

CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP: BLESSING OR CURSE?

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Abstract *Charismatic leadership has become a popular topic in organisational research in the last few decades. This paper discusses the qualities of great charismatic leaders, and specifically examines the characteristics of such leaders. There are various leadership styles, which may be dictated by the management culture as well as the needs of the organisation or venture. The purpose of this article is to consider the concepts of charisma and leadership, and explain the charismatic leadership process and the attributes that a charismatic leader possesses. This review paper also tries to find out various effects of charismatic leadership on the organisation. The paper also aims to look at the implications of the “dark side” of charismatic leadership, that is, a “villain” charismatic leader concept rather than focusing only on the “heroic” capabilities often studied in leadership research.*

Keywords: *Charismatic Leadership, Organisational Research, Empirical Evidence*

INTRODUCTION

There are several styles of management that can be used throughout business practices across the world, some of which are the charismatic, participative, situational, transactional, transformational, servant, and micromanagement to name a few. Charismatic leadership has become a popular topic in organisational research in the last decade or so. However, till date there is still very limited empirical evidence that illuminates the underlying influencing processes of charismatic leadership and the effectiveness of this type of leadership. In fact, in a recent meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental leadership research Reichard and Avolio (2005) showed support for the positive effects of leadership. Many management practices implemented by such charismatic organisational leaders do improve the bottom line results and also employee satisfaction (Pfeffer, 1998). However, there is also research which suggests that leadership has less of an impact on organisational performance as compared to other factors such as competitive market forces, varying economic conditions, or highly motivated employees. It is just that it is convenient to use leadership as a simple and convenient explanation for outstanding or poor organisational performance (Meindl, 1995, 1990; Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich, 1985). Perhaps the concern is not that leadership has little impact, but that the manner in which we study leadership is not consistently uncovering when and how leadership does make a difference.

According to Conger and Toegel (2002) qualitative methods are important tools specifically for the study of leadership

for three reasons. First, the use of this methodology can help us understand how leadership is differentially exercised at different organisational levels. Second, as leadership is dynamic in nature, a qualitative analysis will add depth and richness that's lacking in knowledge that is obtained from questionnaires. Finally, there is research that looks at leadership as a socially constructed role, and in this case it would be useful to use qualitative methods to understand the construct from the different perspectives to get a more complete idea of the social construction.

The big question regarding charismatic leadership has been: can charismatic leadership be taught or are the personal experiences people grow-up with, a major factor in the outcome of charismatic leadership? Most of us understand charisma to be something inherent: either you have it or you don't. The typical CEO was an “organisation man” who worked his way up the ranks and was no better known to the general public than his secretary. These CEOs in the era of investor capitalism are portrayed by disgruntled investors as insulated, self-interested elite, ill prepared to face the challenges of global competition and rapid technological change. Now every company wants to hire the best person, especially when they are choosing a CEO. But a number of organisations fall victim to two common errors: mistaking charisma for skill and hiring a “second in command” as a potential future successor. Many leadership appointments go awry by being overly swayed by candidates with “charismatic magnetism”. It is not to say that you should or are capable of ignoring charisma in making hiring decisions, it is important to understand what it is and is not.

CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP- THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Of all the leadership theories in organisational research, charismatic/ transformational leadership has captured scholars' interest most over the past decade. Leadership is, of course, one of those topics in which interest never wanes. Leaders are by definition at the pinnacle of any society's largest organisation and their actions have the potential to change the course of history. The term *charisma* has traditionally been used to describe the godlike, magical qualities that certain leaders possess. Some leaders seem to have a powerful presence, it seems as though charisma is dripping from every pore. Bass (1985) states that, "Charisma is in the eye of the beholder and, therefore, is relative to the beholder. Nevertheless, the charismatic leader actively shapes and enlarges his or her audience through energy, self-confidence, assertiveness, ambition, and opportunities seized." The term charisma is in fact quite difficult to accurately define, but some similar terms related to charisma are: exuberance, extreme charm, grace, joie de vivre, mystique, positive energy, personal magnetism, personal appeal, and allure. Among many others, connotations of the term have changed, of course, over the years. For some, CEO stands for 'Charismatic, Energetic and Outgoing' and in our more worldly age, some of its religious connotations are lost and it now refers to a wide range of leadership styles that involve the capacity to inspire - usually through oratory-emotional bonds between leaders and followers. Do you think that most leaders, politicians and inspirational figures have charisma and it is that particular quality which makes them stand out? Charismatic leaders are organisational heroes who through sheer magnetism turn things toward dramatic change. Their visionary rhetoric, infused with an indescribable appeal, gives us belief and hope. There is of course a great deal of controversy about whether charisma is made or born and if charismatic leaders are really effective.

Many of history's most effective leaders like Napoleon and De Gaulle in France, Lincoln and Roosevelt in the United States, Peter the Great and Lenin in Russia, Mahatma Gandhi in India, Mao Zedong in China, Mandela in South Africa were known as dynamic, charismatic and inspirational leaders. Truly charismatic leaders are considered to possess some "magical" qualities. Alexander the Great crossed the unconquerable Alps Mountain with his soldiers, a feat which no one had achieved. What was it that led their followers to believe in them that they did the unthinkable? All of the charismatic leaders had unique traits and qualities which made them powerful agents of social change and their most significant leadership attributes were related to their involvement in, and contribution to, the intellectual upheaval that has always been an essential part of freedom struggles. These leaders had gained the trust of their followers to such

an extent that they believed in every word, action and deed of their leader. A look at the list of leaders points out that these were controversial leaders who defied authority and some of them were called "creative maladjusted non-conformist" while they lived. An assessment of their virtues and mistakes has constantly shifted over historical time. They never seem to fade from historical view. A point that demands attention is that though they were all different in their politics the effect on their followers was a commonality. Charismatic leaders "cause followers to become highly committed to the leader's mission, to make significant personal sacrifices, and to perform above and beyond the call of duty." This influence over people is entrenched in the leader's values, passion and logic - as Aristotle called the ethos, pathos and logos. An important part of helping organisations find their next leader is gaining clear insight into what went wrong with the last one. It has been called a fire that ignites followers' energy and commitment?

Charismatic leaders are able to provide very effective leadership to organisations. For one, research has shown a positive correlation between charismatic leadership and reported follower performance and satisfaction (Shamir, House and Arthur, 1993; Shamir, Zakey and Popper, 1998), perhaps because organisational members feel stronger and more in control of their own destinies. Charismatic leaders are also able to help generate organisational meaning and enthusiasm with the meaningful vision that they express. It is known that the organisation can take on characteristics of a cause, or a movement of reform (Berlew, 1974) and this helps. Accordingly, the efficiency and effectiveness of an organisation in attaining its goals is also enhanced because of the influence of a charismatic leader. Also there is other evidence that points to a positive correlation between charismatic leadership and enhanced organisational performance (O'Connor et al., 1995; Conger, Kanungo, and Menon, 2000). The idea of charismatic leadership has enthralled the minds of academicians, investors, journalists, and also the general public. A lot of work has been put into trying to analyze and bottle charisma and for this many renowned personalities have been dissected in a bid to identify the magic ingredients that will lead to corporate success.

NEGATIVE SIDE OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

Partly the discussion on charisma in leadership and organisations has carried the tone of danger. Charisma has been seen as a politically dubious characteristic of individuals in the society and there has been a search for the psychological mechanisms which lead to the emergence of charismatic leaders and their attraction to the people that follow them. For instance, Lindholm has studied extremely

destructive charismatic leaders like Hitler, Manson and Jim Jones and the manipulation practiced by charismatic leaders are seen negative and undesired consequences of it at societal level. Images of charismatic leaders often bring to memory some gloomy examples taken from the history.

A lot of recent research has begun to question the value of charismatic leadership. In a recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, Rakesh Khurana from the Harvard Business School argues that firms appoint charismatic bosses because they tend to believe—despite a notable lack of conclusive evidence—that a chief executive can have an almost mystical impact on a company's performance. The cult of charismatic leadership has gone too far and when struggling companies look for a CEO today, the only quality they prize above all others is “charisma”. And to attract these people, they are given unprecedented autonomy and resources. They have private jets at their beck and call, use of lavish penthouses, interest free loans to buy beach houses and art, heavy security provided by their companies, and benefits appropriate for royalty. Research has also shown that charismatic CEOs are able to leverage higher salaries even when their performance was ordinary by using their charisma.

Although they can have strong positive effects on organisations, but it needs to be pointed out that charismatic leaders can also create substantial negative outcomes. Conger (1990) has referred to this as the “dark side” of charismatic leadership, which he states can eclipse the bright side to the disadvantage of both the leader and the organisation. The actions of charismatic leaders can make the management and decision making processed slightly unstable and uncertain, and can also increase the risk intensities of the organisation (House and Howell, 1992). It can also make the organisational members more open to manipulation and deception by the charismatic leaders (O'Connor *et al.*, 1995). Charismatic leaders are also slightly unlikely to be able to routinize the positive features of their leadership into the organisation to continue beyond their tenure. It is also rare for charismatic leaders to be replaced successfully by leaders with similar capacity for achieving organisational transformation (Bryman, 1993; Conger, 1990).

Nevertheless, charisma remains as difficult to define as art or love. And there is no conclusive evidence that charismatic leadership affects an organisation's performance. Charismatic leaders present a vision for an organisation's future. The leader's principles, motivations, and self-concept system impact the vision and act as guides for the behaviours the leader uses changing the organisation. Unfortunately, leaders who are larger than life are not always interested in affecting change for the purpose of benefitting the organisation and its members as a whole; instead often the leader may be more concerned with his personal results. At its worst, the perils of this ego-driven charisma are leaders who allow

their self-interest and personal goals to override the goals of the organisation. Charismatic leaders are often unable to tolerate criticism and so they surround themselves with ‘yes’ people who are rewarded for pleasing the leader and create a climate where people are afraid to question or challenge the king or queen when they think he or she is making a mistake. Almost by definition, an enduring great company has to be built so that it does not depend on an individual leader, because individuals move on due to retirement, death, etc. Also a company can't be known by what it stands for if you cannot separate the identity of the company from its leader. Thus, this kind of leadership sacrifices the power of being directed by its core purpose.

However, reducing leadership to mere dyadic influence can blur the line between authentic leadership and manipulation. And this is the danger in charismatic leadership. There is no dearth of horrific examples throughout history which point out that there is a dangerous slippery slope. Charismatic leaders have in many cases resorted to manipulation. As when they are left unchecked, charismatic leaders eventually begin to see people as things – that have to be manipulated, cogs in the wheel, and means to an end. Many researchers have recognised a number of possible dark realities of charismatic leadership: keeping followers weak and dependent for direction; maintaining control over decision making; delusions of infallibility; excessive optimism, etc. It's easy to find these character faults in cult leaders and tyrants. But a check list to measure psychotic behaviour is unavailable. However, it's a warning sign for all with the gift and responsibility of leadership.

Charisma can serve not only the personal interests of the leader, but also the larger society (Allert and Chatterjee, 1997; Robbins, 1992). Selfishness and narcissism of a charismatic leader may come together and lead to undesired consequences, whereas unselfishness and scarifying features of a charismatic leader can be seen to cause desired and admirable consequences. The nature of charisma is not very rational. It works between the leaders and the followers; it is evidently not very rational by nature, not based on authority of the leader given to him only because his or her overwhelming knowledge or experience but more based on the personal features of the one. Accepting charisma, from the followers' point of view, can be seen as dubious and showing the tendency to become impressed by others, a kind of sign of weakness and subordination. Charisma of the leaders, and its acceptance on behalf of the followers might leave space for “irrational” forces in the society is the message of suspicious approach towards charismatic leadership. This gives extra space for persuasion and manipulation tendency in charismatic leadership processes. Charismatic followership (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1996) can be seen crucial in understanding the charismatic leadership and the processes where it takes place.

Any study of charismatic leadership is inextricably linked with the psychological concept of narcissism. Narcissism is a normal personality dimension that involves feelings of superiority over others, self-love, and a strong drive for power and glory. On the bright side, productive narcissists enjoy a great vision and have expansive thoughts and ideas. Such visions are more often than not bold. Also they share this vision in a way that is inspirational and that excites their followers and therefore they get their emotional commitment. Their ideas are often optimistic, in some way different from the norm, and challenging. Narcissists will be more focused on pursuing their goals and this pursuit is relentless. This is especially in keeping with their exaggerated self-image. Those leaders who cannot champion a bold vision and commonly lack self-confidence are unlikely to be seen as charismatic. On the dark side, however, they tend not to listen. Sometimes they give the illusion of listening while in fact they are preparing for their next verbal intervention. They do not take criticism well from any quarter and as a form of self-defense will keep their distance from critics. This shows that neither do they open up their feelings to others nor, pay attention to the feelings and thoughts of others especially if they are negative or non-confirmatory of their self-image. When times are tough followers may have to be more tolerant of the darker sides of narcissism. This may in part explain how dictators in the 1930's came to power following the Great Depression. At that time followers were in a state of confusion and uncertainty and therefore much more open to this form of charismatic influence. This presents the view of a situational determinant to leadership. Sometimes these leaders can be addicted to glorification and do not tolerate any kind of criticism. They usually desist from grooming others for leadership, because they prefer not to have anyone to question their authority. Under charismatic leadership, group members may view success in relation to their leaders. Another issue with charismatic leadership is that group success to a very large extent is dependent on the leader. The leader is the glue that holds a group together. So when the leader steps down, the group dynamics fizzles and individual members lose enthusiasm. It is common for the death of a charismatic leader to create a void of uncertainty and often the followers institutionalize their policies for sake of continuance. Max Weber has termed this as "routinization of charisma." But once routinized, the directions these policies can take cannot be predicted.

Unfortunately, charismatic leaders don't always have the company's best interest in mind. A large number of such leaders like to transform the company into their image. This causes the boundaries separating personal and company interests to blur. In the worst circumstances their self-interest and personal goals will take precedence over the company's goals. There are examples of companies such as Enron, Tyco, WorldCom, and HealthSouth where leaders recklessly used company resources for their personal benefit and executives

broke laws and crossed ethical lines to produce financial numbers that allowed leaders to cash in millions of dollars in stock options.

The term *charisma* is value-neutral: in that it doesn't differentiate between good/ moral and evil/ immoral charismatic leadership. Blind fanaticism and heroic self-sacrifice in the service of a beneficial cause are both results of following a charismatic leader. There are at one end ethical charismatics who develop creative, critical thinking in their followers, provide opportunities for development, are open to both positive and negative feedback, know the contributions of others, are more forthcoming with information for followers, and have high moral standards that highlight collective interests of the group or society. At the other end are charismatic leaders who display psychopathic behaviour. Some of these characteristics include: superficial charm, an exaggerated sense of self, lack of remorse and empathy, lack of genuine emotion, manipulative behaviour, etc. Based on this, it seems reasonable that perhaps some destructive charismatic leaders are potentially psychopathic.

Let's face it -- it's fun to have a leader to follow. To have a leader who can get you excited about a vision and the means to achieve it. It's a common human instinct. It is not to suggest that leaders can't be effective without being charismatic, but having charisma can be a huge asset. But this charismatic charm can be both a blessing and a curse. The reason is that charisma can be used for the good of a company or nation as well as for personal ambitions after overlooking the larger good. As it is pointed out above, not all about charismatic leadership is fascinating. It has some darker side too. There can be issues if a charismatic leader starts believing that he is infallible, if he begins to use his charisma to ruin the minds of the young. Finally charisma can reach beyond the walls of the workplace. And charismatic leaders can be very dangerous, because of their power to captivate others. Some of the most oppressive leaders in history were highly charismatic. Consider Hitler, who was the leader of the Nazi Party and responsible for policies that resulted in the holocaust and the deaths of approximately 6 million Jews. Robespierre was also considered charismatic, a leader of the French Revolution. He often used the guillotine to control the country and get rid of his political enemies. And, more recently, Osama Bin Laden inspired his followers in the name of religion to sacrifice their lives, and the lives of so many others. Leaders like Hitler, Stalin and Bin Laden, more recently have used their charisma to achieve their sinister motives that has resulted in chaos in society.

Conservatism rather than charisma is the vital characteristic of successful business leaders, claims a new study. There is an understated leadership style called "intelligent conservatism", which is commonality among companies that have achieved success in the long run. From time to time, charismatic leaders pop up, but largely these companies

have succeeded by listening to their people and relying on old-fashioned industry expertise. Charismatic people have a remarkable ability to distill complex ideas into simple messages; they communicate by using stories, analogies, metaphors and also symbols. This makes it easy for anyone to understand them. They also relish risk and feel a void if there is no risk; they are great optimists they are rebels who fight convention; they may seem idiosyncratic. Sensing opportunity and formulating a vision: these leaders seem to sense their constituents' needs as well as see the deficiencies of the existing situation and untapped opportunities. The combination of these qualities leads to a vision of an ideal future. In organisational terms these visions seem to fall along one of four major types: an innovative product or service; a contribution to society; a transformation of the organisation; or a contribution to the workforce.

The key ingredient of intelligently conservative leadership is in-depth knowledge of an organisation which allows leaders to enter into responsive networks and to build an understanding of what is happening in the organisation. The most effective corporate transformations have most often than not been undertaken by leaders who were promoted from within the company, rather than by charismatic outsiders. A number of transformative leaders succeeded because of the experience they had within their companies prior to taking over. Leadership appointments can easily go awry if the selection is overly swayed by candidates with charismatic magnetism. After all, it has been pointed out that charisma is like nectar on a flower which attracting bees for pollenization. Like the nectar, it attracts you and draws you in, but all the same, it is a personal characteristic, just like height, eye colour, etc. Charisma does have its benefits. It can be a valuable asset in interpersonal situations which can vary from general management, customer service, raising capital from investors, to, of course, sales. But having said this, charisma should not overpower the need to have other right qualities and experiences to fit into the organisational jigsaw.

There are still some aspects that need to be addressed to get a complete understanding of the dark side of charismatic leadership. Some scholars have argued these types of leadership to hinge on different sets of personality antecedents, with factors such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and authoritarianism triggering personalized and factors such as self-efficacy and self-esteem promoting socialized charismatic behaviours (House and Howell, 1992; O'Connor *et al.*, 1995). Others have suggested follower characteristics (e.g., self-concept clarity and identity orientation) to shape the socialized or personalized relations followers form with their charismatic leaders (Howell and Shamir, 2005; Weierter, 1997). It would be worth examining other antecedents to distinguish the specific origins of leaders' socialized versus personalized charismatic behaviour. Also, given that negative behaviour has been shown to spread

within groups (Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998), it may be worthwhile to examine how leaders' immediate social context and larger work environment influence the "dark," personalized aspects of their charismatic behaviour.

MINIMIZING THE RISK OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

Charismatic leadership is slightly 'risky' for companies because it is often difficult to predict the result when there is too much power in the hands of an individual leader. There can be a drastic change in the culture and strategy of a company when a charismatic leader takes over. If the company needs a high degree of change or is facing a crisis then this transformation is appropriate, however, once things are back to normal the centralisation of power and the implementation of risky strategies are unlikely to be acceptable. Research has shown that charismatic leaders are usually good at rescue operations, but when it comes to achieving long-term success and management they are not so successful.

This is an important factor to consider because it is unlikely that a charismatic leader will adapt the leadership style or cooperate in the appointment of a successor if and when the situation changes. The charismatic leaders enjoy the center stage and are not keen to share the spotlight. So they don't usually work on developing successors. Therefore, choosing a charismatic leader needs awareness of both the positive and negative effects that are likely to accompany such leadership. Safeguards can also be implemented within the organisation to maximize the contributions they can make while minimizing the potential negative consequences.

An effective accountability structure is one possible safeguard in the appointment of a charismatic leader. Unethical and moral leadership failures are largely due to the lack of effective accountability structures (Chandler, 2009). But it has to be pointed out that charismatic leaders might react negatively to this because normally they strive for personal autonomy (Conger, 1990). In order to prevent this from becoming a problem, it is advisable to address this at the time of appointment and clarify all the standards of accountability and reporting previously established. Some effective accountability measures that can be included are watchful oversight from the board of directors, agreement on financial and other decision making parameters, and establishment of an effective system of checks and balances (Chandler, 2009). Leaders who are held accountable are more likely to take into account the larger consequences of their behaviour and also more likely to make considerations for the interest of the organisation and its members.

Yet another safeguard that can be put in place is to have a viable support system for the leader. The nature of leadership is such that it tends to isolate the leader from the others and

the lack of an effective support system can further contribute to the demise of otherwise successful leaders (Chandler, 2009). A viable support system might include having personal confidantes, mentoring, participating in formal and informal training, and also having personal and professional development opportunities. Some of the benefits of this social support are that it strengthens emotional reserves, helps to have a balanced perspective, and also offers an outlet for self-expression outside of the organisational setting (Winnubst, 1993). It is also known to contribute to emotional health and appropriate self-image.

One safeguard is to have in place a selection process that is able to help with the differentiation of socialized charismatic leaders and personalized charismatic leaders. Socialized charismatic leaders have a socialized power motivation which integrates humility as well as egotism. Such leaders engage in the behaviours of visualizing, energizing, enabling, and empowering organisational members (Humphreys *et al.*, 2010). Finding ways to enhance the capabilities of the organisation and its members is important to such leaders. A socialized charismatic leader is also more likely to create an organisational culture which is unrestricted, non-exploitative, and altruistic. Understanding this is crucial in setting up effective procedures to identify potentially destructive individuals in the leader selection process. This can be done by including assessments of need for power, negative life themes and also personality traits like narcissism. Other useful assessments would relate to selfish versus socialized motives, and moral and ethical standards. The desired outcome of this selection process would be to fill available positions with socialized rather than personalized charismatic leaders.

There are three simple recommendations for upgrading to a more rational and sterilized leadership model. The first step is to select leaders with the use of a scientifically validated assessment tool instead of relying only on intuition. The next thing that can be done is to limit media exposure to avoid making leaders “look more capable than they actually are.” Finally, try and recognize hidden talent, which can go a long way in avoiding the selection of a charismatic leader.

CONCLUSION

It is important to recognize that charismatic leaders can have both positive and negative effects on organisations and their members. The question that merits a thought is if the positive effects are sufficiently significant to warrant the risks of appointing a charismatic leader. It is true that an effective socialized charismatic leader can transform an organisation and inspire its members to enhanced performance. But on the other hand, a personalized charismatic leader is capable of destabilizing and damaging the organisation and its members because of the leader’s focus on personal

advancement and interest. Having said that the introduction of certain safeguards in selection and tenure can enhance the positive contribution of a charismatic leader— and minimize the negative effects. These safeguards need to address the accountability structure, the support system and the selection process which surround the leader.

Finally, the author does not mean to suggest that charismatic leadership isn’t effective because its effectiveness is well supported by research and examples. The point made is a charismatic leader isn’t always the answer. It is true that a company with a charismatic leader at the helm is more likely to be successful but that success also depends to a large extent on the situation and on the leader’s vision.

In brief, charisma can be both distracting and destructive. With the use of technology and science it is now possible for us to systematize many serendipitous practices (e.g., shopping, marketing, hiring, etc.). If we are to take a more mature and advanced version of politics it will need a charisma detox — for leadership is not a game. The aim of the paper is not to argue that charisma is inherently problematic, charismatic leadership has its benefits. If your company is heading in the right direction, a charismatic leader will get you there faster. Unfortunately, if you’re heading in the wrong direction, charisma will also get you there faster.

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