

Why Charismatic Leaders are not always the answer...

by Dr Mike Rugg-Gunn



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by Dr Mike Rugg-Gunn, CPsychol.
Human Asset Development International Limited

Introduction

Frequently, when consulting with clients to understand what effective leadership looks like for a role, they will exclaim that they 'need someone charismatic – someone who can inspire others and has a real vision for the future'. For them, CEO stands for 'Charismatic, Energetic and Outgoing'. Among many leaders who accord to this stereotype are Richard Branson, Phillip Green and Stuart Rose.

The difficulty with this assertion is that there are very many effective and more introverted CEOs who shun the limelight, but deliver consistently good results without the need for constant self promotion. Jim Collins' book, 'Good to Great,' emphasizes that the top tier of leaders (level 5) blend deep personal humility with an intense professional will. They act in a calm, unflustered but determined way modelling inspiring personal standards rather than inspiring charisma to empower and motivate others. Such leaders would include Marjorie Scardino, Bart Becht and Richard Cousins. You may not have heard of these CEOs of global companies. And that is the point. They fly beneath the celebrity radar yet churn out consistently excellent commercial results. So, why the focus on charisma and just what is it that charismatic leaders do?

Charismatic leadership

'The difference between God and Larry is that God does not believe that he is Larry,' commented one senior executive on Larry Ellison, who has been CEO of Oracle Corporation, a major software organisation, since he founded the company in 1977. Ellison's story is one of business success, fortitude and resilience in the face of much adversity.

Most people who know Larry Ellison would describe him as charismatic, and the notion of charismatic leadership has received much research attention of late. Charismatic leaders offer grand visions, innovative solutions to seemingly intransigent problems and promote radical (rather than incremental) change. They frequently emerge during times of crisis. They differ from other leaders due to their ability to engage their followers in motivational and emotional commitment to their vision and mission.

Narcissism

Any study of charismatic leadership is inextricably linked with the psychological concept of narcissism. Narcissism, as defined in this article, is a normal personality dimension that involves feelings of superiority over others, self love, and a strong drive for power and glory. Former US President Bill Clinton showed a number of significant narcissistic traits. He was supremely self confident, very smart and skilled at developing networks and coalitions. He took over a troubled economy and a significant national deficit that, by the end of his two terms, had become a surplus. He had high expectations of his team and many now serve as governors or members of congress. However, he lied to Congress, the American people, and became the first President to be impeached since Andrew Johnson. This, therefore, is the dichotomy to narcissism. There is both a bright and a dark side.

On the bright side, productive narcissists enjoy a great vision, paint in broad brush strokes and have expansive thoughts and ideas (by and large they tend not to be great analysers or focus on detail). Such visions are frequently bold and this is key to ensuring that the vision is inspirational in a way that excites their followers and seals their emotional commitment. Their visions are frequently optimistic, in some way different than the norm, and challenging. Narcissists will be more focused than most in the relentless way that they pursue their goals. This is in keeping with their grandiose self image. Those leaders who cannot espouse a bold vision and generally lack self confidence are unlikely to be seen as charismatic.

On the dark side, however, they tend not to listen too well. Most likely they will be keen to give the illusion of listening while preparing their next verbal intervention. They do not enjoy criticism from any quarter and will keep their distance from others as a form of self defence. This means that they do not have to open up their feelings to others nor, more importantly, pay attention to the feelings and thoughts of others if these are negative or non confirmatory of their self image. Followers may often be more tolerant of the darker sides of narcissism when times are tough. This, in part, may explain the rise to power of dictators in the 1930's following the Great Depression. Followers were in a state of confusion and uncertainty and therefore much more receptive to this form of charismatic influence. This introduces the notion of a situational determinant to leadership.

Leadership as an exchange relationship

A key defining element of effective leadership is that all leaders are defined by the qualities that their followers attribute to them and, as such, this is much more about a social relationship than a set of particular personality characteristics. This works within the context of an exchange relationship and may take two forms.

The first is termed socialised charisma. This is where the leader is focused on the needs of the followers and invests particular time to both develop and empower others. Their followers find direction less from

identification with the leader but more from the leader's message or vision. Visionary communication is the medium that creates high levels of trust, confidence and emotional engagement. The followers identify more with the social group than the leader per se. They manage the leader's influence, show less dependency on the leader and are therefore less open to manipulation by the leader.

The next is termed personalised charisma. The leader is much more focused on the self and, as such, more self serving and self aggrandising in nature. The personalised vision focuses on self interest, prioritises financial results and performance (over other measures) and is fixated on authority and dominance of others. Therefore, leaders who project a personalised vision impair their ability to engage their followers' trust and confidence. The followers focus exclusively on the persona and needs of the leader leading to follower dependency. This notion of dependency is important. The negative aspects of personalised charisma flourish where the followers sub-consciously view their relationship with the leader in parent/child terms. This occurs where the child seeks approval from the parent (the leader) and thus frames the relationship in attachment terms reminiscent of early behavioural interactions between mother and child. In this way, the narcissistic leader will have the most effect on those followers who have a strong desire for dependency. Many narcissistic leaders (e.g. Mao Zedong and Saddam Hussein) were surrounded by sycophantic followers who bolstered their grandiose self image and acted as a buffer against feelings of inferiority.

Continuing our earlier analogy, Bill Clinton demonstrates both ends of this charisma continuum. When he was working effectively as President of the United States, he was demonstrating socialised charisma and, as such, was inspirational and empathetic. When he tripped up he was demonstrating personalised charismatic traits, such as egotistical behaviour, entitlement, deceitfulness and manipulation.

Summary

So, how do we square the circle? What is the nature of the relationship between narcissism and charisma?

One theory posits that the role of the charismatic leader is liable to be exaggerated as narcissist behaviours act mostly as a catalyst to the attainment of leadership positions. In other words, they facilitate both the development and trajectory of leadership but are less helpful in sustaining that leadership position once attained. We all need to possess some elements of narcissistic behaviour in order to function effectively as self confident human beings. There are many effective leaders who show only limited narcissistic tendencies. It is those who are working at the extremes who give narcissism its negative reputation.

A further explanation suggests that it is only the personalised charisma that is truly narcissistic and that those showing socialised charisma are acting out the very tenets of good transformational leadership. A key determinant in this is the quality and nature of the vision and, in this context, it is likely that socialised and bold visions work best. It does not matter whether the leader is introverted or extroverted. It is the nature of the relationship to the followers that predicts success. Introverts (e.g. Gandhi and Abraham Lincoln) are just as likely to be effective as their more extrovert counterparts (e.g. Lula da Silva or Boris Yeltsin).

From this we can make the judgement that the determinants of leader behaviour are complex and are, in part, the interaction of the leader's personality, the situation in which the leader aspires to lead, and the behavioural preferences of both leader and followers.

It is important to state that effective leadership is not sufficient on its own in order to produce extraordinary performance. Lee Iacocca did not achieve a turnaround at Chrysler without handpicking some high performing executives to tackle the daunting task ahead. Indeed, it is often the case that successful turnarounds previously attributed to charismatic CEOs rely on teams for visionary transformation. There is a danger that the role of the leader (charismatic or not) is liable to be exaggerated and the relevance of teams in helping to both create the vision and sustain and deliver the change should not be underestimated.

Finally, you are conducting a final interview for a senior role in your organisation. The candidate has impressed with charm, social presence, vision and energy. What might be the tell tale signs of an unproductive narcissist?

Ten Top Tips for Spotting Unproductive Narcissistic Behaviours:

1. Locus of control - claiming sole credit for positive outcomes and successes and shifting the blame for unfavourable outcomes onto external events or other colleagues
2. Self-centred - constant referencing to 'I' rather than 'We'
3. Flighty, superficial and over-elaborate in their answers – hard to tie down to specific detail
4. Entitlement – a feeling that normal rules of behaviour do not apply and that one is entitled unreservedly to rewards, recognition and positions of power
5. Denial - protecting the ego through denying facts or data on one self - likely to fight back aggressively with counter denials
6. Self aggrandising behaviour – public statements of fantasy about one's own achievements, power and control
7. Hypersensitivity – reacting defensively to any form of criticism; showing knee-jerk reactions to protect self esteem
8. Lack of empathy - narcissists crave empathy from others but are not noted for being especially empathetic themselves
9. On transmit not on receive - beware of the candidate who fills the interview with self aggrandising comments but does not take time to either listen to the questions or asks questions themselves, that may involve listening and thus deflects attention away from self
10. 'Only the paranoid survive' - firms led by narcissists are identifiable by an intensely competitive internal culture; sometimes seeing enemies where they don't exist.

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www.humanasset.co.uk

mike.rugg-gunn@humanasset.co.uk