh Maze.
- <sup>2</sup> Erin Hill, “Jimmy Fallon: ‘Everyone Looks Better When They Smile,’” [Parade](http://Parade) (June 16, 2012).
- <sup>3</sup> Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People: The Only Book You Need to Lead You to Success* (Gallery Books, 1936, rev. 1981), 63.
- <sup>4</sup> Jim Collins, “Level 5 Leadership,” *Harvard Business Review* (January 2001), 74-75.

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