

When Charismatic Leadership Goes Too Far

by Dan Ciampa

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In most cases, charisma is a useful quality for CEOs. Many work hard to develop charismatic skills. Especially when an organization is asked to become more innovative and to perform beyond normal levels, having followers with an unusually strong belief in the leader and their vision increases the odds of success.

But charisma has a dark side that can sap the strength and potency from an organization. If it grows too powerful, the leader becomes ineffective at motivating others and at driving the business.

Charisma is often misunderstood. Historian Arthur Schlesinger helped popularize the term in the 1960s. As it became used widely, he complained that the word had been reduced to simply “a chic synonym for ‘heroic’...or even just ‘popular.’” It became widely used during and after World War II, when it was used to describe Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill...but was just as frequently applied to Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. The sociologist Max Weber defined the “charismatic organization” as one that exists not due to a legal structure or a strong tradition but to the personal magnetism of the person leading it. That’s one reason the word “charismatic” often comes up when describing the dynamics of cults.

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Up to a point, having a magnetic leader – someone that people want to follow – is good for an organization that has to go through significant change. Charismatic leaders are skilled at articulating a compelling vision that inspires followers. They’re also adept at reading the environment and sensing the needs of followers to tailor a message that will have the most impact. Charismatic leaders are good storytellers who use symbolism and metaphor to make stories come alive.

But true charismatic leadership is more than just a set of techniques to excite followers.

Rather, it comes from the leader’s observable behavior, displaying a deep belief in the promise and possibilities of the organization, a sense of optimism for the probability of

success, and a willingness to take personal risks and make sacrifices to turn the vision into reality. Often, followers admire a charismatic leader enough to actively try to develop some of the leader's distinctive qualities in themselves.

But charisma can be a slippery slope. Over time, deepening loyalty creates negative changes in the leader's behavior. A leader must be attuned to early signs of this shift, which sounds easier than it is.

There are five phases that take place as a leader's charisma shifts from a positive to a negative quality:

The first phase is characterized by the subtle sense on the part of followers that the leader does not want to be questioned. Followers may begin to quietly complain that the leader is becoming hubristic and acts like they believe they're the smartest person in the room.

The second stage flows logically from the first: sensing the leader's diminished appetite for being questioned or challenged, followers begin to self-censor, asking fewer questions and no longer playing devil's advocate. One person reported: "The last time I [pushed back], he came back with a bunch of reasons why I was wrong, and I felt stupid. I'm not going there again." Instead of fostering healthy dissent, the charismatic leader begins to be surrounded by "yes" people.

As the leader begins to hear only praise and admiration, they enter **the third stage**: a negative cycle in which compliments and agreement cause them to become overconfident. Leaders in this stage create their own sense of reality and become resistant to evidence that they may be incorrect. While the first and second stages mostly involve recognition by followers, the third stage involves a distinct shift in behavior by the leader.

If nothing is done to stop this cycle, it progresses to **the fourth stage**. Since the leader's views and actions are the only ones that matter, followers reduce their willingness to be proactive. They wait for directions and become passive. Decision making slows down. Efforts at

strengthening teamwork stop, and meetings change from a time of joint decisions and buy-in to being when the leader announces what everyone else should do. Leaders in this situation complain: “If I want something done right, I need to do it myself.” Because followers begin to grow disillusioned, this stage ends with rising employee turnover.

The fifth stage is characterized by people continuing to follow and ostensibly do only what is necessary but with a deep diminishment in enthusiasm and spirit. They still hear and comply with what the leader wants, but the passion is gone because they don't feel that they are a part of it anymore. Eventually, they stop listening and become cynical. Creativity and productivity decline. What was once a shared, common vision is now just the leader's vision. The leader feels unsupported and followers feel estranged.

What should leaders be aware of to prevent a slide down this slope? First, charismatic leadership is as seductive for the leader as for followers, and the better one is at it, the easier it is to be blind to signs of trouble. Second, the relationship between leader and followers is delicate and requires constant tending. If not managed well by both, a slippery slope can lead to behavior that will destroy the success that they have achieved. Third, while both leader and followers have responsibility to manage their relationship, the leader has far more power to determine the outcome. If he or she does not allow for feedback and dissent, followers will accommodate rather than push back. Fourth, the slippery slope that results has certain points where negative effects can be reversed, but if they're ignored, the accelerating momentum will be impossible to stop, causing failure that damages the leader and organization.

Because each situation is different, there aren't steps that will always avoid or solve problems. In general, though, there are two areas where leaders, especially charismatic ones, should concentrate. One has to do with the culture of the organization, and the other is about themselves and how they lead.

Sliding down the slippery slope will be less likely if the culture emphasizes open communication, including a structured method to extract learning from every success and mistake. Forums must exist where the big bets of the strategy are debated, including a talent

plan that ensures a match between the strategy and the people who must achieve it.

Feedback must be a company norm that people are trained in, and it must be encouraged and rewarded.

On the personal front, the keys for the leader are self-awareness and self-management. Being self-aware is, in effect, believing there's a camera filming every move one makes, a humbling mindset that encourages leaders to view themselves as followers do. The leader must make the choice to let others in on their thinking; the right people could include a board member and direct reports with the skills and the license to offer advice.

Managing stress must be a priority. Depending on the leader's needs and personality, doing so could include such steps as structure or personnel changes, restructuring one's administrative system to conserve time, wise use of a balanced set of trusted advisors who act as honest brokers, and tending to one's overall wellness, perhaps through an exercise program or meditation.

Charisma, when it's based on deep conviction of shared success and when it's skillfully projected, can help a leader be very effective and an organization thrive even during difficult times. But avoiding its dark side requires the leader to add attention to the culture, self-awareness, self-management, and, perhaps most of all, the humility necessary to truly listen.

Dan Ciampa (DC@danciampa.com) is a former CEO, an adviser to boards and chief executives, and the author of five books, including *Transitions at the Top: What Organizations Must Do to Make Sure New Leaders Succeed* (with David L. Dotlich, Wiley, 2015) and *Right from the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role* (with Michael Watkins, Harvard Business Review Press, 1999).

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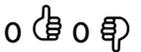
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A Charismatic Leader: inspires followers with compelling attractiveness and charm.

A Fanatical Leader: sparks wild, angry, sometimes even violent idealist movements.

Note the difference.

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