

Charismatic leadership: Findings of an exploratory investigation of the techniques of influence

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify techniques used by charismatic leaders on a conscious and intentional basis to inspire their followers; specifically, those intentional actions, which were used to generate emotion within the target audience. This study provided a greater understanding and insight into the leader/follower relationship.

Impression management is also included in this study to provide greater insight into the mind set and actions taken by charismatic leaders to help project and communicate their vision to their followers.

Keywords: Charismatic, Leadership, Impression Management, Humor, Storytelling

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INTRODUCTION

The great playwright, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), once wrote, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” In theatre, actors rehearse their lines and actions so that when they are performed in front of their audience, the audience will become part of the play and lose themselves in the characters and scenes being presented.

In a similar fashion, charismatic leaders have the ability to speak and act in such a way that those following are inspired to move to action and share in the vision of the leader. Actors use costumes and makeup to make the role they are playing more obvious and real to their audience. Their speech patterns and dialogues are carefully scripted so the audience actually begins to believe the character is real, when done successfully. Do charismatic leaders do the same? Is there a cognizant effort made on behalf of the charismatic leader in regards to how they speak, to whom they speak and how they present themselves? Is the charisma within these leaders an innate characteristic that is of natural origin or is it a polished and practiced skill that is under constant refinement in order to maintain or increase its effectiveness?

Purpose of the Study

This study was driven by the desire to better understand the strategies and techniques used by the charismatic leader on the conscious and cognitive level. By gaining insight into the motivations behind their actions in regards to both their charismatic leadership styles as well as their impression management, researchers and scholars alike are now able to better understand the relationship between leader and follower. Berlew (1974) insisted, “traditional leadership research tells us little about what excites people in organizations and that it is largely to charismatic leadership that we much look for appreciation of the factors which generate excitement” (p. 16).

By studying the environment in which these leaders perform and how the external elements direct their actions, best practices and styles have been drawn from this knowledge and utilized to help leaders convey their vision and missions to those who follow them. A deeper understanding of the charismatic leader has shined light on his or her role in the leader/follower relationship. Previous approaches, being largely transactional in orientation, were deemed ineffective for the purpose of providing strategic vision throughout large-scale organizations (Conger, 1987). Increasingly, competitive global market conditions rendered traditional management models inadequate for dealing with new opportunities and threats (Pillai, 1998). New means of leading, which would gather support for radical change from every level of the organizational hierarchy, were seen as a precondition of survival (Behling, 1991). Bass (1985) further included charisma as a possible element in the transformational leadership style, and supports the need for further research into this field.

Are their styles and techniques as unique as they are? Is there a common approach that works in every environment? If these participants changed audiences, would they be just as effective? This study helped discover these answers and many others.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the histrionical techniques and impression management strategies favored by charismatic leaders? This question revealed the intentional speech patterns,

gestures, inflections and speaking styles used to gain a desired effect on the audience. Additional probing explored the use of humor, the importance or emphasis on personal appearance, or any other variable used by the research subjects to invoke emotion from their given audience. These variables, which are intentional, were compared with those variables, which are classified as innate or unintentional. The variables classified as innate or unintentional will be categorized as part of the participants' personality or natural ability.

Research Question 2: What are the conditions and environment under which they are most effective? This question explored the external elements, which contribute, to the successful conveyance of the leaders' message: lighting, temperature, room design, sound systems, props and attire, in regards to formal presentations. When the situation dictates, other environments were explored such as professional or work environments when compared to informal settings such as social engagements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Charismatic Leadership

Weber's charismatic leadership model was founded on two basic pillars (Weber, 1947). The first is that among followers there is a need, goal or aspiration, which is unfulfilled by the existing order. Second, their submission to the leader is on the basis that his or her possession of charisma will lead to the realization of their goals or aspirations (Weber, 1947). Shamir et al. (1993) recently advanced a theoretical explanation of an interpretive process, frame alignment (Snow et al., 1986), by which charismatic leaders motivate followers to embrace social change. Frame alignment (Snow et al., 1986) refers to the linkage of individual and leader interpretive orientations, such that some set of followers' interests, values and beliefs and the leader's activities, goals and ideology become congruent and complementary. The term "frame" denotes an interpretive scheme (Goffman, 1982) that enables individuals to locate, perceive and label occurrences within their life and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningfully, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective.

There are different theories available that pose varying views as to where charisma actually resides. For example, Howell and Shamir (2005) view charisma as residing in the relationship between leaders who exhibit certain charismatic traits and behaviors and those followers who have certain perceptions, emotions and attitudes toward the leader, the group led by the leader, and the vision advocated by the leader.

The sole mission and vision of the charismatic leader is driven by a self-ordained position and guided by a self-style according to Weber. More than a personality trait or a behavioral preference, the charismatic leader views his role as a fulfillment of his destiny. Furthermore, acknowledging this destiny and, by doing so, validating the authority which accompanies it, is the purpose of the follower (Gerth & Mills, 1976).

Plato believed that truth-seeking vision within a man of power is what made a true leader. He further believed that the characteristics associated with charisma were of divine origin and could not be earned or learned by any means. He believed that they truly were a gift from a higher power (Takala, 2005).

Characteristics that differentiate charismatic leaders from those which are not charismatic as seen by Robbins (1992) are:

self-confidence – complete confidence in their judgment and ability, a vision – idealized goal that proposes a future better than the status quo, strong convictions in that vision, willingness to take high risks and engage in self-sacrifice to achieve their vision, behavior out of the ordinary as well as drastic change taking instead of guardians of the status quo. (p. 151)

Prototypicality is out of the framework of charismatic leadership, because it corresponds to normative expectations, to what is anticipated. “Charisma is grounded on the appearance of the exception/exemplary quality of a leader” (Streyer, 1998, p. 811). This point illustrates the importance and the role that image and/or impression management plays in defining the charismatic leader.

Methodology

The framework for this study of the histrionics of charismatic leadership will be qualitative in nature. Qualitative findings are generally presented in everyday language and often incorporate participants’ own words to describe a psychological event, experience, or phenomenon (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This research project is the study of the dramaturgical or histrionics involved in charismatic leadership, meaning the theatrics or intentional techniques employed by charismatic leaders in order to captivate and reach their target audience on a more effective and personal level. This study will also include the insight into the impression management techniques used by charismatic leaders.

The research question under investigation is, “What are the histrionical techniques and impression management strategies favored by charismatic leaders?” The following is a list of detailed questions, which will be asked of the participants:

- When speaking to an audience, what tonalities have you found to be most effective?
- How would you describe your speaking patterns or techniques?
- Please describe what you would consider an ideal setting for your presentation: Room size, sound, lighting, etc.
- What techniques do you use to connect or establish a relationship with your audience?
- How important is it that the image you present on stage be consistent with the image in your daily life? What measures do you take to convey this?
- What are some of the mistakes you have made when presenting that you feel had a negative impact towards your presentations purpose?
- What are some of the techniques you have developed that appear to have the greatest impact on your audience as it relates to your presentation’s purpose?
- How do you measure the success of your presentation?

For the proposed study, a phenomenological study will be used. According to Hegel (1807), phenomenology is an approach to philosophy that begins with an exploration of phenomena (what presents itself to us in conscious experience) as a means to finally grasp the absolute, logical, ontological and metaphysical spirit that is behind phenomena. The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by in the participants of a particular situation.

Sampling Design

The sample for this study was selected purposefully. Patton (2003) defines purposeful sampling as selecting information rich subjects strategically and purposefully. He reports the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information rich environments, subjects or case studies. Information-rich samples are those from which the researcher can learn a great deal about the issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry.

The following criteria will be used for purposefully selecting the sample participants:

1. Each participant will be considered a charismatic leader, based on their current occupation. Their status as a charismatic leader would be considered common knowledge amongst their peers and followers.
2. Each participant will have a pre-established rapport with the researcher.
3. Due to geographical limitations, each participant will be in relatively close geographical proximity to the researcher.
4. Although each participant will be considered a charismatic leader, they will each currently be working in different professional fields, for diversity sake (business, political, religious, public speaking).

Participants

In line with the above-mentioned criteria, the following three candidates have been selected and have tentatively agreed to participate in this research project. The following is a brief description of the participants and their biographical information:

1. Participant one is a former Texas State Senator, a published author, entrepreneur and motivational speaker. This participant is a highly recognized attorney and political activist.
2. Participant two is a motivational speaker and author of 25 books, 9 of which have been on the best seller lists. This participant has been in the leadership training field for over 40 years.
3. Participant three holds a Doctorate of Ministry and is the Senior Pastor of a mid-sized church in North Dallas. This participant was selected based on his speaking style and perception of his congregational members.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative research methods are used to collect and analyze data that cannot be represented by numbers. The methods used in qualitative research are not new and have a long tradition in a variety of academic disciplines (Murphy *et al*, 1998). Creswell (2000) reports that the interview is the primary tool for gathering data in qualitative research. The primary data collection instrument for this study of histrionical and impression management techniques used by charismatic leaders will be the personal interview. The interview will be able to address “why” the participants use the techniques they do and “why” they believe they are effective.

Qualitative research often includes some form of transcription as a method of recording the data collected (Oliver, 2005). Despite its centrality in qualitative data collection, transcription practices remain superficially examined. It is not uncommon for transcription to be presented as a behind-the-scenes aspect of data management rather than as an object of study in

its own right. Agar (1996, p.153) writes “Transcription is a chore.” Although there are more stimulating aspects of research, transcription is a pivotal aspect of qualitative inquiry. The production of useful observational data differs from ordinary, everyday observation (Patton, 1987). Not everything that is sensed in an interview situation is significant, and some significant observations are not immediately apparent, therefore, having an accurate transcription of the interview is absolutely pivotal. One of the drawbacks with data that is not easily reducible to numbers is the cumbersome nature of the material collected. One hour of recorded conversation may take three to five hours to transcribe and may result in many pages of text for analysis. Although in principle there is no limit on sample size in qualitative research, time and resource constraints make large samples impractical (Brown, 2001). Transcription practices can be thought of in terms of a continuum with two dominant modes; naturalism, in which every utterance is transcribed in as much detail as possible, and denaturalism, in which idiosyncratic elements of speech are removed. These two positions correspond to certain views about the representation of language. With a naturalized approach, language represents the real world. Therefore, the transcript reflects a verbatim depiction of speech (Schelgloff, 1997). Denaturalized transcripts, however, suggest that within speech are meanings and perceptions that construct our reality (Cameron, 2001).

Reliability and Validity

One concern in traditional research is with the reliability and validity of the chosen method. Reliability refers to the process of measuring the phenomenon that is being studied. Each time the study is conducted, the findings must be accurate from the standpoint of the researcher and all of those involved. Validity refers to the process of verification. The instrument that measures the phenomenon must, in fact, measure that very thing, which contributes to validation.

Qualitative researchers question if these two terms can even be applied to naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Naturalistic inquiry indicates that the researcher studies the subjects in their own environment and not in a controlled setting, such as a laboratory.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection; hence, two different studies with two different researchers could lead to two different outcomes simply because the instruments are not the same.

Creswell (2003) refers to “verification” as the eight-step process typically used by researchers to check the accuracy of their findings. As stated by Creswell (2003), the following eight procedures are frequently used to check for accuracy of data collection. They tend to be the easiest to implement in the research project.

1. Triangulation is collecting data from a variety of sources and using a variety of methods.
2. Member-checking is determining the accuracy of the qualitative findings through a final report that is returned to the participants to determine if the experiences summarized are accurate.
3. Rich, thick description is used to convey the findings. This can transport the reader to the setting and give the discussion a feeling of shared experiences and potential transferability to other settings.

4. Bias – opinions and viewpoints the researcher brings to the study should be stated and clarified at the beginning of the study so that his or her bias will not interfere in the findings
5. Negative or discrepant information should be presented and the working hypothesis should be revisited in light of negative information, which means that any information that is negative or discrepant should be further analyzed to gain an understanding of its meaning and why it is so.
6. Prolonged time should be spent in the field. The researcher should develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomena being studied and build trust and confidence with the participants.
7. Peer debriefing should be used to embrace the accuracy of the account or experience being studied.
8. An external auditor to review the entire project and provide an opinion is always helpful to increase reliability. (Creswell, 2003, pp. 196-197)

Creswell (2003) suggests that a researcher uses at least one of the above procedures to test the accuracy of the findings. The researcher in the project under study, *Charismatic Leadership: A Study from a Histrionical Perspective*, will use four of the validation procedures previously described. These are: prolonged time, clarification of researcher bias, member checks, and rich, thick description.

The researcher will detail the time he/she has spent in this studying and researching the phenomena in this study. The researcher will communicate this with the participants in order to build trust and confidence.

The researcher will clarify bias by recording in detail his/her experiences as a charismatic leader and his/her exposure and experiences with other charismatic leaders.

The researcher will utilize member checks by returning the completed document to participants to view and verify that the researcher has recorded their experiences correctly. Otherwise, incorrect inferences could be drawn and data recorded incorrectly.

Rich, thick descriptions will be used to enable the reader to share in the experience of the charismatic leaders. This is important so that findings can be conveyed and potentially applied to other experiences.

Results, Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify techniques used by charismatic leaders on a conscious and intentional basis to inspire their followers; specifically, those intentional actions, which are used to generate emotion within the target audience. This study also examined the environment in which these leaders believed were most effective in connecting with those who follow them. The entire study centered around one central research question: “What are the histrionical techniques and impression management strategies favored by charismatic leaders?”

_____The results from the interviews produced four reoccurring themes that offer significant insight into the techniques of influence of charismatic leaders. The four central themes were humor, storytelling, reading the audience, and working the audience. Each participant independently identified these four themes as being highly significant in establishing a connection to their audience and/or followers.

The word humor was mentioned very early in each of the interviews. Primarily, self-deprecating humor was used by each of the participants as a tool to show their vulnerabilities and increase their likability. Humor is also used to create a level playing field as one participant described. Humor helps people lower their guard and this allows them to be more open to the information the leader is trying to pass on to them. One participant stated that using humor reaches people on an emotional level. Humor is often associated with laughter and smiling. According to a study conducted by psychologist James Laird of Clark University, facial expressions can trigger moods by turning people to happier memories. Laird found that students remembered happier thoughts when they were smiling; conversely, grim stories were more easily remembered when they were frowning (Klien, 1989). Bachrach (1995) quoted Aristotle, who said, “No appeal to logic is ever as successful as an appeal to emotion (p.2).” Bachrach went on to say further that people trust those they have an emotional bond with. This ties directly back to the nature of this study in regards to how charismatic leaders establish a relationship with their followers/audience in order to move them to action.

Each of the participants shared that storytelling played a major role in their communication approach. Building upon the first central theme, humorous stories are used to illustrate key points and the more entertaining the story is, the more likely the audience or follower will be able to retain the information or instruction. Self-deprecating stories are also commonly used by each of the participants. The participants explained that often they will use stories that include members of the audience and this technique has shown to create a sense of connection between the leader and the audience. Cimino (2005) states that those who can tell a story well can empower, uplift and effectively change the lives of companies, organizations and communities. When to use humor and/or an illustrating story depends largely on the response from the audience. Each participant expressed the importance of “reading the audience”. By observing the audience, the leader can determine if it is timely to interject a humorous story, a dramatic pause, or change the cadence of their speech or their tonalities. Observing the audience members’ facial expressions, body posture and or body movement, the leaders can gauge their level of connection with the audience. Three participants specifically addressed the issue of interjecting humor after delivering minutes of serious material or information. This brings the audience’s focus back to the material being presented. It also allows for a physical release in the form of laughter. In his article, “Reading Your Audience”, Walinskas (2001), supports this approach by stating “well-placed and timed, tasteful, and relevant humor is something all presenters should have in their arsenals” (p,24). He further supports the use of some form of humor as a remedy to regain an audience’s attention.

“Working the room” is the term the participants used for directly interacting with the audience prior to a presentation. Shaking hands, learning names and connecting with members of the audience on a one-to-one basis was identified as being highly significant in establishing a connection with the audience. The participants stated that during this time, they can get a feel for the audience and what type of stories or humor would work best with this particular audience. Adubato (2001) supports this approach by adding that the key to success in working a room is to ask about the other person, and then really listen to the answer. In this research project, this is particularly relevant with regards to understanding the audience and/or followers prior to speaking with them in order to customize the message so it is perceived as personal.

This research study also focused on impression management, which is the packaging of information in order to lead target audiences to desired conclusions (Schlenker, 2004). Each of the participants expressed that they felt it was very important to appear to be physically fit and to

dress appropriately. It was agreed that the clothing being worn should not be distracting. Along the same theme of distraction, they expressed that if a leader's appearance is distracting, it could lessen the impact of their particular message. Hollingsworth (1935) reinforced this theme by stating "It is a mistake to suppose that the impressiveness of a speaker comes solely from his speech. His personal appearance and manner, the mode in which his ideas are presented, the clearness and emphasis or force of his discourse, and the general setting and incidental associations of the occasion, all play their role" (p.63).

Another common theme with regards to this topic was being genuine. By genuine, the participants expressed the importance of being consistent, both when in a leadership role and any other setting. All the participants mentioned the importance of not being hypocritical. Acting one way in front of a group and acting in a contradictory manner elsewhere is perceived as dishonest and does not build trust. This was linked back to the use of self-deprecating humor and presenting themselves as leaders, but still not perfect; which helps the followers identify with them on a more personal level.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although the sample size of this particular research study could be seen as a significant limitation, it did produce four consistent themes. However, the demographic make up of the sample size consisted only of Caucasian males between the ages of 40 and 60. To build upon this research, diversifying the participant demographic to include women and men from various ethnic backgrounds could produce different findings. In addition, each of the four central themes discovered in this study could be explored individually on a much deeper level. This study focused solely on charismatic leaders, which creates the opportunity to conduct similar research on non-charismatic leaders and managers as well.

The research question on which this entire project has focused is "What are the histrionical techniques of influence and impression management strategies favored by charismatic leaders?" The primary findings of this research project showed four predominant techniques, which have been identified as: using humor, telling stories, reading an audience and working the room. In regards to impression management, the importance of not only appearing to be the same person, both on and off stage, but actually being the same person was strongly implied. The importance of physical appearance was presented mentioned by each participant. The emphasis was not put on physical attractiveness, but rather avoiding anything that could be perceived as a physical distraction.

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