

# Charisma

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Charisma is the special quality some people possess that allows them to relate to and inspire others at a deep emotional level. Persons possessing charisma tend to be attractive to others, to be influential and inspirational, and to be characterized as brilliant and effective communicators. Although charisma has been widely discussed in sociology, psychology, political science, communication, and other disciplines, it is a very elusive construct, and has been defined in a number of ways. Currently, there is no generally agreed-upon definition of charisma.

Although there are many definitions of charisma, people tend to agree on famous historical figures who possessed charisma, and on those who did not. Yet just as definitions of charisma differ, some of these well-known charismatic figures do not appear to have much in common—except for the great impact they have had on others. For example, commonly mentioned charismatic heads of state include India’s Mohandas Gandhi; Israel’s Golda Meir, the U.S. presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan; Great Britain’s Winston Churchill; and China’s Mao Zedong, but the list also includes infamous indi-

viduals such as Germany’s Adolf Hitler, Russia’s Rasputin, the terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, and leaders of various cults and religious movements, such as Jim Jones, the instigator of the 1978 mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana.

Originally used in a religious context, charisma can mean “a divine gift of grace,” and the term has connections to so-called charismatic religious movements. However, the majority of researchers of charisma do not believe that it is an inherited or inborn quality. Rather, charisma is believed to be a constellation of personal characteristics that enable an individual to have impact on others by inspiring them, influencing them, and affecting their feelings, emotions, and behaviors. Since its beginning, charisma has been closely associated with certain types of leaders.

## THEORIES OF CHARISMA

The earliest mention of charisma occurs in religious writings. Religious prophets and leaders such as Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed were believed to possess special characteristics that captivated and inspired followers. Most often, these characteristics included divine or magical powers, including the power to heal, perform other miracles, and foresee the future.

Social-science interest in charisma began when the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) examined what he termed “charismatic authority.” For Weber, charismatic individuals possess an extraordinary quality that captivates others, but it is in the relationship between the leader’s qualities and the followers’ devotion to the leader and belief in the leader’s cause that charisma lies. This notion that the leader-follower relationship is the key to charisma permeates many of the modern theories of charismatic leadership. Weber also believed that the

leadership context was important, with charismatic leaders more likely to emerge during times of crisis and social upheaval.

The psychoanalytic theory of charisma also tends to emphasize the role of the follower in charisma and charismatic leadership. According to the psychoanalytic theory, followers idolize a chosen individual in much the same way that a young child idolizes a parent, imbuing the charismatic individual with great qualities and projecting their own needs onto an individual whom they perceive as able to satisfy those needs. In addition, however, psychoanalytic theorists note certain characteristics that accompany charisma, qualities such as physical attractiveness, an air of mystery, or something such as a physical flaw, a foreign accent, or a striking birthmark that draws attention to the person. According to the psychoanalytic model, the charismatic leader, through the use of authority and capitalizing on the followers' strong identification with the leader, induces the followers' unquestioning devotion and allegiance.

More recent psychological theories of charisma focus primarily on the personal qualities of charismatic individuals (as opposed to charismatic leaders). This approach focuses on the role that emotional communication and social skills play in determining an individual's personal charisma. Charisma is defined as a combination of highly developed communication skills, including skills in emotional communication, verbal communication, and social role-playing. In these theories, perhaps most important to perceptions of charisma is emotional expressiveness—the ability to convey feelings and emotions accurately and effectively to others. Charismatic individuals use their emotional expressiveness to arouse and inspire others and to spur them to action. It is also this spontaneous emotional expressiveness that causes people to describe charismatic individuals as animated, emotionally charged, and full of life. However,

emotional expressiveness is only the most visible component of charisma, for truly charismatic individuals are also skilled at reading the emotions of others and at regulating or controlling their emotional communications (in other words, charismatic persons are skilled emotional actors). For example, when speaking before a crowd of followers, a charismatic leader can successfully read the crowd’s reactions and determine if they are accepting or rejecting the message. The charismatic leader can then alter the message, or the emotional tone, in order to manipulate the crowd’s reaction. These emotional skills are components of the larger construct of emotional intelligence. In addition to these emotional skills, personal charisma also includes speaking skill (eloquence), the ability to engage others in conversation, knowledge of social rules and customs, and the ability to adopt various important social roles, such as the leadership role. Personal charisma, then, is a constellation of a number of highly developed communication and interpersonal skills.

Although these theories of charisma are different from one another, there are certain common themes: the charismatic individual’s ability to attract attention, to communicate effectively, and to affect followers at an emotional level. This ability to attract attention and arouse emotions elicits followers’ strong devotion to charismatic leaders.

## **SIX CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH CHARISMA**

Independent of any particular theory of charisma, a review of the empirical research on charisma from its roots to the present day, suggests that there are seven characteristics that are most often associated with charismatic persons. Individuals with charisma are: emotionally

expressive, enthusiastic, driven, eloquent, visionary, self-confident, and responsive to others.

As mentioned earlier, charismatic individuals use emotional expressiveness to arouse, inspire, or motivate others. Emotional expressiveness is perhaps the most recognizable characteristic of the charismatic person. Research has demonstrated that emotionally expressive persons are evaluated more favorably in initial encounters, that they have more friends and acquaintances than unexpressive individuals, and that they receive more support from others.

Clearly the most successful charismatic leaders are those who are motivated, possess high levels of energy, and are committed to a cause. Enthusiasm and drive work together with the charismatic leader's emotional expressiveness to spur followers to action and keep them loyal.

Almost without exception, charismatic individuals are effective verbal communicators. In addition to being eloquent, gifted speakers, people with charisma are good conversationalists—they are able to initiate conversations with strangers, make meaningful contributions to discussions, and keep the conversation going.

Charismatic leaders are most often described as visionary, but this aspect of charisma is most effective when combined with some of the other characteristics. For example, a charismatic individual may have a clear vision of where he or she wants to go, but without the ability to articulate that vision (eloquence) and the ability to infuse it with emotion and energy (emotional expressiveness; enthusiasm), the charismatic leader will not be able to convey the vision to followers appropriately and effectively.

Charismatic individuals are self-confident. This is likely a result of being skilled communicators and being effective and influential in social situations, qualities that lead to a form

of social competence, or social intelligence, that allows the charismatic individual to feel confident and efficacious in a variety of social situations.

Finally, charismatic individuals are responsive to others. Because they are skilled emotional communicators, charismatic persons can easily read the feelings, emotions, and attitudes of others. It is this ability to be responsive to followers' needs and desires that helps form the strong bond between charismatic leaders and followers.

## CHARISMA AND SOCIAL EFFECTIVENESS

As might be expected, because of their emotional expressiveness, their high levels of energy, their eloquence, and their social self-confidence, charismatic individuals tend to make very positive first impressions. Moreover, charismatic individuals tend to be judged more physically attractive than their noncharismatic counterparts, not so much because of any static physical characteristics of beauty but because their high levels of energy and emotional expressiveness create a sort of dynamic attractiveness.

In addition to the charismatic person's personal appeal, there is some research evidence that charismatic individuals appear more credible. For example, in studies of ability to successfully deceive, it was found that charismatic individuals tended to be judged as more honest or credible, regardless of whether they were lying or telling the truth. Further analyses suggested that charismatic individuals' verbal fluency, emotional expressiveness, and other-oriented behavior, such as greater eye contact, outward gestures focused toward the audience, and the use of inclusive pronouns ("we," "our"), coupled with an absence of stereotypic nervous cues (for example, head scratching, shifting posture and eyes), led to their being judged more credible

and honest.

As one might imagine, charismatic individuals are unlikely to characterize themselves as lonely, shy, or socially anxious. Charismatic individuals tend to have large social networks, to be successful in school and in work, and to describe their social lives and lives in general as satisfying. There is also some evidence that charismatic individuals are better able to cope with the stresses of everyday life because they can more easily rely on their large, supportive network of friends to help them deal with stress and challenges.

## CHARISMA AND LEADERSHIP

Charisma is obviously a core component of both charismatic and transformational leadership theories, as well as being implicated in other leadership theories. It is important to note, however, that personal charisma does not guarantee that one will be capable of charismatic leadership.

Most theories of charismatic leadership view it as an interaction between the leader's personal charisma, the followers' reactions to the charismatic leader, and situational characteristics. The followers' relationship to the leader is also important; when all these elements interact well, then charismatic leadership can develop. Specifically, to be successful, the charismatic leader needs to have loyal and devoted followers, but certain situational characteristics, such as a time of crisis or situational stagnation (a situation that is ripe for change), tend to be more conducive to charismatic leadership.

Very little research has been done on the possibility of increasing personal charisma, despite the fact that there is an entire industry devoted to increasing the appeal and charisma of

political leaders (and just about anyone else). Theoretically it should be possible to train a person to be more charismatic, given that many of the components of charisma, such as communication skills, self-confidence, and appearing enthusiastic, can be developed. The success of certain leadership programs is likely due to the fact that the training emphasizes developing communication and interactional skills.

A dissertation project conducted at the University of California, Riverside, t focused on improving participants' verbal and nonverbal communication skills as a means of increasing personal charisma. Ratings of the participants made before and after their training suggested that trained individuals were more animated, more influential and persuasive, and more effective communicators following the training session. In addition, trained participants reported greater social self-confidence and reported receiving positive feedback from family and friends following their training.

## THE FUTURE

The concept of charisma draws great popular attention. People are captivated by the notion of gifted, charismatic individuals who can arouse and inspire followers. Yet, charisma has been largely neglected as a serious topic of study by social scientists. Charisma, as opposed to charismatic leadership, has been both understudied and difficult to define. The most promising line of research has focused on the common, core characteristics possessed by persons identified as charismatic, particularly elements such as emotional expressiveness, communication skills, and an air of self-confidence. However, a great deal more work needs to be done before charisma is understood to the same degree as other personal qualities that are commonly associated with leadership.



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