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# Secrets of the Charismatic Leader

Here's how to develop this crucial ingredient in your organization's leaders.

BY DAVID E. MASON

**C**harismatic leaders are plentiful and effective in the nonprofit sector. A study of 142 successful nonprofits in 11 states shows that 88% of these organizations' founders are perceived as being charismatic leaders.<sup>1</sup>

The nonprofit's need for donations makes charisma essential. Charismatics elicit energy in the form of time, talent, and money. They heighten motivation. And they infuse and mold values.

The voluntary sector needs these powerful personalities, especially when an organization is just starting, when it needs revitalization, or when it faces distress, change, or rapid growth. Faith in a charismatic leader's vision generates tremendous energy that becomes available for change.

## Four Essential Steps in Charismatic Leadership

Writers have used the term *charismatic* for two millennia to denote qualities considered so mysterious that they must be gifts from God. The charismatic's power is not a total mystery, however. Charismatics do four things that, together, lead to effective leadership:

**1. Formulate a vision.** Having a vision means conceptualizing a future that others can see in their mind's eye. As the charismatic leader Napoleon noted, "Imagination rules the world." Charismatics have the imagination to see beyond current realities, to picture the desired future as if it already exists. An ideal vision has the following characteristics:

- It is a **clear overall strategy**.
- It is **involving, relevant, and memorable**.
- It is linked to **people's needs**.
- It is **meaningful** beyond work.
- People see it as **a challenge** to move toward something better than the present situation.

**2. Articulate the vision.** How can visionaries help others share their vision? The Points of Light Foundation found that the answer is twofold. First, leaders need to frame the vision in terms of a problem the organization is facing. Next, they must make sure the vision is widely discussed and understood throughout the organization. When leaders do those two things, people feel as if they've freely chosen the vision. The result is a level of performance far beyond expectations.

**3. Build and maintain trust.** Nonprofit undertakings require sustained effort. People's trust in their leader gives them the energy needed to forge on. This trust is based on their perception of the charismatic leader as a unique individual. That sense of uniqueness, or style, may involve a whole gamut of human qualities, including, as Daniel McGregor notes, "clarity of mind and expression, sustained enthusiasm, sympathy, courage, wisdom, originality, humor, sensitivity, and cultural refinement."<sup>2</sup>

In studies that compared charismatic to noncharismatic leaders, Jay Alden Conger found charismatics to be more powerful speakers, thus generating great trust.<sup>3</sup> Warren Bennis, too, writes of "leading from voice," in which trust is the underlying element.<sup>4</sup> Leading from voice is necessary whenever the leader deals with volunteers. Bennis lists four characteristics of leaders who generate and sustain trust:

- **Constancy.** They stay the course.
- **Congruity.** There is no gap between the theories they espouse and the life they lead.
- **Reliability.** They're there when it counts; they support their co-workers in the moments that matter.
- **Integrity.** They honor their commitments and promises.

**4. Symbolize.** Evangelist Jimmy Swaggart's fall had nothing to do with his singing, speaking, or managing skills. It had everything to do with his behavior contradicting the values he espoused.

Effective leaders embody their organization's values. The leader becomes the ego-ideal, the model for followers, who internalize the beliefs that the leader symbolizes.

## Four Ways to Cultivate Charisma

**1. Help your organization's leader focus on the four essential steps** described above. Leaders who do these four things—formulate a vision, articulate the vision, build trust, and symbolize the organization's values—create the aura of charisma.

**2. Provide the leader with training in psychological approaches** such as the neurolinguistic strategies identified by John Grinder and Richard Bandler. For example, *mirroring* builds rapport as you match your posture, movements, voice tone, tempo, and breathing with that of the person with whom you're communicating. Applied with skill, mirroring builds instant rapport, breaking down barriers and facilitating cooperation.

**3. Educate the leader in communication methods** that develop charisma. For instance, some experts in nonverbal

communication believe that people perceived as charismatic are simply more animated than others. Therefore, a leader might simulate or create charisma by exaggerating head and body movements, touching others more, smiling more often, and talking faster and with greater clarity. As another example, an experiment by Harvard University psychologist Ellen Langer shows that people can get their way by using the word "because" to preface even nonsensical reasons for compliance. She says it's a response of the human brain to obey after hearing this potent B-word.

**4. Teach speaking techniques.** Since spellbinding speaking ability can be equated with "presence," some believe that courses in public speaking can develop charisma. Dale Carnegie and the organization that bears his name have conducted a successful business on this foundation.

## Take Care of Your Charismatic Leader

While you can train a person to develop charisma, you can't ever pin down the elusive quality that gives charismatic leaders their awesome power. To take full advantage of that power, you must learn ways to compensate for the negative qualities of charismatic leaders.<sup>5</sup> Develop an understanding of their blind spots. Tolerate their weaknesses, and cherish their strengths. While it takes extra energy to keep charismatic leaders on track, it's worth the trouble, for such leaders are precious, and you're not likely to find one by placing an ad under "Savior Wanted." ■

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The organizations in this survey range from tiny volunteer groups to 10 United Ways. Their fields include health, education, welfare, trade associations, and foundations. Churches and other religious groups were omitted because it is assumed that they would tend more than other organizations to gravitate to the charismatic leader. In addition to the survey, this article draws on a list of 54 charismatic leaders and 54 noncharismatic leaders personally known or observed as well as on research in sociology, political science, business management, and the rare research dealing specifically with the voluntary sector.

<sup>2</sup> McGregor, Daniel, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

<sup>3</sup> Conger, Jay Alden, *The Charismatic Leader: Behind the Mystique of Exceptional Leadership*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>4</sup> Bennis, Warren, "Leading Through Inspiration," *Executive Excellence*, 1989, 6(3).

<sup>5</sup> The next article in this series will detail ways to counteract the flaws of a charismatic leader.

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