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The Myth of Charismatic Leaders

A Paper by

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Perhaps no subject has captivated the American business audience more than leadership, and within the practice of leadership, charisma is thought to be the quality that, though often considered metaphysical, represents the very 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 toward a common cause. Often such individuals have heroic qualities since they are thought to persist in spite of the odds against them. They are also thought to possess particular heroic characteristics, in particular courage and persistence, to face and prevail against those who would resist their noble efforts.

There are many social critics who have begun to challenge this heroic view of leadership. Should leadership rest upon the shoulders of one individual? In the new century, we are beginning to see that many of the tasks that we need to perform in order to achieve our missions cannot be accomplished awaiting the orders from just one individual. People need to act and take a leadership role within their own domain. 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 a need to revise the ancient, obdurate concept of charisma.

The Foundations of Charisma:

Charisma comes from the Greek word meaning "gift," suggesting that leaders have special gifts to distribute. Their gifts are not necessarily physical; they are more likely social. In fact, it is commonly thought that it is the pleasing personality of the charismatic that 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 an impression that they are extraordinary people. Some observers go as far as to suggest

divine qualities to charismatic leaders following Max Weber, who in *Economy and Society*, asserted that these people are

> ...set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, 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 the ingredients were to 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 in kind. Even more, except for quite exceptional circumstances when the 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 particular characteristics that make for a charismatic personality, one begins a process of excluding a host of candidates for leadership. Here's how perennial CEO, Lawrence Bossidy, formerly of Allied-Signal and Honeywell, unwittingly characterizes leaders:

> You all know the old 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 [*Reality-Based Leadership,* p. 410].

One can see in Bossidy's comments that he has already 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 assert that though charismatics can charm the masses with their rhetoric and can draw the 'big picture,' they have a tendency toward grandiosity and distrust. Narcissists tend to keep themselves emotionally distant from others and generally do not tolerate dissent. They are also poor listeners, show little empathy, can be brutally exploitative, seldom mentor, and are not restrained by conscience. Their excessive promotion of self and lack of concern for others can become utterly destructive to their organizations since they are

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. They are advised to always let the narcissistic boss take credit for the followers' ideas and contributions.

Besides a unique vision and compelling language, the 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*, p. A21]

Charisma and Followership:

Charisma is increasingly being seen as a condition inter-connected with followership. The qualities of charisma need to be appreciated by followers or by a following community. Often, the 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 or not 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 very survival of the organization. In this instance, individuals may look to a leader for

psychological comfort in order to reduce their stress and anxiety. Such a leader might be able to turn the uncertainty of his or her followers into a vision of opportunity and success.

Yet, it is precisely at this point that 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 paternal, direction. This is in contrast to leaders who might choose to work with their followers to face and manage their own conflicts.

Some writers have suggested that in the presence of charismatics, followers can experience inspiration, empowerment, and even "awe." These 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 unabashedly assert that leaders need to engage in impression management, in image building, and in manipulation of meaning in order to bind "subordinates" most closely to them and to their vision. It is no wonder, then, why charismatic leaders are granted an enormous license to direct an organization, be it in a direction of pro- or anti-social practices.

There is always a chance that followers might eventually learn to manage their affairs on their own, by which time, they may no longer need the charismatic. They might even feel ashamed for having debased themselves. Under these conditions, they might develop a resentment against the charismatic, especially if they discover that he or she has an underlying weakness. This is sometimes referred to as the "feet of clay" phenomenon. It was 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 an 80s band. From age 12 to 18, I was obsessed with this individual. My friends weren't all that impressed with him and I got made fun of quite a bit for my big crush, but even that didn't sway my feelings. Well the 80s came and went and I moved on from my obsession because the band is out of the top 40 and really has not been heard of again. Well, just last year I found out that my co-worker's husband is my teenage heartthrob's first cousin She offered me tickets to a concert with this band. I was thrilled, and all that excitement came back from when I was younger and more impressionable. 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. Anyway, meeting this person was a big disappointment. I went back stage and actually shook his hand and talked a little bit with him. He was arrogant and conceited and his behavior made me feel stupid for even wanting to meet him in the first place. My "awe" was destroyed by this close encounter.

Most charismatic leaders are capable of capitalizing on awe, offering their followers a set of idealized goals. The more idealized these goals, the more likely these 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 and Rabindra Kanungo further assert that it is "...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 be seen as saviors who through their superb vision can appeal to the masses and save the day. Indeed, Jim Collins' depicts his "Level 5 Leaders" as humble and shy and as people committed to diverting credit to others. Yet, they are 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, 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." He cites Charles R. "Cork" Walgreen II as the iron-willed leader who transformed dowdy Walgreens by proclaiming to his executive staff: "Okay, 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 sense the silence in the room? Cork may have been quiet in demeanor, but his resolve was resolute. His followers knew that the leader, their charismatic leader, had spoken. Yet, did he act alone?

Romanticism:

Views that disentangle leadership from individual action do not coincide with the charismatic mindset because they do not see control as emanating from a single individual. People do not require salvation from the top; salvation is produced by their own mutual hard work and compassion towards one another. 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 goes as far as to suggest that charisma is no more than a romantic notion that people conjure up 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 by only very special people. Although these qualities may NOT exist, they are often ascribed to the leader by either an implicit or carefully conceived orchestration by particular members of the follower community.

Called "carriers," these members essentially spread the news of the charismatic leader's mythical qualities throughout society. In this way, charisma becomes a contagion. What is spread, though, is not necessarily real but rather a spread of reactions that represent no more than pre-existing shared profiles of what leaders are supposed to be like. And we know what the profile often tends to be: the hero who can save us! Meindl asserts that followers may be already looking for a cause and a leader of 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. It is as much a social process often implicitly set up between follower and leader to keep the leader in power. Charismatics rely on this social process to sustain their charismatic effect. They enjoy enhancing the romantic images of themselves.

Yet, it is important to deconstruct the romantic view of leadership embedded in the idea of charisma because its effect not only can deprive a community of its own power and utility but because left unexamined, it can lead to demagogic behavior and deleterious effects on groups not affiliated with the leader. Moreover, it can lead to carrier abuse among the leader's followers, who can exalt the leader's image either without the leader's knowledge or after the leader steps aside. In extreme cases, the leader's death may even spur his or her martyrdom, a hyper-romantic construct that can be used for practically any purpose. The ultimate end of charismatic practices of this 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 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 this 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 be entirely dependent upon the team to achieve prominence. Another possible explanation for our hero worship is our own fear of the future, in spite of our era's advances in science and technology. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, only serve to heighten our fear. Under this 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 unfortunately 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 "separate 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 its elements? What happens when the leader dies and no one is available to take his or her place?

We simply 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 under their own initiative, not as loose canons but as members of a well-oiled community that trusts their independence and needs their interdependence. Naturally, these initiators will check back with their group as appropriate. But if we insist that they wait for the proverbial "go-ahead," they may have lost their chance to act by the time permission is received.

In the new century, we can no longer afford to be mechanistic in our view of the world. We cannot rely on a coterie of subordinates to await their marching orders from the top from detached bosses who have sole possession on problem fixes even across the remote corners of the organization. We need organizations that empower anyone who is capable and who has the willingness to assume leadership in the moment in his/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.