

# Presidential charismatic leadership: Exploring the rhetoric of social change

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## Abstract

Fiol, Harris and House [(1999). Charismatic leadership: Strategies for effecting social change. *Leadership Quarterly*, 10, 449–482] provide support for the theory that charismatic leaders introduce social change by employing communication targeted at changing followers' values in a temporal sequence: frame-breaking (phase 1), frame-moving (phase 2), and frame-realigning (phase 3). Using computerized content analysis, the current study extended these findings by testing additional communication tactics in temporal sequence on a larger sample of US presidential speeches with an expanded presidential charisma measure. Compared to non-charismatic leaders, charismatic leaders emphasized their similarity to followers in phase 1 and used negation in phase 2. Both leadership types used increasingly active and tangible language as they moved from phase 1 to 2 to 3. Across phases, charismatic leaders communicated with imagery and stressed inclusion, while referring less to conceptual thoughts and inspiration. A theoretical model of *social identity framing* is introduced to provide additional insight into how leaders communicate for social change.

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## 1. Introduction

Social change broadly relates to modifying the existing social order, convention, or status quo in some way. For example, social change may pertain to solving an existing social problem in an innovative way (Fiol, Harris, & House, 1999), changing group norms, or changing relations between groups (Tajfel, 1981). Charismatic leadership theory (Weber, 1946) postulates that charismatic leaders institute social change and alter the status quo in some fundamental way (see Fiol et al., 1999). Charismatic leaders achieve this end by presenting people with a powerful vision that inspires and motivates them towards social change. Specifically, these leaders articulate a vision that appeals to people's emotions and boosts self worth (Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001; House, Spangler, & Woyke, 1991). As a consequence, followers form strong emotional attachments and have a high sense of trust and confidence in the charismatic leader (House et al., 1991). Additionally, these leaders seem to have an almost "magical ability" (Weber, 1946) to evoke in their followers an intrinsic motivation to make personal sacrifices in implementing the leader's vision (House et al., 1991; see also De Cremer, 2002;

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McClelland, 1985). The performance and effectiveness of charismatic leaders is theorized to lay, at least in part, in their ability to inspire followers to work towards a vision rather than motivating followers with rewards and punishments. In particular, charismatic leaders tend to use specific communication strategies to inspire followers and implement social change (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004a; Emrich et al., 2001; Fiol et al., 1999; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). The current study replicates and extends previous research by examining additional rhetorical strategies used by charismatic leaders when persuading followers to adopt their vision of social change.

Drawing on Lewin's (1951) field theory, Fiol et al. (1999) suggest that charismatic leaders affect social change by employing specific rhetorical strategies targeted at changing followers' personal and social values. These strategies are theorized to follow a temporal sequence whereby leaders manipulate different aspects of followers' personal motivations (desires and fears) and social values (convention and innovation) during separate and temporally distinct stages. In the first phase (phase 1), charismatic leaders employ *frame-breaking* strategies by attempting to reduce the value people place on the current social convention. Specifically, these leaders derogate social convention by either: (a) negating people's desire to maintain the status quo; or, (b) negating their fear of change or innovation. In the second phase (phase 2), charismatic leaders engage in *frame-moving* strategies by attempting to move people's neutral state of either non-support for convention or non-fear of change to support for change. They accomplish this by either: (a) encouraging people's desire for non-convention; or, (b) encouraging people to fear not changing the old convention. In the final phase (phase 3), charismatic leaders use *frame-realigning* to convince followers to support their new vision by either: (a) substituting a desire for non-convention to a desire for change or innovation; or, (b) substituting the fear of not changing the old convention to a desire for innovation. It is during this final phase that charismatic leaders mobilize their support from followers and encourage them towards action.

To test this model, Fiol et al. (1999) coded 42 20th century presidential speeches for language that denoted negation (i.e., use of "not"), inclusion, and high levels of abstraction in order to include and engage followers in a change process that defies current social convention. Three speeches were selected for each president: one from the beginning of the presidency (frame-breaking), one from the middle (frame-moving), and one from the end (frame-realigning). Thus, these three speeches represented the three temporal phases of social change over the course of each president's first term in office. While the social phases may have been operationalized around specific issues (e.g., Cuban missile crisis) that leaders aimed to change, the researchers' rationale for this operationalization was centered on the argument that presidents have broad agendas of change that may take years to accomplish (Fiol et al., 1999, pp. 464–5). Overall, results from their study indicated that charismatic leaders were more likely to use negation, inclusion, and abstract rhetoric than were non-charismatic leaders. Additionally, results showed that charismatic leaders used these techniques most frequently during the frame-moving stage (phase 2).

Although Fiol et al. (1999) provide support for their model of social change, several limitations to their study should be noted. First, the study of Fiol et al. (1999) was limited by sample size, as only one speech per phase was analyzed for each leader. To help ensure that the speeches are typical of the leader's communication (Shamir et al., 1994) during each phase, we utilize at least two speeches per phase to address this limitation, resulting in an average sample size of six speeches for each president. We also extend the sample to include more recent U.S. presidents. Second, the current study utilizes computerized content analysis rather than human coding. Computerized content analysis minimizes human coding biases and provides a reliable way of uncovering and counting features of language that may otherwise be undetectable (see Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004b for a review of content analysis in leadership; see also Bligh et al., 2004a; Insch, Moore, & Murphy, 1997; Morris, 1994). Finally, the study of Fiol et al. tested three rhetorical devices (negation, abstraction, and inclusion) in temporal sequence that charismatic leaders may use to institute change, but additional communication strategies may also be important. Theory and research on charismatic leadership theory suggests that charismatic leaders use a multitude of rhetorical devices in crafting their visionary messages (e.g., Bligh et al., 2004a; Conger, 1991; Emrich et al., 2001; Holladay & Coombs, 1993, 1994; Shamir et al., 1994; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), which have not been tested in relation to the social change process of frame-breaking, frame-moving, and frame-realigning (Fiol et al., 1999). Therefore, additional rhetorical techniques derived from the study of Bligh et al. (2004a) (similarity to followers, inspiration, action-oriented language, and tangibility) are also included to explore a wider range of techniques that charismatic leaders may employ during social change. According to Fiol et al. (1999), each social change phase requires specific communication tactics to achieve the specified goals of that phase. Hence, each additional communication tactic explored in this study was specifically selected to correspond to how leaders may achieve the targeted goals of a particular social change phase. We now turn to detailing the theoretical rationale and hypotheses concerning each of these rhetorical strategies.

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