



## Charismatic Leadership and Society

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### Abstract

*Charismatic leadership is one of the most influential types of leadership in society, establishing an unshakable bond between the charismatic leader and his followers, who will follow and go where he directs without question, in pursuit of a common desired goal. However, despite the obvious importance of the charismatic leadership topic, there has not been much attention paid to it. This paper shows how the charismatic leader has the power to convince individuals to sacrifice their personal gain, even their lives, for the common goal and commit themselves to an omniscient god-like leader who knows the best for them and for society. To address this issue, the definitions and characteristics of charismatic leaders are reviewed. Identifying the underlying reasons for the followers' unique trust in charismatic leaders will lead us to an understanding of how such a bonding relationship between followers and leader can result in the elevation of society or its destruction.*

**Keywords:** Charismatic, Influential factors, followers, leaders, Max Weber, power, destructive, constructive.

### Introduction

Leadership is an interwoven segment in every part of society, including government, business, organization labor, the professions, minority communities, universities, social agencies, and others. It is found at various levels within the social function, from the highest in social status to the school headmaster, business manager or shop administrator<sup>1</sup>. Among leadership theories, charismatic leadership has the most influential power in societies. It has been shown that charismatic leadership has appeared in all places, all the time. The prophet, as an example, is a kind of leadership that has emerged in the past. In addition to that is the elected war lord, the gang leader and condottiere<sup>2</sup>.

The original charismatic leadership in organization was introduced by German sociologist Max Weber who applied the term 'charismatic' to the leaders in the secular world. Weber, as a sociologist had an outstanding knowledge of history and culture. He described three forms of authority: bureaucratic, traditional, and charismatic. Bureaucratic authority according to Weber is akin to today's society, traditional is linked to earlier and feudal societies, while charismatic implies authority. Weber, in his writings demonstrates how human beings are dominated by other human beings, and views this as an eternal feature of life. The only alternative for bureaucracy is a charismatic form of leadership which is more dynamic. Although Weber affirms the disadvantages of capitalism by calling it cold, calculating culture and such, he justifies it since other alternatives are even much less satisfactory or "worse bureaucratic nightmares"<sup>4</sup>.

Weber's category of three types of authority in society, which are the traditional, the rational-legal, and the charismatic, pointed to charismatic leadership as a prominent term to demonstrate a form of authority which is understood through perception of an extraordinary individual<sup>5</sup>. According to Nadler and Tushman, this extraordinary character, who has special qualities rules in every organization by mobilizing and sustaining the activities. His personal performance and personal characteristics create a combination, which is a requirement for charismatic leaders<sup>6</sup>. Charismatic or transformational leadership prioritizes the factors that motivate and help to develop the bond between leaders and their followers<sup>7</sup>.

Reviewing history shows that it is only charismatic leaders who are behind the great wars, revolutions, or acts of peace. As described by Wren, the words 'leader' and 'leadership' carry historical implications. Since it is interpreted differently according to differences in geography, for instance, in America, it is positive while in Germany the word 'Führer' is the remembrance of a leader who behaved badly. Wars, revolutions, and movements are events that shape the destiny of society and eventually the individuals' lives and even their next generations<sup>8</sup>. In Kellerman's view, scholars should remind us that leadership is not some spiritual notion and that leaders are no different from other people, and like other people they are as likely to be responsible, dishonest, coward or brave, compassionate, covetous or merciful. The assumption by some people that all leaders are good implies a decision to close our eyes to the reality of human nature, and effectively hinders the development of efficient leadership<sup>9</sup>. Charismatic leaders are sometimes constructive, and develop the country to their ideals like Martin Luther King, who was able to control the course of

the civil rights movement in America on his own, employing his power of oratory<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand; under no circumstances should we forget the negative role of destructive leaders. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser, explain in this regard that charismatic leaders are not always destructive. An examination of past U.S. presidents shows that charismatic leaders were far more effective than those who were non-charismatic, although charismatic ones were not flawless. In any case, it is emphasized that destructive leaders are charismatic typically<sup>11</sup>. There is a long list of them in government, business, and religious cults. Hitler and Stalin are two prominent examples of destructive leaders who are generally considered charismatic. This paper reviews and identifies the definitions provided by various scholars on charismatic leadership. The goal is to understand the meaning of charisma, and shed light on the strategies that attract followers to charismatic leaders' policies without question. The sections that follow address these issues.

### What is charisma?

Regardless of the various definitions given for charisma, the meaning of charisma is still debatable. In this regard, Shils states that the concept of charisma in many fields such as sociology, politics and organization-related is still being defined<sup>12</sup>. Lindholm in *Charisma* reveals that the word 'charisma' was first introduced to sociology by Weber, who was the first to scrutinize the internal meanings of the charismatic character, as well as the first to point out the implication of the word charisma to the relationship between a great man and his followers. And finally, it was Weber who positioned this word in the social context<sup>13</sup>. Potts in the *History of Charisma* explains the origin of the word. It only appeared in the first century AD within the Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures. The root of the word charisma, as a late Greek word can be traced back to several centuries ago, and is related to the 'charis' in Greek meaning spiritual gifts. The meaning and usage in different cultures ultimately combined to form the term 'charisma' in the mid-first century by Paul. The word developed later in various adjustments to be used in different contexts in the twentieth century<sup>14</sup>. It is explained that the term charisma indicates an exceptional kind of power, and refers to certain characteristics of individuals which enable them to act like supernatural beings. These people are considered as having divine or exemplary origins. We can refer to Ghandi, a pacifist-socio-political leader, and Hitler who was a dictator as charismatic leaders<sup>3</sup>.

Weber defines the literal meaning of charisma as a 'gift of grace', which is characterized by self-appointed leaders who are followed by those who believe in them as extraordinary individuals. For instance, we could refer to the founders of world religions, prophets, military and political heroes as the archetypes of the charismatic leader<sup>2</sup>. These leaders have god-like power in the eyes of people and their charms deeply affect the followers so that they obey without question. Considering the strong bond between such leaders and their followers,

Weber considers the importance of society and environment in which these leaders live. According to Weber, charisma lacks stability, and could change to tradition or rational, or a marriage of both<sup>15</sup>. It should be noted that the meaning of charisma differs from Weber's definition. Weber relates the meaning of charisma to political and religious leaders, while in contemporary culture it indicates a type of special individual, such as entertainers and celebrities. The present definition of charisma is usually in reference to specific distinctive qualities that distinguish some individuals from others while attracting others to them<sup>14</sup>. Shils clarifies that the apparent charismatic situation is rooted in what is deemed to be his relationship with some very primary features of man's existence and the universe. When this centrality is complemented with intensity there can be very exceptional results<sup>12</sup>. Bullen states that 'charisma' is a quality of a person that is so extraordinary and can lead others to believe that he has powers or abilities that are supernatural, superhuman or at least exceedingly rare; or that he is sent by god; or that he is worthy of emulation; or, that as a result of these beliefs, he is accepted as their 'leader'<sup>16</sup>.

Lindholm states that charisma in its primary form is not linked fixedly to authority; those involved are not subscribe to orderly progress, dislike economic exchange and its benefits, and their ambition is to dismantle structures, and destroy all sense of tradition. This type of charisma, which happens in a time of social crisis, is both revolutionary and creative and attempts to change the future. People do not follow custom and law in charismatic movements; instead they yield to the heroic character whose desires are neither logically based nor belong to "ascribed hierarchy"; yet they have personal power to command, which is a charismatic characteristic<sup>13</sup>. Weber explains charisma as an unusual characteristic of an individual, and it does not matter if this feature is true, alleged, or presumed. Thus, charismatic authority is related to control over man, either mainly external or internal, which the governed accept because they have faith in the extraordinary quality of that individual<sup>2</sup>. Bryman explains charisma as social relationships in three ways: firstly, the importance of followers accepting and supporting charisma. Secondly, leader and followers mutually finding greater purpose in charisma, and thirdly, the charismatic relationship are being opposed to the notion that charisma is purely attribution<sup>17</sup>. Greenfeld explains that, original charisma is the capability to exude a high level of excitement, something that can attract attention and create a desire to imitate in others.

Reviewing the various definitions of charisma we can conclude that charisma is a combination of magnificent power with extraordinary understanding of opportunities to establish the presence and extreme abilities to influence. In other words, charismatic leadership is situations whereby a leader exerts great influence over his/her followers through his/her exemplary traits, behaviors and abilities. Based on what has been defined as the notion of charisma, what should a charismatic leader do

to achieve his / her goal? The sections that follow answer this question.

### **The Characteristics of Charismatic Leaders and their Strategies**

Charismatic leadership can be categorized in two different parts, which are socialized and personalized. The socialized parties based on “(i) egalitarian behavior (ii) serves collective interest, and is not driven by the self interest of the leader, and (iii) develops and empowers others.” The tendency of socialized leaders is to be altruistic and to establish their authority through legitimate channels<sup>19</sup>. On the other hand, personalized charismatic leadership basically feeds the need for personal control and absolute authority over others, personalized charismatic leadership is egoistic and self-aggrandizing, and meets the leader’s selfish needs at the expense of others. Such leaders need to control others, often using threats which could also be aggravated by physical confinement and punishment. They ignore the institutional procedures for establishment as well as “rights and feelings of others”. They are impulsively aggressive, narcissistic, and impetuous<sup>20,19</sup>.

Van Seters and Field’s study assert that charismatic leadership “must be visionary; it must transform those who see the vision, and give them a new and stronger sense of purpose and meaning”<sup>21</sup>. A charismatic leader is characterized as a dedicated individual, illuminated with heroic personality<sup>22</sup>. It is explained that Weber’s opinion of the charismatic leader is in line with the notion of genius as applied since the Renaissance to leaders who are artistic and intellectual<sup>2</sup>. Weber defines charismatic leadership in the following way: An original charismatic situation is simple and direct and allows interaction. To challenge the predictability of daily existence of organizations with personalized and automatic essence of charismatic leadership, may lead individuals to realize the legacy of liberalism that is invariably fraught with contradictions. “mass versus personality, the ‘routine’ versus the ‘creative’ entrepreneur, the conventions of ordinary people versus the inner freedom of pioneering and exceptional man, institutional rules versus the spontaneous individual, the drudgery and boredom of ordinary existence versus the imaginative flight of the genius”<sup>2</sup>.

Charismatic leaders highly demand to influence followers to act in accordance with their wish or command to accomplish their vision<sup>23</sup>. Nadler and Tushman clarify behaviors and characteristics that every charismatic leader possesses. According to them the charismatic leader is able to envision meaning that they can create a picture for the future that excites the people. This envisioning will act like a vehicle for people’s commitment. On first account the vision needs to be challenging, meaningful and worthy of pursuit, as well as credible. Setting expectations by the leader whose behavior and activities represent and further the vision is quite necessary as well. The second role of the leader is to energize the individuals.

Different leaders have different ways, but the most typical ones demonstrate their own personal excitement and show that excitement through direct personal contact with large numbers of people in organizations. They use success to solemnize their development toward the vision. The final component is when a leader attempts to enable people. In this stage the leader attempts to psychologically assist people to confront the challenging targets. A charismatic leader is quite aware that energized individuals require emotional assistance to fulfill their goals. This is managed in different ways. Charismatic leaders demonstrate their ability to listen, share and understand individuals’ feelings. They convey how they are available to support the individuals. Therefore, we can conclude that the followers must be psychologically prepared to passionately follow the leaders’ orders<sup>6</sup>. As Schyns and Meindl express it, the way charismatic leaders influence their followers to act as they wish is by stimulating or involving followers’ emotions<sup>24</sup>.

The most important behavior of charismatic leaders is to express their “confidence in people’s ability to perform effectively” and overcome the challenges. When people realize that their leader understands their ability this acts as a doping for them, which actually energizes them to feel quite powerful to fulfill their leaders’ needs. There is another indication of how charismatic leaders attain their desires. A charismatic leader infuses individuals, forms their desires, and conducts their energy. But the problem is that despite the commitment of subordinates and colleagues to the vision that the charismatic leader creates for them, over time they may be influenced by other environmental forces, which cause them to change their behavior, particularly when there is no personal contact<sup>6</sup>. Thus, this is the reason that charismatic leaders in history, such as Hitler always attempted to have direct connections and speeches to the people, and continuously remind them of their omnipresent power. They constantly repeat their goals by speaking passionately, and acting strongly. As such, strong oratorical skills are often a talent of charismatic leaders.

In Weber selected in translation, the term ‘association’ is explained as a “social relationship whose rules restrict or exclude those outside of it” while inside individuals are settled for specific reasons to secure the maintenance of the rules and regulations in the association. The head or leader is one of these individuals while there may be an executive staff with delegated powers in proper cases. Leadership has an authority to act in proper situations (which may be called governmental powers) or be assigned in agreement with the accepted principles of the association<sup>25</sup>.

### **The Relationship between Charismatic Leaders and Followers**

“Conceptually, leadership is charismatic and followers seek to identify with the leader and emulate him or her”<sup>20</sup>. Weber’s idea is different from Nietzsche and Mill in understanding charisma as a very specific kind of personal authority that is

exercised by a leader. Mill believed that a charismatic character is an “outsider” who is deserted by people, because of his supernatural characteristics, which distinguish him from others. However, Weber considers this type of leader within the social contexts and in a relationship with “adoring” followers. That is the reason Weber emphasized that a charismatic leader demands attracting followers, which in fact is his significant contribution to the knowledge<sup>13</sup>.

Hughes Ginnett, and Curphy explain the relationship between power, influence and influence tactics. Despite being synonymously used by many, these terms are actually different. Power is defined as a capacity to generate effects on others or having the potential to influence. Influence could be described as change in target agent’s attitudes, values, beliefs or behaviors. And finally, influence tactics are considered as a person’s genuine behaviors forms to alter individual’s viewpoints, beliefs, values or manners. In this work it is also claimed that contrary to the general perception that influence only comes from the leader, followers not only could influence leaders, but also use several tactics to change the value, behavior and attitudes of the leaders<sup>26</sup>.

Certainly in every charismatic environment, different elements are required to achieve a certain goal. *On Fire: Charismatic Leadership and Level of Analysis* explains the relationship between charisma, leader and follower. Charisma is compared to the fire that inflames follower’s energy, commitment, and efficiency. It resides neither in leader nor in follower, but it does remain in the relationship between a leader with charismatic quality and follower who willingly accept the charisma, in the charisma-conductive surroundings<sup>27</sup>. The charisma-conductive environment performs as oxygen. In a time of crisis and in an unstable situation, leaders with significant charismatic features act as a spark. The flammable materials are followers. Based on this metaphoric expression charisma is the union of spark, oxygen and flammable material<sup>27</sup>.

Shamir, House and Arthur explain that in some exceptional conditions, for instance during crises, charismatic leadership could be more demanding and simultaneously more effective. Since crises are not common, any environmental conditions which cause uncertainty and anxiety could give rise to the development of charismatic leadership<sup>28</sup>. This could be applied to all societies and cultures no matter the geographical location. There are some aspects of leadership that are universal across cultures<sup>29</sup>. One of the outstanding abilities of charismatic leaders is the alternation of followers’ self-interest in “needs, values, preferences and aspirations” to collective interests<sup>28</sup>. It is concluded that charismatic leadership/transformational leadership broadens and elevates the interest of followers, and develops a kind of agreement among them to prefer the good for the group or organization on their self-interest<sup>30</sup>.

It is worth to note the idea of Weber’s contemporary, George Simmel who explicitly explains the relationship between

followers and leaders. He says: “followers have about as much influence on their leaders as leaders have on their followers”. Leader’s maintenance of authority is only possible when followers are ready to trust that authority. Since the writings of Weber and Simmel were before the First World War Germany, their ideas were not under the influence of a “populist environment”<sup>31</sup>. In this regard, Gradner provides further explanation that mutual connection between leaders and followers is highly affected by the followers’ beliefs. Within any homogeneous social constitution people have common “needs, aspirations and values, hopes and fears”. This group constructs norms to rule the members’ behavior. This will provide a proper context for the leader to rise. The contexts determine what type of leaders could emerge and what the community expects from them. People will choose a leader either ‘consciously’ or ‘unconsciously’ who believes in his power to solve their problems and “meeting their needs”, a leader who represents their standards, and the leader who is in agreement with the communities’ internal atmosphere of “myth and legend”<sup>31</sup>.

A homogenous group boosts the strength of charisma, when all the aspects including leader, follower and environmental characteristics are conducive to homogeneity. Charisma is promoted, firstly, by a leader who has the charismatic qualities and secondly by compatible followers and lastly the catastrophic environment that provides the opportunity for a leader to attract the subordinates. What fosters the homogeneity of charisma is a leader who treats all of his/her followers equally, while these followers themselves are homogenous and attracted to the leader<sup>27</sup>. Bass and Riggio explain the dark side of charismatic leaders who use their power to inspire their followers to destructive, selfish and even evil deeds; leaders who destroy thousands and millions of individuals. Leaders like Hitler and Stalin. They demonstrate charismatic elements, although they are driven by personal, exploitative, and self-aggrandizing motives<sup>20</sup>.

Charismatic rules are different in the sense that they are not managed by the general norms, either traditional or rational but basically according to revelations and inspirations, and therefore charismatic authority is considered irrational and also revolutionary since it does not follow the existing structures<sup>2</sup>. Followers believe in whatever the charismatic leader says and orders, which are accepted without question, even if they are inconsistent and self-contradictory. It is a complete devotion to the individuals with these qualities. Followers have “devotion born of distress and enthusiasm” to the charismatic leader. They are willing to sacrifice for their leader and it becomes the principal enquiry for the true believer while under no circumstances could they act selfishly<sup>2</sup>.

Howell and Shamir concluded that charisma is a mutual relationship that is provided by both leaders and followers. In addition to that, followers play a central role in these contexts rather than what they have in traditional theory. In this case both leaders and followers are responsible for the development and

outcome of the charismatic relationships<sup>32</sup>. In the same way, Hoyt asserts that the relation between leader and follower could be examined at the interpersonal stage of influence and conviction. Social influence on the whole indicates the capability of affecting individual's behaviors and ideas. The leaders who know the tactics of social influence and can professionally apply them in society are successful in achieving the group goals<sup>7</sup>. Cauto in *Effectiveness* points out that "Followers' behaviors and performance are much clearly inputs, more independent variables, in leadership models of process that emphasize mutual and reflexive relationships between leaders and followers. These mutual process models require interacting with followers and taking into account followers' needs and wants as well as the task"<sup>33</sup>.

Weber understands that many social forces result in social changes, yet his special emphasis is on the upheaval of charismatic leaders. They are motivated by their great enthusiasm, while class and status barriers give way to "fraternization and exuberant community sentiments". Based on this, throughout history, charismatic leaders are considered "as truly revolutionary forces"<sup>2</sup>. In the same way, it is indicated that the unique relationship between charismatic leaders and followers enables them to make radical social changes<sup>34</sup>. Trust plays an important role in what followers decide to do. Followers, on the basis of personal trust in the leader and his intention consciously accept to believe in his charisma, vision and mission<sup>22</sup>. In fact, what in the end enables followers to perform great deeds is trust in leaders and their vision. But if the charismatic leader is self-centered, the followers' fate would be in severe danger. House and Howell state that the "personalized charismatic leaders, if left unbridled" could be extremely 'detrimental', and fatal for the followers<sup>19</sup>.

## Conclusion

Charismatic leadership is one of the influential types of leadership in societies and could lead to and determine communities' fate to a disastrous path or otherwise. The Second World War, as the most catastrophic war in the twentieth century, was the result of a totalitarian leader who had the qualities of a charismatic leader. Weber's idea of charismatic leadership demonstrates that the particular relationship between the leader and followers enables them to prefer the community's interest to individual's interest and devote their lives to the command of such leaders. It is evident that the underlying influence of the leader on the followers plays a significant role in attracting the followers to the goals of charismatic leaders. It should be understood that charisma without social relation has no function, and it has always been empowered or weakened by the forces which are within the context. Trust in leaders' power to achieve unreachable goals acts as a vehicle which drives individuals' motives to obey the charismatic leaders. Therefore, charisma, environment, and followers are three interrelated parts in every societal/organizational leadership. Thus charismatic leaders try to impose force on others by psychologically

affecting them in the first step and then manipulating them to think and act toward certain goals accordingly. These elements are required for any social changes and consequently individual's fate is linked to the decisions made by charismatic leaders. Thus, history is a good example of the power of charismatic leadership that could be used in constructive or destructive ways. It is suggested that for future research the motives and drives of the specific leaders who had great impact on the whole world should be studied.

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