Audience perceptions of charismatic and non-charismatic oratory: The case of management gurus

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to investigate whether people consider someone a charismatic speaker because they are deploying the generic features commonly identified as being associated with charismatic oratory in the literature, or whether the attribution of charisma is informed by factors which vary across different settings. Video-taped extracts from speeches given by seven people widely regarded as influential thought leaders – Kenneth Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Daniel Goleman, Gary Hamel, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Tom Peters and Peter Senge – were shown to different audiences. After viewing each extract they rated the extent to which they found the speaker charismatic or non-charismatic and why. In addition, the whole speeches and focal messages were content analysed for the presence a number of factors – delivery, rhetorical techniques, abstraction and inclusion – identified in the previous literature as underpinning charismatic oratory. When the speeches are taken as a whole the speakers rated as charismatic differed significantly from their non-charismatic counterparts only in terms of delivery. For focal sentences delivery remains significant but in addition the speakers rated as charismatic use a higher proportion of rhetorical techniques. This has important implications for theory and practice that are elaborated.

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1. Introduction

Oratory is viewed as a critical but elusive leadership skill which significantly influences followers' perceptions of leaders, particularly when there is little or no personal contact between them (Shamir, 1995). There are at least two reasons for the importance of live oratory. The first is that public speaking is a very effective medium for persuading, motivating, inspiring, building trust and connecting emotionally with a range of audiences within organizations (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Conger, 1991; Morgan, 2001; Niadoo & Lord, 2008). The second is that a leader's oratorical skill is often viewed as a proxy measure of their broader abilities and it is therefore unlikely that anyone could achieve or sustain a senior position without being a technically proficient orator (Atkinson, 1984a; Conger, 1991). Indeed, the commentaries of speeches made during the US Presidential election in 2008 frequently allude to this link (Nightingale, 2008; *The Washington Times, 2008*; Zeleny, 2008).

The ability of a leader to captivate and energize an audience through effective and powerful public oratory has been seen as a special ability that requires the mastery of a number of key techniques at least since the Greeks (Dobson, 1919; Kennedy, 1963). Consequently, amongst both leadership training professionals and academic researchers there is a tendency to view speaker effectiveness, and charismatic oratory in particular, as involving the use of a set of common practices across different speakers and

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settings. Management training courses often equate effective oratory with a single dynamic charismatic style (e.g., Frese, Beimel & Schoenborn, 2003). Much prior research has been founded on experimental studies which often begin with definitions of charismatic and non-charismatic oratory that assume a common style across different speakers, audiences and contexts (e.g., Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Howell & Frost, 1989; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). However, there is evidence to suggest that participants in such studies cannot always distinguish between 'pre-defined' charismatic and non-charismatic speaking styles (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). This raises serious questions about the extent to which perceptions of speaker charisma are in fact informed by a set of common factors which do not vary across speakers and contexts. In this paper we therefore ask whether people consider someone a charismatic speaker because they are deploying the generic features commonly identified as being associated with charismatic oratory in the literature, or whether the attribution of charisma is informed by factors which vary across different settings.

We explore this issue by focusing on a group of successful and very prominent thought leaders who build and sustain follower commitment to their ideas through writing best-selling management books and giving public speeches on the international lecture circuit. In the context of the general issue which forms the basis of this article they are a particularly pertinent group to focus on since they are widely considered to be very effective and charismatic speakers and their live talks are critical to their ability to build and sustain followers (Baur, 1994; Clark & Salaman, 1996, 1998; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 2001, 2002). To a large extent the continuing authority and legitimacy of their ideas is intimately linked to their personal communication and impression management abilities (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Greatbatch & Clark, 2003, 2005). Along with certain kinds of political and religious leaders, they are almost a pure form of what has been termed "rhetorical leadership" (Dorsey, 2002; Tulis, 1987; Willner, 1984). In this respect they are leadership orators par excellence. That is their relationship with their followers is based upon the continuing communication of a message which in turn 'relies for its authorization upon the individual who developed and popularized it' (Huczynski, 1993: 38). They are therefore thought leaders in the sense that they exercise 'a profound influence on followers by the strength of their personal abilities' particularly via their oratory (House & Baetz, 1979, p. 399).

The article is structured as follows. We begin with a discussion of the key factors that have been identified as underpinning effective/charismatic oratory. We then discuss our methods and results before identifying the ways in which the paper contributes to theory and practice.

2. The nature of charismatic oratory

There is quite a diverse literature on leader oratory and charisma. As we will show this emphasizes the role of a number of fixed generic factors in underpinning followers' attributions of speaker effectiveness and charisma to leaders. The literature can be divided into three streams. The first two are closely interrelated and focus on the management/organizational context in that they emanate from the "new leadership" literature (Bryman, 1992). One of these streams comprises studies that focus on message content, whilst the other comprises a smaller number of studies which focus on the impact of delivery, especially in eliciting perceptions of charisma. The third stream of research focuses on the ways in which public speakers interact with their audiences, paying particular attention to the social organization of collective audience responses such as applause, laughter and booing. With very few notable exceptions (e.g., Greatbatch & Clark, 2003; 2005; McIlvenny, 1996) this latter group of studies has focused on leader oratory within a political context.

2.1. Content

There have been numerous studies of the relationship between the content of speeches and leadership charisma. Many of these have focused on the articulation of visionary messages, which are seen as critical to effective leadership by the charismatic and transformational leadership literature. The role and impact of leader oratory has been examined by several advocates of what Bryman (1992) refers to as "new leadership" theories, which include the charismatic (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1987, 1988; House, 1977; Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993), transformational (e.g. Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Tichy & Devanna, 1986), visionary (e.g., Nanus, 1992; Sashkin, 1998), and dramaturgical (Gardner & Avolio, 1998) leadership perspectives. These perspectives all share the view that (i) leader influence is ultimately determined by followers' perceptions of leadership charisma and leadership effectiveness, and that (ii) a key source of such perceptions is the creation and articulation of a vision, which can be defined as 'a mental image(s) that a leader evokes to portray an idealized future for an organization' (Conger, 1989: 38).

An idealized visionary message is generally regarded as a prerequisite for a leader to be perceived as charismatic, effective and transformational (e.g., Bass, 1990; Conger, 1991; Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Once formulated, or framed (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), this visionary message must be articulated by the leader to mobilize followers to jointly pursue it (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999: 346; Conger, 1991; Holladay & Coombs, 1993, 1994). Although there is relatively little empirical research on the formulation and delivery of idealized visions, a handful of studies of leader rhetoric have provided insights into the formulation and/or delivery of visionary and non-visionary messages by leaders in the context of speeches, which are recognized as being a key medium through which leaders communicate with followers. In terms of content, these studies indicate that 'the leader's choice of words, symbols, and expressions constitute critical content elements which determine the extent to which the audience becomes aroused, inspired, and committed to the vision' (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999: 346; see also Conger, 1991). Leaders who are perceived as charismatic and transformational appeal to followers' emotions, values, identities, and hopes, as opposed to followers' more pragmatic and instrumental considerations. Effective orators are inclusive by referring to a collective history and identity, their