



Charismatic leadership in resistance to change

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ABSTRACT

In Weber's writing and in leadership theory, charismatic leadership is associated with social change. However, the importance and desirability of charismatic leaders in change processes can be questioned, as well as the notion that charismatic leaders are invariably proponents of change. There are documented cases of charismatic leaders in religious and political contexts who have opposed ongoing change and proposed restoring tradition. This paper reports on two historical, qualitative case studies of charismatic leadership in an organizational setting, studies that demonstrate that charismatic leadership can also act in resistance to change and in defense of the status quo. The analysis indicates that the influence processes involved are basically the same as in charismatic leadership in general. It suggests that impending change can challenge the interests and values of established groups and thus create a crisis that stimulates the formation of charisma in opposition to change.

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1. Introduction

Charismatic leadership is generally associated with social change and renewal. In Weber's original formulation, pure charismatic authority typically arises in times of crisis, disrupting both tradition and rational rule. It changes followers from within by shaping their attitudes according to the leader's revealed ideas, and it is "indeed the specifically creative revolutionary force of history" (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 1117). In contemporary leadership theory, charismatic leaders are highlighted as pre-eminent agents of organizational change (Beyer, 1999a; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Fiol, Harris & House, 1999; House, 1977; Ladkin, 2006; Seyranian & Bligh, 2008; Shamir & Howell, 1999; Waldman & Javidan, 2002). Research on charisma in organizational settings often focuses on leaders who found new organizations (e.g., Kärreman, Alvesson & Wenglén, 2006; Weed, 1993) or transform organizations in crisis (e.g., Beyer & Browning, 1999; Roberts & Bradley, 1988).

This paper questions the notion that charismatic leaders are intrinsically drivers of change. The purpose is to explore whether, and if so, how, charismatic leadership can also act in opposition to change. Applying a Weberian definition of charisma, informed by organizational leadership research (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Biggart & Hamilton, 1987; Bryman, 1992) and recent sociological critique (Joas, 1996), it presents and analyzes two cases of organizational leadership with charismatic qualities in which leaders and followers actually opposed upcoming change and made efforts to preserve the status quo. Based on the cases, the underlying social processes and the implications for leadership theory are discussed. Finally, the paper outlines how these implications can be further tested empirically.

Given the present purpose, two theoretical aspects are particularly important. First, to investigate whether the cases presented really are cases of charisma, charismatic leadership must be carefully defined and characterized. Second, to explore the connection between charismatic leadership and social change, established conceptions of charisma and change need to be examined. Both aspects are critically expounded on in the next two sections, focusing on Weber's concepts and on organizational leadership theory of Weberian inspiration.

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2. Charismatic leadership defined and characterized

2.1. Defining elements

In line with Weber (1922/1968), leadership is defined as charismatic when people follow someone because he or she is “considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (p. 241). “Considered” is a key word: the essential point is not whether the leader really is an extraordinary person or actually possesses any exceptional powers or qualities, but whether the followers are convinced this is the case, and feel compelled to follow (pp. 241–242). This corresponds to Bryman’s (1992) “working definition” of charismatic leadership, intended for analysis of charisma in organizations, identifying it as a relationship between leader and followers “in which, by virtue of both the extraordinary qualities that followers attribute to the leader and the latter’s mission, the charismatic leader is regarded by his or her followers with a mixture of reverence, unflinching dedication and awe” (p. 41). It is also compatible with Conger and Kanungo’s (1998) assertion that charisma is “an attribution based on followers’ perceptions of their leader’s behavior” (p. 47).

According to Weber (1922/1968, pp. 212–301), charisma is one of three main types of legitimate authority. The other two are *traditional authority*, resting on belief in the sanctity of tradition and age-old rules, exemplified by rulers such as elders, kings, or established religious leaders, and *legal-rational authority*, resting on belief in the legality of enacted rules, typical of modern bureaucracies (e.g., corporations and public agencies) with their hierarchies of formally defined positions and office-holders appointed by merit. In its pure form, *charismatic authority* (pp. 241–254, 1111–1157) occurs in extraordinary times and situations, when an aspiring leader with a mission—such as a prophet, warrior, artist, philosopher, or scientific innovator—attracts a group of followers who become bound to him and his mission by personal devotion and loyalty. This is an unstable social form; no formal organization is created, only a close-knit community of disciples governed by fiat of the leader, whose charisma endures only as long as he can prove it by new miracles or heroic deeds, and as long as his mission brings well-being to the followers. If charisma is to endure in a stable manner, it must be routinized, i.e., transformed into more legal-rational or traditional structures: “The charismatic following of a war leader may be transformed into a state, the charismatic community of a prophet, artist, philosopher, ethical or scientific innovator may become a church, sect, academy or school” (p. 1121).

It should be noted that charisma is an ideal type, i.e., a concept formulated, for the sake of analysis, in the most sharply delineated form, which is usually not found in historical cases (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 216). In reality, the three types of authority can appear together in various combinations, such as a bureaucratized political party led by a charismatic politician (pp. 262–266, 1132–1133). So, even if ideal-typical charisma can hardly exist in rational-formal organizations, since it is intrinsically alien to everyday economic considerations (pp. 244–245, 1113–1114), mixed forms of leadership influence based on charismatic processes, legal-rational positions, and/or traditions can emerge in ordinary organizational life (Biggart & Hamilton, 1987).

In this paper, charismatic leadership is not considered primarily in its pure form, but rather as it may occur when a manager or informal leader in an organization gains a dedicated following, not only because of formal position, but because he or she is seen as an extraordinary, especially gifted, and inspired person. In this regard, the present approach differs from Trice and Beyer’s (1986) Weberian model of charisma, according to which the concept should be reserved only for those relatively rare cases when all the following elements are present: an extraordinarily gifted person, a social crisis, a leader’s vision that is radical and novel, a set of followers attracted to the leader and convinced of his or her exceptionality and connection to higher powers, and the validation of the leader’s extraordinary gifts by repeated success. In addition to problematizing Weber’s view of genuine charisma as a break with the past, this paper is guided by an understanding of Weber’s writing that differs from Trice and Beyer’s. As mentioned, the actual personality of the leader—whether or not he or she is actually extraordinarily gifted—is not a relevant criterion of charisma (Weber, 1922/1968, pp. 241–242). In particular, charisma should not be treated as a sharply delineated, either/or concept, but as an ideal type that is meaningful in its various empirical manifestations, including mixed forms (p. 216). Yet, this paper is sympathetic to Trice and Beyer’s sociological thrust, and to Beyer’s (1999a,b) emphasis on the importance of the wider social context of leadership.

2.2. Typical features and perceived leader behaviors

In addition to this core definition and understanding of charisma, we will also take into account Bryman’s (1992) model of the social formation of charisma and Conger and Kanungo’s (1998) model of the perceived behaviors of charismatic leaders, both of which identify a number of phenomena typically but not necessarily associated with charismatic leadership, particularly in organizational contexts. Bryman (1992, pp. 56–68) underlines that charisma is brought into being by the activities of both leader and followers, and especially by the inner group of particularly dedicated devotees. An aspiring leader may gain initial recognition by displaying acts and sayings that correspond to the relevant culture-specific model of outstanding leadership, particularly if the leader’s mission has situational relevance to potential followers. Initially, a small group of followers may help spread the message and promote an appropriate leader image, acting as a bridge to a wider following. In this process of charisma formation, Bryman identifies a number of characteristic though not necessary elements, starting with powerful leader oratory (including deliberate rhetorical devices, such as use of metaphors), carefully premeditated gestures, eye contact, and stage-managed audience reaction. Another element, in which both leaders and close followers take part, is creating legends and myths illustrating central points in the projected persona of the leader, for example, special abilities since childhood, or decisive moments of insight and revelation. Creating innovation and success is also a typical element, which will be treated in more detail in the following section. Bryman

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