



## Charismatic Leadership Case Study with Ronald Reagan as Exemplar

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Charismatic leadership theory describes what to expect from both leaders and followers. Leaders engage in extraordinary behaviors and display substantial expertise. Crisis situations or other substantial realities create an atmosphere that is conducive for the emergence of charismatic leadership. Followers react to these extraordinary behaviors as part of the greater situational context and attribute charisma to the leader. Charismatic traits including communication, vision, trust, impression management, and delegation of authority are all discussed. Ronald Reagan is also discussed as an exemplar of charismatic leadership. Examples from Reagan's presidency are cited to help frame charismatic traits and their effects on followers. It is asserted here that followers' attributions of charisma are interwoven with both the leader's behaviors and contextual circumstances. Thus, charismatic leadership is framed as a reciprocal process. Although this reciprocity exists, charismatic leadership in the common understanding tends to be leader-focused. Ronald Reagan exemplified this reciprocal relationship well as his extraordinary leadership behaviors engaged followers, and these events took place in the midst of a variety of crisis situations.

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Charismatic Leadership is a leadership style that is recognizable but may be perceived with less tangibility than other leadership styles. This reality is likely due to the difficulty associated with directly defining charisma in an individual when only examining the individual. Max Weber's work in defining charisma led to his categorizing charisma as an untraditional form of influence where the leader possesses exceptional qualities as perceived by his or her followers (Yukl, 2010). Charisma is often a trait that one perceives in another, but difficulty describing that perception without directly referencing particular behaviors, traits, or individual characteristics is common (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Yukl (2010) notes, "Follower attribution of charismatic qualities to a leader is jointly determined by the leader's behavior, expertise, and aspects of the situation" (Kindle Location 6939). Exceptional behaviors and expertise aside, contextual factors such as a crisis play a significant role in the attribution of charisma (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Therefore, the basic premise of this study is that followers will attribute charisma to a leader when that leader possesses exceptional behavior and expertise and when the situational context is conducive. Ronald Reagan is used as an exemplar of charismatic leadership. Reagan's communication skills, visionary attributes, integrity, humor, expertise, and the situational context of his presidency will be examined pertaining to how followers attributed charisma to him.

## Communication

Effective communication is an essential quality in any leadership style. In that regard, charismatic leadership is no different, but charismatic leaders act differently than non-charismatic leaders (Fiol, 1999). For the charismatic leader, effective communication requires more than merely the dissemination of information. To be effective, charismatics often include emotional appeals within their rhetoric (Yukl, 2010). This includes the use of dramatic, symbolic, and metaphoric language that lends credibility to the communication (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Ideas, thoughts, and concepts must be articulated in an inspirational and motivating manner (Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000). When charismatics communicate with passion, emotion, inspiration, and motivation, followers are likely to attribute charisma. Additionally, charismatics must appear confident and communicate that self-confidence in their rhetorical efforts. This is especially true for distant charismatic leaders who only communicate with followers through media such as television, radio, or internet (Yukl, 2010). Therefore, it is expected that a charismatic leader would be recognized for exciting and passionate public oratory. The methods of this communication are integral to the attribution of charisma. The message is obviously important, but the importance of the delivery of the message supersedes that of the message itself. Charismatic leaders may be best known and/or remembered for rousing public speeches where the crowd became frenzied with excitement. Charismatic leaders must also bridge the distance gap and effectively communicate through a variety of media in order to be considered charismatic by larger groups of people.

Sheehan and Sheehan (2006) properly note that Ronald Reagan is remembered historically as “The Great Communicator” (p. 10). This is more than just a nickname or passing compliment. Reagan was a very effective communicator, and his communication style was perceived as charismatic. A study conducted by Mio et al. (2005) of all U.S. presidents’ inaugural speeches ranked Reagan as one of the top three charismatic American presidents in the twentieth century. This study focused on a number of communication attributes and specifically included the use of symbolism and metaphors in these public speeches (Mio et al., 2005). Reagan appealed to a sense of understanding through this use of symbolism and metaphors that went well beyond the actual words. Two memorable examples of this include when Reagan called the U.S.S.R. the “Evil Empire” and later when he beckoned Gorbachev to “Tear down this wall” (Meese, 1999). The evil empire was more than just a comment on the U.S.S.R. Followers felt that it metaphorically described an existing moral superiority over the communist regime. Tearing down the Berlin Wall also symbolized the tearing down of the U.S.S.R., communism in general, and the end of the Cold War. Reagan was also an expert at using sentimental imagery to communicate novel ideas (Garrison, 2008). Reagan best exemplified this by famous comments such as “America, the shining city on a hill,” and

“It’s morning in America,” (Norquist, 1997). Reagan used these communications to reach the sentimental ‘side’ of his followers.

## Vision

As with effective communication, establishing a vision is a necessary trait for successful leaders. Charismatic leaders often emerge with a vision that is solution-oriented and is very different from the ‘status quo’ (Yukl, 2010). This new vision is separated from the ‘way things are or have always been’ and is an important separator from other leadership styles. As Conger et al. (2000) notes, other leadership styles are less likely to have a radical new vision. Fiol (1999) states, “Charismatic leaders engage followers in radical change” (p. 455). Yukl (2010) furthers this point by stating that the charismatic leader will “articulate an ideological vision” (Kindle Location 6961). The ideological vision portrayed by a charismatic is often the source of the differentiation from the normative. This ideological vision cannot be merely a said vision, but, as Conger and Kanungo (1987) claim, leaders must be the “holders of an idealized vision” (p. 642). Followers will only attribute visionary attributes of charisma to a leader who personalizes the vision with steadfast resolve. Of course, followers will not attribute charisma based on vision without a proper and enthusiastic articulation of the vision (Yukl, 2010). This directly relates to the previously mentioned communication trait and lends credence to the notion that charismatic leadership cannot be based on any one attributable function. As followers become supportive of a leader’s unconventional and ideological vision, they will begin to internalize the new values (Yukl, 2010). Charismatic leaders translate radical or innovative ideas into more socially conventional ideas (Foil, 1999). Concerning vision, it is the internalization of the vision in followers that directly leads them to attribute charisma to a leader.

Reagan’s vision was clearly articulated to followers and was certainly ideological. Reagan’s ideological vision was that of a conservative as he promoted concepts including individual freedom, low taxes, smaller government, strong national defense, and a strong national economy (Meese, 1999). He believed whole-heartedly in this vision and communicated it with passion and vigor. Americans at the time saw much of this vision as a proverbial ‘U-Turn’ from the direction of the Carter administration. Reagan appealed to the unhappiness with the Carter administration’s ideology and became the visionary leader for change. In foreign affairs, Reagan’s vision was described as romantically utopian (Garrison, 2008). Reagan’s vision was that America was a morally just nation, and freedom was deserved by every person in every nation. Again, this vision appealed to followers who saw Reagan’s stance for equality for all people to be right and just. Reagan was able to articulate his vision in ways that appealed to followers. Reagan’s followers began to internalize the values that he espoused and, therefore, supported the vision fully. As Norquist (1997) states, great

strength remains for Reagan's vision. Much support for Reagan's vision still exists today as political leaders from both parties tend to claim to be followers of Reagan.

## **Trust**

Establishing a trust relationship with followers is crucial for charismatic leaders (Yukl, 2010). As Conger and Kanungo (1987) note, this trust must be an extraordinary trust that is similar to reverence. Howell and Shamir (2005) claim this trust must be a "high level of trust between leaders and followers" (p. 98). Integrity is a key factor in creating trust relationships. Integrity is established by demonstrating honesty and consistency between said values and personal actions (Yukl, 2010). One must tell the truth regardless of popularity and must personally quantify the values that he or she espouses for others. In order to consistently adhere to a values base, a charismatic leader must also understand the needs and values of followers (Yukl, 2010). There is a subtle sensitivity at play in this where a leader understands the needs and values of followers and respects them while continuing to mirror his or her personal convictions. This is a process where effective charismatic leaders will demonstrate poise and self-sacrifice (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Often this means the personal sacrifice of money, position, or other valued tangible in order to remain inheritably congruent and maintain the trust relationship (Conger et al., 2000). As with most discussions of trust and integrity, charismatics must accomplish these efforts with genuineness.

Reagan was able to capture the trust and admiration of his followers. Followers believed in him and expressed admiration for his candid honesty. Reagan displayed courageous convictions and was willing to sacrifice his own political career in order to pursue what he perceived (and his followers likewise) as right and true. Reagan's ideas were perceived by his followers to be genuine and deeply held (Garrison, 2008). Reagan did deeply believe in his own ideals and often told advisors to not mention "political risks" when advising of options or consequences related to a pending decision (Sloan, 1996). Perhaps his most memorable act of integrity was when he addressed the nation from the Oval Office in March 1987 and took ultimate responsibility for the Iran Arms and Contra Aid controversy (Garrison, 2008). Even though he had not personally authorized the unpopular action, he did take responsibility for actions conducted by his administration's officials. This was an act that restored trust and contributed to his followers' perceptions of his integrity. Certainly, his poise and willingness to take the blame in this instance caused followers to strengthen their faith in his honest resolve.

## **Impression Management**

Managing the impression of the leader held by his or her followers is an important task for charismatic leaders (Yukl, 2010). A concerted effort regarding image building must be undertaken by charismatics in order to maintain charismatic attributions (Shamir, 1999). Charismatic leaders manage follower impressions by constantly demonstrating

courage and conviction (Yukl, 2010; Fiol, 1999). The word constantly here denotes the need for regular attention to this matter. In order to accomplish this, charismatic leaders regularly communicate their convictions (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). To make this communication of convictions most effective, charismatics appeal directly to followers (Conger et al., 2000). For distant charismatics, appealing directly to followers requires understanding the impression that is given when communicating through a variety of media other than face-to-face communication. Passion, strength, resolve, and humor are used effectively by charismatics to manage follower impressions (Shamir, 1999). These characteristics lend credibility while retaining the appeal of humanity. The goal of charismatics is, of course, to create a positive impression that contributes value to the leader-follower relationship. However, there are times when the opposite occurs and followers' impressions can have a negative connotation that results in an assassination attempt or political tactics designed to remove the leader from office (Yukl, 2010).

Reagan was well known for demonstrating courage and conviction. He used his personal strength and conviction to impress his values on followers and persuade them that his vision was best for the nation. At times, Reagan would use righteous anger to fend off a perceived injustice or to protect his image. One classic example of this is when Reagan explained to a debate moderator in 1980 "I'm paying for this microphone, Mr. Green!" (Gamble, 2004). The moderator was attempting to keep Reagan from speaking at a certain point. Reagan's anger led followers to believe in his strength and courage. Reagan also frequently used humor to manage follower impressions. He regularly told jokes to 'break the ice' or to fend off a perceived political attack. When sparring with reporters in press conferences, he would use humor to level the field. Once when Sam Donaldson asked Reagan if he thought he held no responsibility for a particular fiscal crisis, Reagan responded "Yes, because for many years I was a Democrat!" (Gamble, 2004). This humorous comment let followers know that his convictions were strong, and he could fend off attacks readily. As expected with charismatic leaders, some followers of Reagan had a negative response to his leadership which culminated in an assassination attempt early in his presidency. Even in this situation, Reagan used humor to communicate strength and resolve. When met at the hospital by the emergency room doctors, he quipped "I hope you're all Republicans," (Gamble, 2004). Reagan's mastery of impression management certainly contributed to his followers attributing charisma to his leadership style.

### Expertise

The methods by which leaders express expertise are closely related to the power source from which they lead. This power source can often help explain whether the charismatic leader is viewed as a positive or negative leader (Yukl, 2010). The values and personality of the charismatic leader will also offer evidence as to whether the leader is viewed positively or negatively (Yukl, 2010). Negative characteristics such as a

personalized power orientation are expected of charismatics who are viewed negatively (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Positive charismatic leaders will be perceived to have positive characteristics such as a socialized power orientation (Howell & Shamir, 2005). A socialized power orientation is one in which the charismatic leader does not relish personal power but, rather, desires to share power among and with subordinates. Both positive and negative charismatics have consequences related to their followers (Howell & Shamir, 2005). The negative charismatic controls and instills fear in followers. The positive charismatic is expected to express such power sharing through delegation of authority among subordinates (Yukl, 2010). This is done without consideration of personal glory and leads to an emphasis on the organization and the charismatic leader's vision rather than on the leader. Additionally, there is a positive benefit for subordinates as they experience empowerment (Conger et al., 2000). This seems to move through the organization as members at all levels become empowered (Yukl, 2010). Empowered subordinates will provide a number of positives to an organization. Positive charismatic leaders are able to create this sense of empowerment because they personally are most committed to the vision and less committed to personal success.

President Reagan displayed expertise in managing his administration by utilizing delegation. Reagan was not interested in increasing his personal power base but felt strong personal conviction for his vision and subsequent policies. Therefore, it was often said that Reagan's approach to managing his White House staff and other administration officials was deemed as a very positive approach (Cohen & Krause, 2000). Reagan was an expert delegator of tasks. His knowledge of the detailed inner workings of his administration was often questioned because Reagan himself was disinterested in the details of policy enactment. Reagan was known to believe that he did not need to be involved so long as his policy was being implemented (Sloan, 1996). Additionally, Reagan was known to have established excellent teams, and he then allowed them to operate with autonomy as he did not micromanage their activities (Kim, 2011). Reagan understood the powerful potential of empowerment and used delegation in a skillful manner. This use of delegation of authority, as a result of his socialized power orientation, contributed to Reagan being attributed with charisma by his followers. Based on this socialized power orientation, one would expect to see Reagan viewed as a positive charismatic. History confirms this assumption since Reagan was not viewed as a negative charismatic leader.

### **Situational Context**

Followers' attributions of charisma to a particular leader have been discussed, thus far, primarily in view of the leader's behaviors, followers' perceptions, and the corresponding attributions. A final and significant contributor to attributions of charisma is related to the situational context surrounding the leader, followers, the organization, and the larger society. The situational realities existent at the time will

contribute or detract from the attribution of charisma (Shamir, 1999). Yukl (2010) notes that Max Weber believed, "Charisma occurs during a social crisis, when a leader emerges with a radical vision that offers a solution to the crisis" (Kindle Location 6905). As previously mentioned, this vision must be attractive to followers, and the leader must articulate the vision with conviction. However, it is imperative to note that timing is critical in order for charisma to be attributed (Yukl, 2010). A situational reality where unhappiness exists with the status quo is an environment that can help generate a charismatic leader. These contextual variables are so important and overwhelming that the leader may not be considered charismatic otherwise (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Yukl (2010) sums it up by stating that charismatic leadership is "dependent on favorable conditions," and these conditions include any crisis element that creates fear, anxiety, or disenchantment (Kindle Location 6985). Leaders that rise to prominence during these crisis situations have what Conger et al. (2000) calls a "heightened sensitivity . . . to environmental opportunity" (p. 748). They are able to seize the moment and appeal directly to the people with a new vision that seemingly solves the crisis or otherwise alleviates the emotional strain existent at the time. At this point, it is worth noting that charismatic attributions may end when the crisis ends (Shamir, 1999). Similarly, leaders may attain charisma due to a crisis that occurs well after their leadership tenure began. Therefore, one can never discount the timing of a crisis or other contextual factors when considering charismatic attributions.

The situational context certainly played a significant role in Reagan's charismatic leadership style. As Reagan campaigned for president in the late 1970s, the nation was suffering through a severe economic downturn where unemployment, gasoline prices, and interest rates were soaring (Meese, 1999). Domestic conditions aside, President Carter was seen as a capitulator and a weak foreign policy president. The citizenry was very dissatisfied and eager for change. Reagan, no doubt, perceived this and articulated his visionary platform well by appealing directly to people's core convictions. Reagan promised a new vision that included a small federal government, strong military, and a booming economy (Meese, 1999). He understood the timing of his political rise and used the country's eagerness for change to help him gain the presidency. Situational realities that contributed to Reagan's charismatic attributes did not assuage upon his election as president. By the time Reagan was elected, America had spent the better part of the previous three decades resisting communism both ideologically and militarily in different parts of the world. The situation had dissolved into what was referred to as a "cold war" primarily between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Additionally, the nuclear arms race was increasing rapidly between the two nation states. This culmination of events created a sense of fear and urgency for the American people. Reagan again used this crisis to appeal to followers by showing strength and resolve. Americans felt confident that their leader would stand strong against the Soviet nation. Therefore, it is understandable that followers of Reagan in these critical times attributed charisma to his leadership style. An argument could then be postulated that Reagan, although an

exemplar of charisma, may have not been attributed with charisma had different contextual situations been realized.

## Conclusion

At the core of any leadership study is the influence process because influence is an important component in the act of leading others. Charismatic leadership theory can be used to understand how a leader influences followers. Charismatic leadership as a theory has a reciprocal quality. Charismatic leaders must be perceived as charismatic, but this perception cannot occur unless leaders express themselves with expertise and certain behaviors. Additionally, the situational context of the current reality plays a significant role in determining charismatic attribution. According to the theory of charismatic leadership, therefore, a charismatic leader is a leader who displays certain behaviors and expertise when certain situations exist, and this combination causes followers to attribute charisma back to the leader. Charisma is a trait that is 'felt' and then attributed to a leader by followers. This makes charisma rare but easily observed when in existence. Ronald Reagan was an exemplar of charismatic leadership because he brought effective communication, vision, integrity, humor, and delegation to the leadership task at a time when there were social, economic, and foreign policy crises facing the nation.

## About the Author

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