

Charm School – Harnessing the Power of Charismatic Leadership

Difficult to define but evident when we see it, charisma is usually cited as a quintessential leadership trait. However, experts on the study of charisma believe that, rather than being an innate trait in itself, possessed by a lucky few, it is a collection of traits that constitute charismatic leadership. Dependent upon relationships, charisma relies on external perceptions of a leader, bestowed upon by followers who experience it.

The word charisma is derived from the Greek word, *kharis*, which means “gift of grace”. Max Weber, celebrated early 20th century sociologist, defined it as “... a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary.”¹

While charisma is hard to define and hard to measure, its effects are evident in the massive influence charismatic leaders can exert and the massive following that they can garner. What could appear to be a divine gift bestowed upon a select group, people like Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela, Steve Jobs and Aung San Suu Kyi, however, is believed by experts as something

that can be developed, internalised and practiced. This is supported by the work done by Richard Arvey at Singapore’s NUS Business School, which revealed that up to 70% of leadership is learned.²

The reasons to learn and apply charismatic tactics are compelling. Consider the following experiment that was conducted by Professor John Antonakis, professor of organisational behaviour at Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Lausanne.

In the experiment, the research team recruited 106 temporary workers to prepare postal mail for a fundraising campaign on behalf of a charity. The workers were randomly placed in three groups. The first group, the baseline, was offered no bonus and was given a standard scripted motivational speech that was delivered by an actor. The second group was given the same speech but was offered a bonus. The third group was offered no bonus but was given a scripted “charismatic” motivational speech. Relative to the baseline group, both the second and third group achieved approximately 20% higher output. With the second group, costs were 10% higher than that of the baseline, but in the third group, costs were 15% lower. In the third group, the better overall result is attributed to charismatic tactics alone without any financial incentive.³

¹ Max Weber; *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*; Guenther Roth, Claus Wittich eds. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); p 241

² Richard Arvey; “Leadership: Is it in the Genes?” in *Developing Leaders, Issue 3, Winter 2011*; p. 26–30.

³ John Antonakis; “Let’s face it: Charisma matters”, on *TEDx Lausanne*; 18 March 2015

According to other research, the model that is believed to represent the best leadership is the ability to be transformational. When transformational leadership is coupled with the potent power of charisma, it leads to high performing groups and teams; the development of leadership capacity in followers'; and increased potential for an organization to change and innovate. Indeed, when an organisation is in an environment of change, charisma becomes ever more consequential. It acts as a powerful force for leaders' ability to exercise what is known as "inspirational motivation", which propels followers to perform at high levels, and to be committed to the organization or the cause.⁴

The following are specific qualities that experts have identified as what constitutes charisma in a leader, as perceived by their followers, and is hence able to garner their support.

1. Communication

Charismatic leaders understand that the best way to exude personality and charm is by being expert communicators. Essentially, therefore, they are entertaining conversationalists; they use metaphors and tell stories; they use language that is well thought out and demonstrates fluency of command; and they make effective use of body language alongside verbal language to establish connections with their audiences.

Many leaders have sharpened their ability to do this effectively. They make speeches that "work the room" and zero in on messages that resonate with their audience and potential supporters. The extent to which they are convincing is often seen as the mysterious "X-factor" of personal charisma, which incidentally can only be sustainable if supported by the belief among followers of the leaders' sincerity and good intentions.

Because they exude confidence and optimism and have an uncanny ability to light up a room, it

⁴ Ronald E. Reggio; "What is Charisma and Charismatic Leadership" in *Psychology Today*, 7 October 2012.

is undeniable that charismatic leaders tend to be extroverts. This is not to say that introverts cannot be charismatic. Indeed, many work hard to make themselves more extroverted, but to them, it is more difficult as, unlike true extroverts, introverts usually find social situations draining, rather than energizing.⁵

2. Being an emotional player

Related to the point above, for charismatic leaders, communicating effectively is not limited to verbal and non-verbal communication. They are also able to articulate a compelling or captivating vision, and are able to arouse strong emotions in followers.

They are very skilled and pay a great deal of attention to scanning their environment and reading social situations. They are good at picking up on moods and concerns and are highly attuned to the hopes, fears and desires of their audiences. They will then hone their actions and words to suit the situation.

Usually displaying high levels of emotional intelligence, they do not shy away from talking about feelings or showing empathy, as these allow them to connect with followers on a deep, emotional level. As such, they are able to make people want they want, see things as they do, and unite towards a common cause.

Doing this sometimes requires a certain amount of "acting". Appearing optimistic in difficult situations, for instance, entails some level of masking of their own fears and vulnerabilities in order to reassure their audience, heighten their confidence and give them hope.

3. Passion and conviction

This brings us to the next related quality. A charismatic leader displays commitment to a cause with passion and conviction. What the leader stands for is rooted in his or her values,

⁵ Scott Edinger, "Learn to be Charismatic" in *Harvard Business Review*, 13 November 2012.

passion and arguments – what Aristotle called the *ethos, pathos* and *logos*.

Usually this is demonstrated by being on the front line in the pursuit of a cause, think Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela. In business, the charismatic leader serves as the face of the company or the movement, think Steve Jobs or Anita Roddick.

Such leaders act as positive and moral role models. They “walk the talk”, and their behaviour cascades through the organisation. Many studies have shown that the moral or ethical orientation of the leader is strongly related to follower job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Charismatic leaders who are high on moral or ethical orientation are able to create better workplace environments with reduced conflict and workplace deviance.⁶

4. Intelligence

From time immemorial, perhaps the most visible form of leadership was charisma as it was based on the exceptional personal qualities of an individual. One could only exercise influence if they could demonstrate prowess in something or because they possessed some kind of uncommon knowledge. In hunter-gatherer societies, those who were viewed as dominant or influential were those who had skill or knowledge that made them useful to a group. This inspired the confidence and belief in others of their abilities and thus conferred them with a level of prestige.

As charismatic people are able to communicate effectively with others and are usually good at reading situations and initiating conversations, they tend to be highly intelligent. Having an up-to-date knowledge of current affairs and well-rounded general knowledge allows them to tailor messages, think on the fly, make the right remarks and make the sometimes-difficult conversations easy.

⁶ John Antonakis, “Using the power of charisma for better leadership” in *The Guardian*, 3 December 2012.

They often have expert knowledge in some area and are able to explain complex topics in ways that are easily understandable, adapting their explanations according to the expectations, viewpoints and expertise of their audiences.

Beware the dark side

The biggest risk of derailment facing charismatic leaders would, in all likelihood, be due to arrogance. Their high self-belief means they could potentially cross the fine line between tempered narcissism (that is viewed as positive) into hubris. According to INSEAD Professor of leadership development, Manfred Kets de Vries, when leaders succumb to hubris, driven by excessive pride and arrogance, they take for granted that they can transgress the rules, which are seen as meant for the common mortals, and not them.⁷ They may also be intolerant of challengers and see themselves as infallible and indispensable, meaning when they inevitably leave, there will be no successors.

The values of the charismatic leader are highly significant. If they are well-intentioned, they can elevate and transform entire organisations and nations. If they are hubristic and Machiavellian, on the other hand, they can create cults and effectively exploit followers and lead them into turbulent times.

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⁷ Manfred Kets De Vries, *The Organisational Fool: Balancing a Leader's Hubris*, (Fontainebleu: INSEAD, 1990).