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DEVELOPING CHARISMA: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE IN LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

In this experiential exercise, students use great historical speeches to explore what is involved in developing charisma. Students consider possibilities as well as limitations to the development of charismatic leadership abilities.

PURPOSE

Leadership is a popular topic in organizational behavior courses, and many students seek ways to improve their leadership skills. Recent approaches to leadership include charismatic leadership (Conger, 1989; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; House, 1977), transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994), and visionary leadership (Sashkin, 1988; Nanus, 1992), all of which include charisma as a fundamental characteristic of effective leaders. One question that arises from these theories, however, revolves around the extent to which people can *learn* to be charismatic leaders. The purpose of this exercise is three-fold:

- ◆ to enhance students' understanding of leadership theories that incorporate charisma,
- ◆ to challenge students to consider the malleability or trainability of leadership characteristics, and
- ◆ to demonstrate ways students can, to some extent, develop charismatic leadership skills.

INTRODUCTION

In defining charisma, Conger (1989) explained that is most useful to think of perceived charisma. Grounded in the attribution theory of leadership (McElroy, 1982; Shamir, 1992), the

concept of charismatic behaviors means that a leader may exhibit certain situation-relevant behaviors that cause followers to perceive him or her as charismatic.

Conger and Kanungo (1988) have suggested that charismatic leadership can be trained. They described seven key characteristics of charismatic leaders: 1) self-confidence, 2) a vision, 3) articulation of the vision, 4) strong convictions, 5) unconventional behavior, 6) perceived as a change agent, and 7) sensitivity to environmental constraints and resources. Most of these characteristics can presumably be developed, at least to some extent. Even more to the point, Richardson and Thayer (1993) proposed a three-step process by which a person can become charismatic. First, a person needs to create an aura of charisma by using passion and one's whole body to communicate. Second, an individual needs to create a bond that inspires others. Finally, a charismatic individual should address followers on an emotional level.

Students' efficacy beliefs regarding their own charismatic potential may be enhanced by a description of an experiment conducted by Howell and Frost (1989), who succeeded in scripting undergraduate business students to portray charisma. Students in this study were taught to project a powerful, confident, and engaging persona. In addition, students were successfully taught to exhibit nonverbal behaviors that projected the energy associated with charisma. The following exercise encourages students to consider the extent to which charisma can be developed, and possibly helps them enhance their own charisma.

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EXERCISE: DEVELOPING CHARISMA

One difficulty associated with creating a situation in which students might develop and/or recognize charisma first-hand in the classroom is coming up with an appropriate context and moving words for the situation. In order to allow students to practice and exhibit the charismatic behaviors described in Richardson and Thayer's (1993) three-step process, this activity provides the context and the words for them.

This activity was designed for class sizes of 20-30 students in an MBA program. Very large classes may not provide the level of interaction necessary for assessments of charisma unless students are divided into smaller groups. The activity requires 50-60 minutes.

After reviewing the theories of leadership and the concepts associated with charisma referred to above, students should be asked to consider the following questions (3 minutes):

- 1) Can leaders be trained to project charisma?
- 2) To what extent do you suppose charisma is a trait, i.e., a relatively stable individual characteristic such that a person possesses a certain level of charisma?
- 3) How much of what you understand about leadership and charisma is attributed to the person in the leadership role by followers?

These questions can be provided to students in a handout. Students should be given the opportunity to consider their individual responses to these three questions, but should not discuss them at this point in the exercise.

The instructor should explain that the class will participate in an activity in which they can explore the concept of charisma more deeply. To make this exploration easier, students should receive a list of Richardson and Thayer's

(1993) three-step process. The instructor should explain that given time limitations and the lack of a specific leadership context, rather than ask potential charismatic leaders in the class to create a situation and then make up the words, the context and words will be provided in the activity. The instructor should ask for three to four "charismatic" volunteers from the class.

Each volunteer is given one or two key paragraphs of a great historical speech. (There are several Internet sites that provide manuscripts of famous speeches.) Speeches can be selected on the basis of the characteristics of the speaker, familiarity to the student audience, ease of language used, or other criteria. Possibilities include Napoleon Bonaparte's "Farewell to the Old Guard," Susan B. Anthony's "Women's Right to Vote," Queen Elizabeth I's "Against the Spanish Armada," Nelson Mandela "I am Prepared to Die," and Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" speeches. There are many others. Each speech should be formatted so that it is easy to read, it includes the most dramatic part(s) of the speech, and it can be read aloud in five minutes or less.

Volunteer speakers should be reminded that their objective is to portray charisma, in the role of the famous speaker, and they should be given approximately 5 minutes to practice their speech. As appropriate, the instructor should provide the context for the speech and ask the class to put themselves in that context.

Each student speaker should deliver his or her speech to the class. After all of the speeches have been delivered, each student should be asked to write his or her own definition of charisma, as observed (or not) in the speeches.

Students can then be divided into three or four smaller groups to work with *one* of the speakers (10 minutes). Each work group should coach the speaker in terms of what would increase their perception of charisma. In particular, students should consider Richardson and

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Thayer's three steps in terms of the delivery of the speech. The speakers can deliver their speeches to their work groups again to modify the energy, nonverbal communication, use of emotion, etc. Other members of the group can also practice delivering the speeches if time permits.

The instructor should address the class groups in order to discuss students' observations from the activity. First, the instructor should ask for reports from each work group regarding what transpired in the smaller groups. What kinds of suggestions did the group members make to the speaker? How easy was it for the speaker to make these changes? Did charismatic behavior improve? Second, the instructor should ask the work groups to meet for a few minutes in order to be able to comment on the three step process: 1) What does it take to create an aura of charisma? 2) How can a leader establish a bond that inspires? 3) What role does emotion play in uniting leaders and followers? Each group can report their responses to the class.

Finally, the instructor should ask the class to reconsider responses to the three questions administered at the onset of the exercise. Each question can be discussed in turn. A final question for the class is "What else matters besides charismatic behaviors in true leadership?" Students may note the importance of context and the needs of followers for leadership as they discuss this question.

CONCLUSION

It is usually easy for students to provide examples of charismatic individuals. In addition, since many organizational behavior textbooks review various leadership theories, it is straightforward to associate charisma with effective leadership. However, when the attribution of charisma is considered in depth, it is less apparent to most students how one might put these theories into practice and to develop leadership skills in terms of reaching followers.

Participants in this experiential exercise learn from firsthand observation the complexity of charismatic leadership. On one hand, students observe that charismatic behaviors and a charismatic communication style can be learned to a certain degree. At the same time, students observe that it is not always straightforward to determine the limits of charisma training. By presenting the speeches and by observing the delivery, students focus on their communication skills as a charismatic speaker. Working with a small group allows speakers and observers to exchange ideas about how to improve one's charismatic persona. Overall, students develop a deeper understanding of leadership theories that incorporate charisma, the practical issues associated with developing charisma, and an enhanced view of their own ability to portray charisma.

References Available Upon Request