

charisma bypass?

Jenny Rogers explains how to avoid confusing charisma with transformational leadership and leadership with management.

■ **My client Jules is in despair. As a recently promoted deputy FD in a large acute NHS trust, he is about to start his new role. He is entitled to coaching and along with the coaching, some specially commissioned 360 feedback.**

This is a process which goes considerably deeper than the usual questionnaire: I have spent a minimum of 20 minutes on the phone with each of ten colleagues nominated by him, probing for examples of Jules' strengths and weaknesses. Tempting though it is to be over-enthusiastic about the plusses and to soft-pedal the minuses, in my eventual written report it is my responsibility to tell it straight. This includes direct quotes, and however tactfully you say it, some of the feedback has the power to sting.

"Do they really think I have had a 'charisma bypass'?" asks Jules quietly. "And if they do, what can I do about it?" Good questions.

defining charisma

Charisma is a curious word. It comes from Greek words meaning to have a talent or grace conferred by the divine. It was popularised through the work of the German sociologist Max Weber in the 1920s. Weber argued that if you have charismatic authority you receive the uncritical and emotionally-charged devotion of your followers.

You see it most clearly in political leaders where it is obvious who has charisma and who doesn't. So Tony Blair yes, Gordon Brown no; Bill Clinton yes, George Bush no. Barack Obama has it, John McCain does not. People with charisma demonstrate unaffected self confidence, deep self-knowledge, charm and eloquence.

Jules wants to know if charisma can be learnt. My answer is no, I don't believe it can. It is also embarrassingly obvious when being faked, hence the smirking at politician-baby-

kissing when it is palpable how sincerely they wish they were doing something else. Can you imagine a course where you could learn charisma? I certainly cannot. However for Jules and many other clients, I believe they are confusing charisma with transformational leadership and leadership with management.

transformational leadership

For Jules, I suggested that his real challenge was to learn how to move from being a manager to being a transformational leader. Managers will often see their jobs as being to keep the machine of the organisation going. They are conscientious in giving people feedback. They can persuade people to conform to the rules, they minimise conflict and risk and their motto might be 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work'.

Leaders on the other hand will see their core task as being about change: they will question how and why things are done, they have a relentless appetite for improvement and they connect with people through an intense interest in their entire lives, not just their work roles. Managers work from formal power, leaders through the willingness of their followers to believe in the leader's vision of how the future might be.

making the transition

How are managers like Jules to make this transition? I recommended all of this to him:

- start by making a 'leadership speech' not just to his own team but versions of it at the meetings of all his client departments. A leadership speech is an intensely personal declaration of what you stand for and a broad brush statement of your intentions (see box)
- connecting with people through authentic listening and questioning. It still shocks





me how rare true listening is. Most people do pretend-listening when actually they are just queuing to speak. All charismatic politicians are supremely good listeners – in fact Bill Clinton has been described as doing ‘aerobic listening’... ‘as if he were hearing quicker than you can get the words out, as if he were sucking the information out of you’. Authentic listening comes from genuine interest in and curiosity about people. Real leaders will ask highly personal questions that are respectful, not prurient. They want to know about the whole person because they care. Private life is not off-limits, whether their own or other people’s

- talking unashamedly about your personal values, what motivates you and why you are in the job. Declaring your values is a high risk strategy because in general people believe what you do, not what you say
- balancing optimism with challenges to complacency. In all the billions of words written about leadership, at its core this is what leadership is: being able to create an optimistic picture of the future which will motivate and inspire, showing people that you are proud of them – and yet at the same time unhesitatingly challenging what is not good enough
- coaching rather than telling. Leaders know the limits of a directive style. Instead they invest in developing their people through coaching and mentoring. Coaching is about being wise rather than clever and having good questions rather than having the answers. It is also about observational feedback which is focused on praise
- when you do all this you become an attractive proposition. People want to talk to you. They want to work for you. You are offering them personal connection, hope and inspiration. They give you their loyalty. In return, you tend to get what you want.

People often confuse charisma with extraversion. In fact you can be a highly effective leader without being extraverted in the way the word is usually understood. Barack

Obama is clearly an introvert and is a good example of how a preference for introversion is not synonymous with shyness.

You can be an introvert who seeks the limelight as long as it is in a good cause. In his well-written book *Dreams From My Father* Obama repeatedly describes needing to retreat to a private space in order to get his thoughts clear, yet his speeches are models of bold, confidently-expressed transformational leadership, drawing as they do on emotion and intellect equally.

There is one further issue to note. You must look the part. It’s not about trivialities like ‘fashion’ but it is about creating an aura of natural authority. Jules’ feedback suggested that he could look ‘dishevelled’. That does not inspire confidence. If your clothing is dishevelled then who knows – perhaps the same might be true of your thinking? If you have not yet had style and image advice, get some.

Talking about charisma and transformational leadership gave Jules and me a rich agenda for the coaching that followed. I was also able to reassure him that charisma undoubtedly has its dark side where it can flip into narcissism. However, the narcissist and the charismatic leader part company on one great issue. The genuine leader can and will always admit to mistakes; the narcissist never can: cockiness and arrogance are too ingrained.

The genuine leader is humble. Perhaps one of the best examples is Lee Iacocca, the CEO who transformed Chrysler in the 1980s while awarding himself a one dollar annual salary. So I think we can say that the cadre of recently disgraced British bankers is not likely to fall into the charismatic or indeed the transformational leader category on this or any other grounds. ■

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Please email me if you would like a copy of a handout outlining how to do it in more detail than I have space for here.
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