

# The Myth of Charismatic Leaders

It can be foolish, futile, and even dangerous to follow leaders just because they're charismatic. Be careful of hero worship, and step forward.

By Joseph A. Raelin

Perhaps no subject has captivated the American business audience more than leadership. Within the practice of leadership, charisma is thought to be the quality that, though often considered metaphysical, represents the hallmark of inspirational leadership.

If leadership has something to do with inspiring a cadre of followers to do things in their own interest but also for the greater good, then we certainly need individuals who have a special talent to recruit others to work together towards a common cause.

Often, such individuals have heroic qualities because they're thought to persist in spite of the odds against them. They're also thought to possess particular heroic characteristics, such as courage and persistence, to face and prevail against those who would resist their noble efforts.

Many social critics have begun to challenge that heroic view of leadership. Should leadership rest upon the shoulders of one individual? We're beginning to see that many of the tasks that we need to perform in order to achieve our missions cannot be accomplished awaiting orders from just one person. All of us need to act and take a leadership role within our own domains.

Is it possible, then, that leadership may be as much a collective as an individual property? Do we need a savior to steer us out of trouble, or can we rely upon each other to find our way in the world?

If leadership is something other than being in charge of others—if it belongs not to the hero (without whom the followers will surely founder) but to the collective urged to face their own problems, then there may be a need to revise the ancient, obdurate concept of charisma.

## The sway of charisma

*Charisma* comes from the Greek word meaning "gift," suggesting that leaders have special gifts to distribute. Their gifts aren't necessarily physical; they're more likely to be social. In fact, it's commonly thought that the pleasing personality of a charismatic person is his or her greatest gift. So, by definition, charismatics sway people and shape the future by their sheer presence and personality.

Charismatic leaders are thought to differ from mere mortal leaders by their ability to formulate and articulate an inspirational vision, as well as by actions that foster the impression that they are extraordinary people. Some observers go as far as to suggest that divine qualities exist in charismatic leaders—following Max Weber, who in *Economy and Society* asserted that these people are "set apart from ordinary [people] and treated as endowed with su-

pernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers and qualities... [that] are not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as divine or as exemplary."

Unfortunately, even if we were to decide on what are the ingredients of a charismatic personality, I doubt we would ever find that charismatics are persuasive in all environments and for all times. The post-war demise of Winston Churchill is a sufficient case. Except for exceptional circumstances when a community is in dire straits and genuinely asks for the direction of an outspoken member, there are severe problems in allowing a given individual—particularly a charismatic—to control a community.

As soon as one attempts to identify the particular characteristics that make up a charismatic personality, one begins to exclude a host of candidates for leadership. Here's how perennial CEO Lawrence Bossidy, formerly of Allied-Signal and Honeywell, unwittingly characterizes leaders in his chapter, "Reality-Based Leadership: Changes in the Workplace," in *The Book of Leadership Wisdom* (John Wiley & Sons, 1998):

*You all know the maxim, "Leaders are born, not made." That's only half true. Some people are, indeed, born leaders, and you can spot them a mile away. The trouble is, there simply aren't enough of them to go around. So, we need to find individuals with innate intelligence, an eagerness to learn, and a desire to work with others, and give them the tools and encouragement they need to become effective leaders, too. They may never run the company, but they can make enormous contributions to the success of your organization.*

Bossidy's comments show that he identified in advance the also-rans because of a notion of what it takes to be a leader.

Using the Freudian term *narcissist*, Michael Maccoby and Roy Lubit point out in separate articles (Maccoby: "Narcissistic Leaders," *Harvard Business Review*; Lubit: "The Long-Term Organizational Impact of Destructively Narcissistic Managers," *Academy of Management Executive*) that though charismatics can charm the masses with their rhetoric and can draw the big picture, they tend to be grandiose and distrustful. Narcissists tend to keep themselves emotionally distant from others and generally don't tolerate dissent. They're also poor listeners, show little empathy, can be brutally exploitative, seldom mentor, and aren't restrained by conscience. Their excessive promotion of self and lack of concern for others can become utterly destructive to their organizations be-

cause they're prone to make reckless business decisions, divert people's energies away from their real work, and ultimately drive away the community's most talented people.

In what strikes me as a stark contrast to democratic practice, followers working under narcissists are advised to find out what their bosses think before presenting their own views. That way, they can keep any dissent to a minimum. People are advised to generally let the narcissistic boss take credit for the followers' ideas and contributions.

In addition to claiming to have a unique vision and compelling language, a charismatic leader might also attempt to acquire the symbolic accouterments of the role of savior. Depending on the society in question, this might be represented by a certain look or stature, by particular vestments or possessions, or by a relationship or lineage to prior historical figures. It was reported that during the Taliban control of Afghanistan, the spiritual leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, rose to power by acquiring the very cloak of the Prophet Mohammed, which had been folded and padlocked in a series of chests in a crypt in the royal mausoleum at Kandahar. Myth had it that the padlocks to the crypt could be opened only when touched by a true *amir-ul-momineen*, a king of the Muslims. After the collapse of the Taliban regime, the people of Afghanistan came to know of Omar's brutality and how he duped them into obedience through the Taliban's rigid interpretations of the Koran. In the words of a young Kandahari: "We trusted men we thought were holy and educated in the Koran, and because many of us did not know Arabic, we could not study the Koran carefully ourselves. When we saw Omar in the cloak, all of Afghanistan hoped that... the rains would begin. But, in truth, we did not know what he was saying. We only followed." (*Boston Globe*)

### The charisma-followership connection

Charisma is increasingly being seen as a condition interconnected with followership. The qualities of charisma need to be appreciated by followers or by a following community. Often, a charismatic emerges within the community as it faces some level of psychic distress. Distress occurs when people are unable to understand the direction in which the surrounding environment might be changing, what the potential impact of those changes on the organization might be, and whether particular responses by management might or might not be successful. Further, people might perceive that any erroneous decision on the part of management could risk the survival of the organization. In that instance, people may look to a leader for psychological comfort in order to reduce their stress and anxiety. Such leaders might be able to turn the uncertainty of their followers into a vision of opportunity and success.

Yet, it's precisely at that point followers are particularly susceptible to charismatic salvation. They find themselves in a dependent state and look to their leaders to satisfy their needs. Charismatics are all too willing to comply by offering them hope, and usually, in a particular direction. That's in contrast to leaders who might choose to work with their followers to face and manage their conflicts.

Some observers have suggested that in the presence of charismatic leaders, followers can experience inspiration, empowerment, and awe. Those states are created by specific acts undertaken by leaders—behaviors such as dramatizing a mission, assuring followers of their competency, projecting self-assurance, and enhancing their own image. Other accounts of charismatic leaders have emphatically asserted that leaders need to engage in impression management, in image building, and in manipulation of meaning in

order to bind "subordinates" closely to them and to their vision. It's no wonder, then, that charismatic leaders are granted enormous license to direct an organization—be that in a direction of pro- or anti-social practices.

There's always a chance that followers might learn to manage their affairs on their own, by which time they may no longer need the charismatic. Followers might even feel ashamed for having debased themselves. When that happens, they might develop resentment against the charismatic, especially if they discover that he or she has an underlying weakness—referred to as "feet of clay." That phenomenon is well captured in a story recounted by one of my former students:

*I will tell a story about meeting a celebrity. This person was a very popular singer in a 1980s band. From age 12 to 18, I was obsessed with this individual. My friends weren't all that impressed with him, and I was made fun of quite a bit, but that didn't dissuade me. Well, the 1980s came and went, and I moved on. But just last year, I found out that a co-worker's husband is my teenage heart-throb's first cousin, and she gave me tickets to a concert with the band, on a comeback tour. I was thrilled; all of the excitement came back. I was, after all, on my way to meet the subject of my awe. I'm sure by now you realize where this is going. Meeting this person was a big disappointment. I went backstage and shook his hand and talked a bit. He was arrogant and condescending, and his behavior made me feel stupid for wanting to meet him. My awe was destroyed by the close encounter.*

Most charismatic leaders are capable of capitalizing on awe, offering their followers a set of idealized goals. The more idealized those goals are, the more likely it is the leaders will be credited with extraordinary vision. An idealized vision further serves to highlight the uniqueness of the charismatic leader, making him or her even more admirable and worthy of identification and imitation. Jay Conger, Rabindra Kanungo, and Sanjay T. Menon say in their article "Charismatic Leadership and Follower Effects" (*Journal of Organizational Behavior*) that it's "this idealized quality of the charismatic leader's goals—supported by appealing rhetoric—that distinguishes him or her from other leaders."

We might note that charismatics need not be narcissistic, egocentric, or hard-driving. More critical is that they're seen as saviors who, through their superb vision, can appeal to the masses and save the day. Indeed, Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, depicts his "level-5 leaders" as humble and shy and as people committed to diverting credit to others. Yet, they're at the same time recognized as having individually turned companies around or having led them in a strategic direction that, though unpopular, resulted in success.

For example, in an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, Collins refers to Alan Wurtzel as a leader "responsible for turning Circuit City from a ramshackle company on the edge of bankruptcy into one of America's most successful electronics retailers." Collins cites Charles R. "Cork" Walgreen II as the iron-willed leader who transformed dowdy Walgreens by proclaiming to his executive staff, "OK, now I am going to draw the line in the sand. We are going to be out of the restaurant business completely in five years." Can you imagine the silence in the room? "Cork" may have had a quiet demeanor, but he was resolute. His followers knew that the leader, their charismatic leader, had spoken. Yet, did he truly act alone?

### The contagion of charisma

Views that disentangle leadership from individual action don't coincide with the charismatic mindset because they don't credit control as emanating from a single individual. People don't require salvation from the top; salvation is produced by their own mutual hard work and compassion towards each other. One folds into one's own community. Although we may temporarily focus attention on a speaker, we simultaneously seek connections to ourselves and to others.

James Meindl, author of "On Leadership: An Alternative to the Conventional Wisdom" (*Research in Organizational Behavior*) and a professor of organization and human resources at the State University of New York at Buffalo, goes as far as to suggest that charisma is no more than a romantic notion that people conjure to uplift their spirits. Most of us tend to overemphasize a leader's prowess. As followers interact, they begin to define a social reality of leadership representing special mythical qualities endowed only by very special people. Although those qualities may not, in fact, exist, they're often ascribed to a leader by either an implicit or carefully conceived orchestration by particular members of the follower community. Called "carriers," those members essentially spread the news of the charismatic leader's mythical qualities throughout society. In that way, charisma becomes a contagion. What is spread, though, isn't necessarily real but rather reactions that represent no more than pre-existing shared profiles of what leaders are supposed to be like. And we know what the profile tends to be: the hero who can save us! Meindl suggests that followers are predisposed to look for a cause and a leader for whom they can become true believers.

I see charisma as not necessarily a set of personality or emotional characteristics that define the attributes of leadership. Charisma is more of a social process, often implicitly set up between follower and leader to keep the leader in power. Charismatics rely on that process to sustain their charismatic effect. They enjoy enhancing the romantic images of themselves.

But it's important to deconstruct the romantic view of leadership embedded in the idea of charisma, because its effect can deprive a community of its own power and utility and, left unexamined, can lead to demagogic behavior and deleterious effects on groups not affiliated with the leader. Moreover, the romantic view can lead to carrier abuse among followers, who can exalt a leader's image either without his or her knowledge or after the leader steps aside. In extreme cases, a leader's death may spur martyrdom, a hyper-romantic construct that can be used for practically any purpose. The ultimate end of charismatic practices of that ilk is disempowerment. People no longer control their own destiny, having handed it over to their saviors.

### Back down to Earth

We need a leadership that subsists without charismatics, or heroes. It won't be easy. Though we advocate the value of participative

leadership and other forms of organizational democratic practice, the drive to have a spiritual leader whom we can love and who can save us sneaks back into our consciousness just as we prepare to assert our own worth and independence. Part of the reason for that is that our culture still seems to value, even revere, individualism while preaching teamwork. Whatever the walk of life—be it a corporate setting, a professional sports team, or an opera—we tend to focus on the star performer, even when he or she may depend entirely on the team or group to achieve prominence.

Another possible explanation for hero worship is a fear of the future, in spite of our era's advances in science and technology. The tragic events of 9/11 heighten our fear. Under that cloud of uncertainty, many people look to heroes, or surrogate parent figures, who can bring us comfort and assurance, who can inspire us and explain the future.

Hero worship is outdated in our age. Indeed, it might have become outdated ever since the common man or woman was thought to be able to go out into the world and make decisions on his or her own. Relying on a single charismatic leader to part the seas for us works as long as the leader can successfully diagnose the environment and make correct decisions. But what happens when this same leader errs? What happens when his or her followers realize that they have the maturity to make their own decisions? What happens when the environment becomes so complex that no single individual could possibly discern all of its elements? What happens when a leader dies and no one is available to take his or her place?

We must graduate from our reliance on charismatics because, sooner or later, they will need us as collaborators in leadership. We no longer need dependent subordinates who are waiting to act on command. We want our colleagues to act on their own initiative, not as loose cannons but as a well-oiled community of members who trust and need their independence and interdependence. Naturally, these initiators will check back with their groups as appropriate. But if we insist that they wait for the proverbial go-ahead, they may lose their chance to act by the time permission is received.

We can no longer afford to be mechanistic in our view of the world. We can't rely on a coterie to await orders from the top, from detached bosses who have sole possession of problem fixes even across the remote corners of the organization. We need organizations that empower anyone who is capable and willing to assume leadership in the moment in his or her relationships with peers, team members, customers, suppliers, and other organizational partners.

Alas, we are in it together. The essence of leadership is collaboration and mutuality.

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