

THE DARK SIDE OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

WHY WE SHOULD STILL KEEP A DOSE OF SCEPTICISM IN THE MIDST OF SUCH LEADERSHIP



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WHAT is it about charisma that captivates us to the point where we can listen intently for hours to a speaker or carry out requests made by that person? In theology, charisma is defined as a gift or power from the divine. In other words, charisma can confer a god-like status on an individual. Charismatic people are respected, revered and adored.

When we describe someone as charismatic, we usually offer it in praise of their character. They are—we believe—good people whom we can trust.

However, charisma, just like any other trait, is neither positive nor negative, but rather, depends on how it's used by both charismatic individuals and their followers.

In order for charismatic leaders to thrive, they need followers not only to recognise the value of their cause, but to fully immerse themselves in whatever vision is being presented, which often creates an attitude of "them and us."

A POTENT TOOL OF INFLUENCE

In the most extreme examples, there have been a number of cults that have led to the mass suicide of followers who wholeheartedly believed in the revelations of a charismatic leader. Such is its power, charisma can help to deliver the greatest of goods, or plunge people into the depths of darkness and despair.

Of course, the negative side of charisma doesn't require dangerous environments in order to thrive. In the world of politics and business, we have seen an abundance of cases where charming leaders have used their ability to suit whatever agenda they have in mind—and it doesn't take much to draw people in.

Take, for example, the President of the United States of America (US), Barack Obama's first-term campaign to be elected to the White House.

Almost a decade has passed since he first ran for president, and the chances are that most of us would have forgotten any key points from his

debates, or election promises made on the campaign trail. However, we are able to clearly recall his campaign slogan: "Yes We Can!"

I remember watching as Obama would travel across the country, and being amazed by throngs of people chanting, "Yes We Can!" in unison.

Yes we can, what? I was sure few of these people could answer the question; so caught up they were in the euphoria and theatre that is American politics.

That's not to say that Obama is necessarily a leader with questionable motives. Over his two terms in office, he has helped America progress, not least of all through the provision of "Obamacare" which has helped millions of previously uninsured people gain access to affordable healthcare.

However, what Obama's charismatic campaigns have shown is that charisma is a potent tool that can have a powerful effect over those who are drawn into its orbital path.

On one level, charisma can be sinister in that those who buy into an ideology or a personality are the ones who create the effects of charisma.

Obama, or any other charismatic leader, wouldn't have much success if it wasn't for the willingness of supporters to be psychologically influenced and easily so, as exemplified by the "Yes We Can!" message.

IS CHARISMA A GOOD OR BAD TRAIT TO HAVE?

Charisma is, of course, extremely useful for leaders in connecting with others and driving a message home. While it's not an inherently negative personality trait, it is useful to keep some level of caution intact whenever we feel we're being sucked in by someone but we're not entirely sure why.

As ever, it's usually those who believe that they "never fall" for such traits that become most affected by them.

Just as advertising is a billion-dollar business because it knows how to manipulate human nature, charismatic leaders know how to succeed in getting their message across by tapping into our psychological cues and triggers.

The best defence is to always keep a healthy

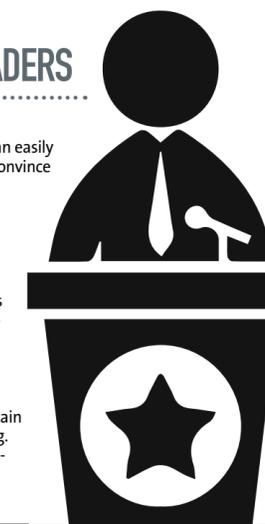


dose of scepticism in the face of grand personalities and sugar-sweet messages. This can go some way to making sure any decisions are well-informed and consciously made.

Sandy never falls for the tricks of advertising—the fact that he has a stockpile of stuff he doesn't need is immaterial. He remains (not at all) impervious. To connect with Sandy, you can find him on Twitter @RealsClarke. This article was first published on www.leaderonomics.com. To develop and enhance your leadership qualities, e-mail training@leaderonomics.com.



3 KEY TRAITS OF CHARISMATIC LEADERS



1 COMMUNICATION

Leaders with charisma are powerful communicators. They can easily motivate, inspire and direct others in the face of challenges, and convince people of their ideas and visions.

Whether in a group setting or on a one-to-one basis, they are effective communicators in any situation.

2 CONFIDENCE

Charismatic leaders are sure of themselves, and they never try to be anyone else. Even when faced with difficulties, they focus on opportunities for solutions rather than dwell on the problem—their glass is always half-full.

3 STRONG BODY LANGUAGE

Often, we can sense charisma in people even before they speak. The way they walk into a room, hold eye contact and maintain composure, shows an authenticity that permeates their very being.

Communication is said to be 20% of what you say and 80% non-verbal language; and charismatic leaders have mastered the art.

POTENTIAL DANGERS OF CHARISMA

1 IT CAN DISGUISE DAMAGING TRAITS

Being naturally drawn to charming people, as most of us are, allows charismatic people to hide their less attractive characteristics such as ego, manipulation, deceit, and selfishness.

Think Donald Trump and you have an idea of how charisma can work for charming people at the expense of others.

2 CHARISMA PRODUCES COLLECTIVE NARCISSISM

This is something widely seen in politics, but it also exists in business and other arenas. Democrat or Republican? Apple or Microsoft? Liverpool or Manchester United?

The sense of belonging to a group enhances our adoration of the candidate, boss, or football team, and it also increases our own sense of pride within ourselves, as well as the group to which we "belong." This leads to a deluded sense of superiority over others, bolstered by an abundance of justifications when needed.

3 CHARISMA IS ADDICTIVE

Just as pop stars come to depend on the love from their followers, business leaders can become addicted to the approval of their employees. The biggest problem this causes is distraction from the goals of the business.

Followers also become addicted to charismatic individuals and so, when problems arise, the reality is often distorted in a bid by both parties to maintain the charismatic image of the leader.



POSITIVE LESSONS FROM 4 CHARISMATIC LEADERS

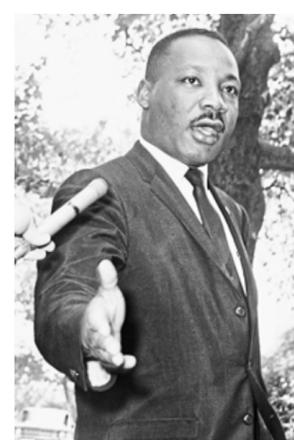
1. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Traits: Passion, Courage, Vision

At the time of King's "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, the gathering of some 250,000 protesters during the march on Washington was the biggest the US capital had ever seen.

The enduring efforts of the captivating preacher and his followers led to Congress passing the Civil Rights Act in 1964, officially outlawing discrimination on the grounds of race, religion or gender.

Lesson: From the biggest to the smallest, no vision is without its stumbling blocks and setbacks. Success isn't about getting it right the first or even the 10th time; success is never giving up until you get there.



2. EVA PERÓN

Traits: Compassion, Generosity, Determination

Widely known as Evita, thanks to the musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, Eva Perón achieved so much within her short life in Argentina.

The mildly successful actress saw her life transformed following a marriage to Colonel Juan Perón, who went on to become the country's president. Using her position as First Lady, Perón worked tirelessly to help the poor and advance a number of causes including women's suffrage.

Lesson: Whatever your position in life, always look to give others a hand wherever you can. There's no telling where your generosity might end or what it can achieve.



3. AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Traits: Resilience, Conviction, Grit

For 20 years, Suu Kyi endured house arrest as a prisoner of conscience in Myanmar. Having returned from living in the United Kingdom to attend to her mother, she was invited to lead the pro-democracy movement, where she fought for free and fair elections.

Giving a speech to 500,000 people in 1988, her vision of democracy—in the face of a ruthless junta—saw her National League for Democracy Party win a landslide victory in the 1990 general election.

The ruling junta offered to release her from house arrest if she left Burma and kept out of politics. She refused. Her eventual release in 2010, following intense international pressure, led her party to sweeping victories in the 2012 by-elections and the 2015 general election.

Lesson: Nothing worth fighting for ever comes easy. It's not how long the battle rages on, but how true we are to our convictions in striving to create lasting change for the better.



AP Photo/Aung Shine Oo

4. BARACK OBAMA

Traits: Resolve, Audacity, Decisiveness

Obama is acutely aware of the fact that, oftentimes, support is required from those who aren't always supportive. His ability to unite people behind a cause has led to a number of significant achievements, including the Affordable Care Act, which has helped millions gain access to health insurance.

Obama has also re-established relations with Cuba, and played a central role in worldwide commitments to limit global warming.

Lesson: Sometimes, we have to reach across the table to get support to accomplish what we're working to achieve. Treat everyone you meet as though your success depends on them—you never know when you might need their support or when.

