

Charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leadership: Multi-level influences on emergence and performance

Michael D. Mumford^{*}, Alison L. Antes, Jay J. Caughron, Tamara L. Friedrich

Department of Psychology, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019, USA

Abstract

Theories of outstanding, historically notable leadership have traditionally emphasized charisma. Recent research, however, suggests that charisma may represent only one pathway to outstanding leadership. Outstanding leadership may also emerge from ideological and pragmatic leadership. This article examines the conditions influencing the emergence and performance of charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders. In particular, different conditions operating at the environmental, organizational, group, and individual levels influence the emergence and performance of each of these three types of leaders. Implications for understanding the origins and impact of charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders are discussed as well.

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, students of leadership have sought to identify the individual and situational variables that influence leader emergence and performance in routine, day-to-day organizational settings. Thus the literature has stressed behaviors such as consideration, initiating structure, participation, and change management (e.g., [Fleishman, 1953](#); [Hunt, 2004](#); [Marta, Leritz, & Mumford, 2005](#); [Yukl, 2002](#)) and situational variables such as follower expertise ([Hersey & Blanchard, 1982](#)), leader–follower relationships ([Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995](#)), and the degree of task structure ([House, 1971](#)) that might moderate the effects of these behaviors on leader emergence and performance. Although this research has contributed much to our understanding of leadership in its normative form, it is open to question whether it has told us much about incidents of truly outstanding leadership—incidents where leaders exercise exceptional influence over followers to obtain notable results ([Bass, 1985](#); [Mumford, 2006](#)).

Recognition of the limitations of normative leadership theory in accounting for incidents of outstanding leadership—for example, Winston Churchill in the Battle of Britain, Michael Collins in the foundation of the Irish Republic, and Thomas Watson in the creation of IBM—has led students of leadership to seek to identify the attributes of leaders that make these incidents of outstanding leadership possible ([House, 1977](#)). Theories of charismatic and transformational leadership have become the dominant models applied in attempts to account for incidents of outstanding leadership

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mmumford@ou.edu (M.D. Mumford).

(Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1990; Conger, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; House and Howell, 1992). Although theories of charismatic and transformational leadership differ from each other in some notable ways, they share a common core. Specifically, they hold that outstanding leadership is based on effective articulation of a future-oriented vision that motivates and directs others while providing a sense of meaning and affective engagement (Bass, 1990; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

In fact, the available evidence indicates that a leader's articulation of a viable vision is positively related to various indices of organization performance (Deluga, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996), follower motivation (Sosik, Kahai, & Avolio, 1999), effective group interaction (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2003), and satisfaction with both the leader and the group (Dumdum, Lowe, & Avolio, 2002). Although some evidence indicates that charismatic visioning may contribute to outstanding leadership, charismatic theories have been subject to some noteworthy criticisms (Beyer, 1999). For example, charismatic leadership seems to exert stronger effects in bureaucratic organizations than in non-bureaucratic organizations (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996), and it may prove ineffective in some groups such as research and development professionals (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002). Charismatic leadership theories, moreover, seem to discount—or ignore—some key functions of leaders, such as planning and decision making (Yukl, 1999).

These observations led Mumford and his colleagues (Mumford, 2006; Mumford & Van Doorn, 2001; Strange & Mumford, 2002) to argue that we might need to examine alternative pathways to, or alternative types of, outstanding leadership. Drawing from earlier work by Weber (1924), they argued that three distinct types of outstanding leadership may exist: charismatic leadership (e.g., John F. Kennedy), ideological leadership (e.g., Ronald Regan), and pragmatic leadership (e.g., Dwight Eisenhower). The present article examines the conditions shaping the emergence and performance of charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leaders at the environmental, organizational, group, and individual levels. Before examining these multi-level influences on charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leadership, however, it would seem germane to consider the general model of outstanding leadership giving rise to these three alternative pathways.

2. Outstanding leadership

2.1. Crises and mental models

Perhaps the most straightforward conclusion one can draw about outstanding leadership is that it requires placing the right person in the right situation. Abraham Lincoln's greatness is inexorably linked to the U.S. Civil War. Bill Gates's achievements at Microsoft depended on the phase of development of the computer industry. These observations about the situations giving rise to outstanding leadership, however, point to a broader conclusion: Outstanding leadership appears to emerge under conditions of crisis, change, and turbulence (Beyer, 1999).

Some support for this conclusion may be found in a study by Hunt, Boal, & Dodge (1999). They asked management students to work on two business tasks under crisis and non-crisis conditions where a crisis involved high-priority goals and little response time was available. In their study, visionary charismatic leadership proved especially important to follower perceptions of leadership under crisis conditions. Further support for this conclusion has been provided by Halverson, Holladay, Kazama, & Quinones (2004), who found that followers were more likely to attribute charisma to a leader under conditions of crisis, and Pillai & Meindl (1998), who found that crisis conditions cause people to prefer leaders evidencing charisma.

Apparently, crisis (or change) creates conditions in which the emergence of charismatic leaders, and perhaps other forms of outstanding leadership, becomes possible. One potential explanation for the effects of crisis, change, and turbulence on outstanding leadership is that these situations, by undermining normative routines, provide leaders with discretion that allows for the exercise of exceptional influence (Lowe, 2001). Another potential explanation for these effects, however, may be found in Mumford (2006). He argues that under conditions of crisis, change, and turbulence, the behavior of complex social systems becomes unpredictable. As a result of this unpredictability, not only might new threats and opportunities emerge, but the actions needed to effectively respond to these threats and opportunities will also be ambiguous or unclear, because people lack an understanding of the causes and consequences of these change events. Under these conditions, leaders can exercise exceptional influence by engaging in sense-making activities that clarify goals and paths to goal attainment (Weick, 1995). These sense-making activities on the part of leaders induce feelings of control, provide a framework for collective action, reduce perceptions of threat, clarify opportunities, and minimize the feeling of anomie and identity diffusion associated with change.

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