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How to Live with a Charismatic Leader

It's vital to understand and compensate for the pitfalls of charismatic leadership.

BY DAVID E. MASON



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Charismatic leaders hold such a salient position in nonprofit organizations, and so many charismatic leaders are cursed with negative attributes, that organizations need to be aware of these faults and know how to combat them. We can divide the weaknesses of charismatics into two types:

Type 1: Complementary Weaknesses

The first type of weakness requires a complement—someone in the organization who can balance the negative trait with its positive counterpart. Without such a complement, these defects may become intolerable. Be on the lookout for the following shortcomings, which are typical of charismatic personalities:

Substitution of excitement for substance. Leaders may spend much of their time inspiring those within the organization and advocating the cause to

the public. Such an emphasis, while effective, may result in ignoring important tasks. However, to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, all progress is the result of the efforts of unreasonable people. Thus, some “unreasonableness,” some task neglect, may be necessary for the organization to advance.

Idealized visions that fly away from reality. Charismatic leaders often have a heightened sense of destiny. The more idealistic they are, the more they're likely to lose touch with the real world of what their followers are struggling to accomplish. The greater their commitment to their vision, the less they may see the viability of other approaches. Charismatics are more likely than other leaders to pursue failing goals.

Unawareness of fundamentals. Charismatic leaders often wear intellectual blinders. They attain their objectives without learning the routine skills and disciplines of managerial leadership. Charismatics may lead organizations to

great heights, only to see their success jeopardized by their neglect of the orderly approach.

Disregard of people's needs. The world of charismatic leaders is often one of the ecstasy of ideas and adulation of disciples. They single-mindedly pursue their dreams, often living ascetic lifestyles. They can forget that others haven't reached their level of dedication. Thus, they may overlook people's everyday needs. If employees feel their needs are being dismissed, they may become frustrated and disillusioned.

Erratic, impetuous, and overstimulated behavior. Many charismatics live in a field of dreams. Their minds are bombarded with visions of creative change, opportunities, and hopes. Employees can't put these ideas into practice fast enough to keep pace. Charismatics can stir up more to do in a week than can be done in a year, and next week they may bring in another load. It's often the subordinates' job to sort

through this wealth of opportunity, and prioritize, selecting what is possible for optimum implementation.

Rejection of supporting systems. Some charismatic leaders take their organizations' systems and structures for granted. They act impulsively. Their hiring choices are based on personal impressions rather than the candidates' competence. There is no systematic development of staff. Input from the managerial tier is neither sought nor heeded. Indeed, employees are reluctant to disagree with one whose approval is so vital, and in this way, valuable ideas are stifled.

Denial of personal limitations. Human beings developed organizations because groups can accomplish some things better than individuals working alone. Charismatic leaders tend to forget this fact. They have the same hours in each day as their colleagues. They can talk to a finite number of people, occupy just one space at a time, keep up their interest only so long, and remember just so many facts. They are subject to fatigue and burnout. If the charismatic is the only hub of the wheel, the limitations of a single human being constrain an organization's capacity to function beyond those limits.

Arrogance. Arrogant people are so convinced they're right that they don't see alternatives. They begin to feel infallible. Charisma, with its sense of preeminence, authority, and power, creates arrogance and a great need for visibility. The most charismatic American military leader in memory was Douglas MacArthur. In the end, his charisma made him so arrogant that he brushed aside orders from President Truman, disregarded warnings of a counterattack in Korea, and blundered into disastrous—and totally unnecessary—defeat.

Alienation of valuable participants. Charismatics' magnetism attracts people. Their strong personalities are hard to ignore. However, the qualities that attract some may repel others. The people who are turned off by too strong a personality are often those most needed by the organization.

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Clay feet. Charismatic leaders enjoy high visibility as symbols of their cause. Adoring followers surround them. If the charismatic becomes tainted through sexual, financial, or other failures, all hell breaks loose, and an organizational crisis ensues.

Type 2: Corollary Weaknesses

The second type of weakness includes the "other side of the coin" of leader strengths. These corollary weaknesses are the consequences of charisma. They would not exist if the charisma did not exist, and eliminating them might require abandoning positive charismatic benefits. Be aware of the following corollary weaknesses in your charismatic leader:

Subjective emotional appeal. Charismatic leadership involves an emotional connection between leader and followers. Therefore, all aspects of the organization must put up with this emotionally based relationship. Organizations are well advised to compensate a right-brain approach with a left-brain supplement. Both heart and head are essential, especially if the organization seeks to recruit and retain a strong tier of capable people.

Control over adherents. Tremendous control is inherent in the relationship between charismatic leaders and their followers. Without constraints or norms to the contrary, the charismatic leader can exert this control with impunity, posing an awesome problem.

Success and growth limitations. Leadership can remain charismatic only as long as followers are few. As an organization grows, access to the leader diminishes in frequency and intimacy. To grow beyond the size at which everyone has intimate contact with the leader, an organization must develop substitutes for this face-to-face relationship. Often, these

substitutes are symbolic. For the good of the organization, the evolution of the process accompanying growth must move smoothly and harmoniously.

Too much power. Charismatic leaders are potent. They get things done. They generally get them done quicker and better than would be possible with more pedestrian means. Therefore, others in the organization can become addicted to their leader's empowerment. They can come to depend on the charismatic leader and fail to develop other ways to fulfill such tasks as recruiting, raising funds, innovating, and building morale. When the leader is the only initiator of action, the rest of the organization may become passive or reactive.

Failure to lead in the absence of a crisis. A crisis is perfect for those who love excitement, adventure, enemies to conquer, and flowing adrenaline. Crises are also great for unilateral action, because rules are relaxed in a crisis, and power is transferred from formal structures to the charismatic leader. But is a series of disrupting crises healthy for an organization? And what if there is no crisis? Might leaders precipitate periodic emergencies to renew their claim to savior status? That isn't as farfetched as it might seem. In response to a recent survey,¹ one leader confided that his fundraising strategy consisted of precipitating several financial emergencies a year.

Six Ways to Handle a Charismatic Leader

Having a powerful leader doesn't absolve the organization from its responsibility to develop checks and balances on the leader's power and blind spots. Here are six ways successful nonprofit organizations compensate for the weaknesses of their charismatic leaders:

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1. Create an Independent Board.

An organization led by a charismatic needs a strong board to act as a balance. This board must not be dependent on the organizational leader. Board members should have the experience, clout, and initiative to anticipate and supplement the leader's shortcomings. Their status should be equal to (or higher than) that of the leader. They must become true partners with the leader, grasping the organizational reins firmly while allowing the leader as much slack as possible.

2. Form a Management Team with Authority to Act.

Consider establishing a senior team of managers to handle day-to-day operations. This team should do the following:

- **Harness talent.** Encourage charismatics to surround themselves with people who are skilled at operational details and have strong connections to other areas of the organization.²
- **Manage the organization** if the leader lacks management skills. Build the structure required to fulfill the organizational purpose.
- **Design a successor plan.** The most traumatic event for many organizations is the loss of the charismatic leader with no successor at hand. Be sure to ask the right questions early enough: What kind of leader will we need? Where will we find this person? The successor may or may not exercise a charismatic style. The important thing is to find someone with good leadership skills. Offer training, testing, and incentives for potential successors, and be sure they have opportunities to practice their leadership talents and to learn about your organization from the inside out.³
- **Steer charismatic leaders** from disastrous courses and from attempts to stick with failed tactics.

Coordinate the leader's agenda with program priorities, and provide an objective viewpoint.

- **Have good personnel procedures in place** to meet employees' needs. People love to be inspired, but they live in a world of car payments, lawns to be mowed, and the need for days off and vacations. Be sure someone in the organization is available to respond to these needs.
- **Provide data to the board** about potentially negative trends set by the charismatic. Counsel the board on how to offset the harmful effects of such trends. Be available and capable of shouting, "Don't drink the Kool-Aid!"

3. Use Informal Counselors.

Another way to guide a charismatic leader is to create, off the organization chart, an inner circle of respected advisors. The leader can bounce ideas off these counselors, while they, in turn, keep the leader's feet on the ground.

4. Adopt Normative Controls.

Leaders, especially founders, play a major role in establishing and maintaining organizational culture and norms. Normative controls are of great value in harnessing a leader who moves off the accepted path and goes onto a tangent.

5. Exercise Dual Leadership.

An inside-outside leadership dyad is typical of many organizations. The charismatic leader represents the organization to the public, while a more routinized manager keeps the internal machinery running. In some cases, the charismatic may be the true subordinate, looking to the manager for direction.

6. Rely on Formal Policies.

Codes of ethics, mission statements, formal strategies, and policy manuals are

excellent tools for guiding charismatics when skillfully used by boards, managers, and advisors.

Are Charismatics Worth the Trouble?

After scanning the long list of negative qualities in this article, your impulse may be to avoid charismatics. Don't give in to that urge. Think of yourself as a talent scout whose ultimate success depends on your ability to identify, encourage, and support people with charismatic leadership potential. You have no reason to fear charismatics as long as you take steps to harness them.

Charismatics tend to act fast. Be prepared for this speed. Don't be caught off guard when the charismatic leader mounts a white horse and takes off in a cloud of dust, precipitating change on all sides. That's what charismatics are supposed to do. Enjoy the ride—and keep a tight hold on those reins. ■

Footnotes

¹ This survey of 142 successful nonprofits reveals that 88% of these organizations' founders were perceived as being charismatic leaders. For more details, see "Secrets of the Charismatic Leader," *Nonprofit World*, Vol 22, No. 4 (www.snpo.org).

² Conger, Jay Allen, *The Charismatic Leader: Behind the Mystique of Exceptional Leadership*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

³ See "Planning for Leadership Succession: Are You Ready?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (www.snpo.org).

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