

Why Kamala Harris Needed Tim Walz at Her CNN Interview

Walz's presence helps Harris navigate the "warmth-competence" double bind.

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Updated Aug. 29, 2024

Key points

- It's inevitable that Harris decided to have Walz beside her for her CNN interview with Dana Bash.
- The decision is rooted in the warmth-competence matrix of psychological perception.
- In this matrix, a woman isn't perceived as "competent" if she comes across as "warm." It's a double bind.
- Harris isn't just playing the game—she's rewriting the rules as a female contender for president on her terms.



U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz
Source: White House/Office of Minnesota Governor

Before Kamala Harris picked Tim Walz as her vice president, I explained in a [column in The Hill](#) why she had to choose a white man to navigate the “warmth-competence matrix” in psychology.

In this matrix, a woman isn’t perceived as “competent” if she comes across as “warm.” It’s a double bind. As I wrote in a [Psychology Today post](#), it hamstrung Fulton County prosecutor Fani Willis when she testified on her own behalf in a court hearing to remove her from a case prosecuting former President Donald Trump.

So it’s inevitable that Harris decided to have Walz sit beside her for the high-stakes CNN interview with Dana Bash.

As Harris continues to navigate the complex political landscape of the United States, her decision to have Walz sit beside her for the interview, whether intentional or otherwise, plays into that matrix. To some, it may seem like a straightforward political choice, even a miscalculated one, exhibiting a lack of confidence, but beneath the surface lies the more intricate reasoning rooted in the warmth-competence matrix of psychological perception.

A Catch-22

The warmth-competence matrix says that individuals, particularly women, are often perceived along two key dimensions: warmth and competence. The catch? When a woman is seen as warm, she is less likely to be seen as competent, and when she is seen as competent, she is less likely to be perceived as warm. This double bind has profound implications for women in leadership, particularly for someone like Harris, who is constantly under the public microscope. However, for men, including Walz, the warmth-competence matrix actually plays in their favor. They only need to have one attribute in order to be perceived as having the other.

Harris's political career has been a balancing act between projecting warmth—an essential trait for garnering public trust—and demonstrating competence, which is crucial

for being taken seriously as a leader. It is an especially challenging scenario for Harris, who, as a Black and South Asian woman, must also contend with the added layers of racial and gender bias.

Enter Tim Walz. Walz, a white male politician with a reputation for down-to-earth, Midwestern sensibilities as a former high school football coach, offers a strategic counterbalance to the warmth-competence matrix. He has communicated a lot of warmth to date, but he has not received much scrutiny on the competence front. It's just a given.

By having Walz beside her, Harris effectively taps into a psychological loophole: The pairing allows her to project competence while indirectly associating warmth with her running mate.

This dynamic is not new; it's a well-worn strategy in American politics. Male politicians have historically paired themselves with running mates who complement their perceived deficiencies. Think of a younger, inexperienced Barack Obama in 2008 with veteran politician Joe Biden. Or former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan with Beltway insider George H.W. Bush. For Harris, the need is more acute because the warmth-competence matrix is a trap designed to ensnare women, particularly women of color, in leadership roles.

Too Ambitious, Too Assertive

The choice of Walz also mitigates the potential backlash that Harris might face for appearing “too ambitious” or “too assertive,” traits that are often unfairly criticized in

women leaders, especially Black women, but celebrated in their male counterparts. By positioning Walz alongside her, Harris can afford to focus on demonstrating her competence without the social penalty of being perceived as less warm. This is not to say that Harris lacks warmth; rather, it's an acknowledgment of the social realities that dictate how warmth and competence are perceived.

Critics may argue that Harris's decision to have Walz by her side is a concession to the biases that should be fought against, not placated.

However, strategic choices like this are essential in the high-stakes world of politics, where perception often trumps reality. Harris's decision is not just a reflection of her understanding of the political landscape but also a reflection of her understanding of human psychology.

In her CNN interview with Dana Bash, the visual of Harris and Walz sitting together will be more than just a display of political partnership; it helps Harris navigate the treacherous waters of the warmth-competence matrix.

The double bind may be an unfair obstacle, but it's a reality that Harris has had to navigate throughout her career. As Walz sits beside her, Harris isn't just playing the game—she's rewriting the rules as a female contender for president on her terms.