

Charisma and PR Risks

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What do the following figures have in common -- Mahatma Gandhi, Adolf Hitler, Pope John Paul II, George Washington and Rev. Jim Jones who persuaded 914 followers to commit suicide with cyanide-laced Kool-Aid? Answer: They were all charismatic personalities.

Much has been written about charisma, but no one appears to understand precisely how one person is charismatic and another isn't. Yet, persons with charismatic qualities have appeared in all walks of life from politicians to religious leaders to businesspersons and self-proclaimed prophets. From a PR perspective, charismatic personalities should be easy to represent. People flock to them, but on the other hand, charismatics are also dangerous because those captured by charisma often don't question a charismatic's message. However, it is the message, and consequent action, that count in the end and not the person.

Describing Charisma

It is difficult to describe charisma although many try. It is a quality one knows when one sees it. Here is a summary of descriptions and characteristics from the literature. Sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) introduced the modern discussion of charisma when he described it as one of three forms of authority. The other two were feudal and legal, also known as bureaucratic. Weber defined charisma as a quality of personality that sets one apart from others and gives that person exceptional powers. Charismatic persons have an ability to inspire, influence and lead. They project confidence, credibility, power and focus that moves others to share the charismatic's ideals and views. A charismatic's words are often ringing, inspirational and appealing to higher goals:

- That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. Gettysburg Address. Abraham Lincoln.
- I cannot teach you violence, as I do not myself believe in it. I can only teach you not to bow your heads before any one even at the cost of your life. Mahatma Ghandi.
- We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire...Give us the tools and we will finish the job. Sir Winston Churchill. BBC Radio Broadcast, Feb. 9, 1941.

- **Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can't ride you unless your back is bent. Martin Luther King**

Some say one is born with charisma. Others say it can be taught. There are those who say charisma is a set of personality traits. No one knows for sure. Experiments have shown that performers can achieve charisma with audiences. They do this through feeling an emotion strongly and evoking it in others. This is achieved through posture, a focus on individuals, enthusiasm, a compelling message and clear and forceful speech patterns that are imagistic and paced. Actors use nonverbal cues, such as extended eye contact and animated facial expressions. Charismatics can demonstrate synchrony by unconsciously adjusting posture and speech rate to another.

Charismatics manage impressions and build images of themselves as competent and credible. They frame arguments and explanations of reality in ways that people accept these views. They appeal to audience values, emphasize the importance and power of their messages and degrade opponents. They can script their presentations and dialog, direct and rehearse performances and stage presentations to achieve maximum impact, as dictators often have done. Hitler is known to have practiced his speeches while facing a mirror. Communist party pageants that still survive in North Korea were carefully designed to demonstrate party power. Charismatics can be concerned about impressions they give on a day-to-day basis and can work to hide scandal. The ultimate key to charisma, however, is the audience that must accept that another has it and be willing to suspend distrust and even rational consideration. The charismatic person may be attractive only to a select or self-selected group out of the mainstream. No one is charismatic for everyone. There are always those who resist them.

Charismatic leaders set overarching goals, expect much from followers and show confidence in their followers ability to rise to the level of expectation. They are a form of bonding agent who allow people to join a group and forget themselves. However, they may not be good managers. In fact, there is evidence many are not. Because they demand much in terms of emotional and psychological investment from followers, eventually their followers' commitment wears out. Continuing revolution is a poor solution for stable society. Eventually, stable systems must be created as China learned bitterly from the Cultural Revolution launched by the aging Mao tse Tung. Charisma breaks individuals out of routine but humans habitually develop patterns. Weber stated that charismatic authority eventually dissolves or moves either toward traditional authority or bureaucracy.

Charisma is not bound by morals or ethics. It can be a force for good or evil. An ability to mobilize others stands apart from one's goals. That is why some of history's more charismatic leaders are also symbols of human destructiveness.

The PR Risks of Charisma

A PR practitioner should examine several aspects of a charismatic person before making a decision to represent that individual. One is the person's personal life insofar as what the person does affects relationships to others. Rev. Jim Jones was known among followers to be out of personal control long before he incited them to suicide. On the other hand, President John F. Kennedy, if one is to believe certain historians, was one whose personal dissolution did not appear to hamper his political decisions, nor did he propose actions that harmed society. A charismatic, in other words, can mix "clay feet" with noble aspirations, but when clay begins to intrude into the message, there is imminent danger. Private behavior may be an indicator of how a person will act later on.

It is the charismatic's message and the message's implications that PR practitioners should examine most closely. What seems on the surface to be credible and compelling can have disastrous consequences. The inhumane message of an Osama Bin Laden is what makes him personally dangerous, although he may be an ascetic individual. The populist messages of Hugo Chavez of Argentina, of Fidel Castro in Cuba and of the Perons in Argentina all led to dictatorships. While few practitioners will work with political figures, the same distortion of messages occurs in corporations, associations and other organizations. It is too easy to take surface meaning and to forget subtext and consequence. I can recall visiting a small firm where the founder possessed a fierce vision about the potential of a technology, and he had collected a group of engineers about him who shared his vision. When I asked him a question that evinced the tiniest amount of skepticism, the founder erupted and dispatched me verbally in the middle of a meeting with others. Later, his EVP asked me why I wasn't a believer. I told the fellow that I had no opinion about the technology, but major companies had bet a billion dollars on a competing process, which would be hard to overcome. I said the company's message would have to be so compelling that the market would have to change its course. Later, I fought against representing the company because of my distrust of the founder's arrogance. Today, years later, the company is still a small developmental firm that has made no commercial impact.

The charismatic person may not, and in fact, is most likely not amenable to advice. Charismatic figures create their own PR in their own ways. Some of these ways may not be ethical or transparent. The burning of the Reichstag provided the force for the Nazis to take over Germany. Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, was the seminal publicity event in the eventual round-up and gassing of Jews. While these may be extreme cases, there are abundant dirty tricks that one can point to in political campaigns, for example, where the end justifies the means. PR practitioners must be alert to the methods that charismatic figures use to get their messages out. Anything that smacks of dishonesty or lack of transparency is a danger signal not to be ignored.

Another aspect of the charismatic is the individual's ability and susceptibility to criticism. A charismatic person may be immune to objections that might prevent the person from going off track. There are "Teflon" candidates, such as Ronald Reagan, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt and George Washington, who stand above and apart from critics, and this not always good. Look at what critics are saying. Are they credible? Are their messages better aligned with reality or ethics or human rights? Pakistani lawyers and the Pakistani Supreme Court have stood publicly against Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf who imposed emergency rule in Pakistan to stay in office. Musharraf at the time of writing showed no signs of backing off from his dictatorial control, but public sentiment was running against him. One can spend too much time and psychic energy listening to critics, but on the other hand, one shouldn't ignore them completely or crush them as dissenters. The PR practitioner should stand midway between the charismatic's vision and the world outside of it. If there is a general chorus of disapproval, it is hard to say nothing is there.

Handling the charismatic person

PR practitioners take a hardheaded view of charisma. This is difficult, but because it is so easy to get sucked in, it is necessary. Before serving a charismatic person, ask if this person can run an organization off the rails with his or her infectious enthusiasm and leadership. Is pursuit of a goal grounded in fact and realities of the marketplace? Is the person flexible when the vision requires change? Is the person building an organization that can deliver performance with vision?

Decide carefully and thoughtfully. Don't get swept into a charismatic's urgency. It is better not serve such an individual than to serve the wrong one. I had personal experience with making such an ill choice at the beginning of the internet boom. There was a company that briefly led the marketplace for the development of web sites. It was caught up in a vision of going public and making everyone rich. I was asked to take over as general manager of the PR function. I did and learned quickly that the company was a money-loser and its management abysmal. I knew quickly it would never go public, but I thought I would have an opportunity to build a PR arm. I was a fool. Management destroyed the PR division in its effort to appease investment bankers and ultimately handed the tattered remnants off to another PR agency. The company not only never went public, it went out of existence, a victim of greed. That kind of perverse charisma was prevalent in the 1990s.

When PR practitioners choose to serve charismatic persons, they shouldn't lose their footing while doing so. It is obvious that this is difficult to do because the charismatic person is sensitive to the smallest signs of "disloyalty," and the PR practitioner serves as a spokesperson for the individual. But, the PR practitioner should understand that his or her reputation is bound to that of the charismatic

and should the charismatic derail, the practitioner will as well. It is dangerous to give one's all to a person and message without thinking about the consequences. A PR practitioner should know when to resign and leave. Sooner or later, an objective person should know whether the individual or message or reality makes a quest untenable. If or when that happens, a practitioner should part ways carefully to avoid dissension and retribution. A charismatic person may be upset that a key member of the team has left and seek vengeance.

A final step in departing from a charismatic is knowing when to oppose such a person publicly. This is a relatively rare and hard decision to make, especially if one is dealing with a "Teflon" personality. Anything one says is likely to bounce off the person and result in disparagement of the practitioner. However, there may come a time when a charismatic's actions are dangerous to others and to an organization. Speaking out requires an overwhelming burden of evidence and not just one's opinion. Evidence should be able to stand up in court because it is likely the practitioner will spend time there.

Summary

In many ways, the charismatic person is the easiest person to represent because he or she draws others magnetically. On the other hand, this quality is also the most dangerous because those drawn magnetically often do not think about the person or message. They go along blindly with what a charismatic has to say. If the charismatic is respectful of humans and their rights and ethical, the message can advance society and achieve good. One should be honored to serve such a person. On the other hand, if the message is intolerant, the damage to others can be large and fatal, as we learned from World War II. Charisma is a strange and compelling quality that few PR practitioners see, but it is not one to be ignored.

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