

TAMING AND PROMOTING CHARISMA TO CHANGE ORGANIZATIONS

Janice M. Beyer*
University of Texas

Taking a sociological perspective on the accumulated literature on charisma reveals how theories and ways of operationalizing charisma depart from Weber's original conception. These departures tend to blur the distinctiveness of the charismatic form of leadership by ignoring or downplaying integral aspects of charisma, especially the precipitating crisis, the radical vision, and subsequent systemic change.

As an apparent outsider to the “new paradigm” (House & Aditya, 1997) of leadership research discussed in this special issue, I was impressed by the diligence of the researchers who have pursued it in investigating, refining, and extending their original conceptualizations. Clearly, the work of these authors has spawned a great deal of interest and a large body of research. Also, as Conger argues in his extensive review of that literature in this issue, some researchers see a degree of convergence among the most prominent approaches subsumed as part of the new paradigm. This opinion, however, is not unanimous. Yukl (this issue), for example, argues that the two major types of leadership that have been studied so assiduously—charismatic and transformational—are not even compatible. In addition, many researchers, not necessarily represented in this issue, have offered refinements or exceptions that have not been uniformly considered by other researchers (e.g., Deluga, 1997; Erlich, Meindl, & Viellieu, 1990). Also, the convergence that has occurred is limited because it has failed to take adequate account of earlier sociological theories and various qualitative studies of charisma.

My commentary will take a more sociological stance than Yukl's and try to focus

* Direct all correspondence to: Janice M. Beyer, University of Texas, College of Business Administration, Department of Management, Room 4.202, Austin, Texas 78712; *email*: jbeyer@mail.utexas.edu

on those issues that are particularly telling for sociologists. For example, to this outsider sociologist, the convergence that has occurred within this group of researchers seems to have reinforced commonalities rather than differences between the theories associated with new paradigm and those associated with the traditional paradigm used by organizational and social psychologists in prior decades to study leadership. In the process, the so-called neo-charismatic and transformational leadership paradigms have tamed the original conception of charisma advanced by Weber (1947) and, in the process, diluted its richness and distinctiveness.

Several influences provided impetus to the taming of charisma: the prevailing psychological paradigm and associated methods for studying leadership, the preoccupation with leadership itself in the U.S. culture (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985), the appealing description of transformational leadership offered by Burns (1978) together with the pull of prior normative views of leadership, and the widespread conviction that what leaders should do is to change their organizations (e.g., Nadler & Tushman, 1990). All of these factors also seem to have contributed to a convergence on what Yukl (this issue) accurately terms a "heroic" portrayal of leadership that largely ignores possible negative effects of charisma or of transformational leadership. Rather, the conceptions of charismatic and transformational leadership advanced in the new paradigm portray leader characteristics, behaviors, and outcomes that are loaded with social desirability. Also, writers associated with the "new paradigm" often write in a more promotional than scientifically questioning or analytical vein.

HOW DIFFERENT IS THE NEW PARADIGM?

What strikes a non-psychologist in reading these papers is how research investigating the new paradigm is still so heavily tied to the traits and behaviors of leaders as measured by the reports of followers. Willner (1984) pointed out that the most common misconception about charisma is that it is located in the quality or combination of qualities of a person. Indeed, dictionary definitions of charisma encourage this misconception in nonscientific speech and writing. But many other, more complex definitions of charisma have been advanced in the scientific literature, most notably by Weber (1947). Nevertheless, the lists of relevant traits and behaviors investigated have lengthened considerably since the line of research called the new paradigm began.

This search for relevant traits is reminiscent of what happened decades ago during the search for a universal set of traits and behaviors that would discriminate leaders from non-leaders. The only obvious difference seems to be that researchers are now trying to discriminate charismatic or transformational leaders from those who are not charismatic or transformational. Such a search makes no sense unless it is assumed that people everywhere are attracted by the same personal traits and behaviors. Indeed, as Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Dorfman, Ruiz-Quintanilla, and associates (this issue) argue, many of the researchers in the new paradigm expect that certain attributes of leaders are universally endorsed and universally effective. They acknowledge, however, that the enactment of these attributes may vary across cultures, and predict that many attributes will not be universally endorsed. Indeed,

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