Beneath the mask:
Examining the relationship of self-presentation attributes and impression management to charismatic leadership

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Abstract

We tested several hypotheses derived from Gardner and Avolio's [Acad. Manage. Rev. 23 (1998) 32.] self-presentational theory of charismatic leadership. We collected multisource field data in an information technology (IT) consulting firm and examined linkages among managers' self-system attributes (i.e., desired charismatic identity, self-monitoring), pro-social and self-serving impression management of managers, charismatic leadership of managers, and two measures of performance. Eighty-three managers provided self-reports of self-system attributes. Six months later, 249 subordinates rated the focal managers' impression management and charismatic leadership styles. Superiors of the focal managers provided performance ratings 7 months after collecting the subordinate ratings. Results indicated that complexity of desired charismatic identity was positively related to self-monitoring. Self-monitoring was negatively related to ratings of pro-social impression management and positively related to ratings of self-serving impression management. Pro-social impression management related positively to charismatic leadership, which predicted managerial and unit performance. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The literature on charismatic leadership identifies self-image and self-presentation as two key dispositional elements considered important for charismatic image building (cf. Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Gardner & Avolio, 1998). *Self-image* is one's perception and description of oneself in terms of relevant features, characteristics and identities (Schlenker, 1985). Leaders vary in terms of self-image, such that some leaders may view themselves as being able to inspire others, while others do not view this as part of their self-identity (Kets de Vries, 1988). *Self-presentation* involves the activity of regulating one's identity primarily for others (Schlenker, 1985). Self-presentation capacities to monitor and control expressive behavior (i.e., self-monitoring) and employ behavioral strategies to regulate one's identity (i.e., impression management) are not unique to charismatic leaders. However, they are associated with leaders who are emotionally intelligent (Goleman, 1998) and perform best in dynamic environments that help shape charismatic leadership (Shamir & Howell, 1999).

Despite increased research attention over the last decade, a number of issues remain unresolved in the literature on the construction of charismatic images. First, although prior theoretical research has highlighted self-image and self-presentation as key components of the charismatic leadership process (e.g., Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Kets de Vries, 1988; Shamir, 1991), there has been little empirical research examining the linkages between these respective constructs. Only one study has examined the relationship between leader impression management strategies and evaluations of charismatic leadership, and that study was based on a psychohistorical analysis of leader biographies (Gardner & Clea-venger, 1998).

Second, prior research has called for clarification of how the self-images and self-presentation style of charismatic leaders influence their impression management behavior (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). Earlier psychoanalytic theories of charismatic leadership (e.g., Kets de Vries, 1988; Shamir, 1991; Zaleznik, 1974) suggest that leaders are motivated to behave in ways that are consistent with their self-images, while presenting themselves to others in a socially and situationally appropriate manner. The need to project and maintain these images suggests that self-presentation may play an important role in creating perceptions of charismatic leadership.

This study examines relationships among aspects of a leader's self-system (e.g., desired charismatic identity and self-monitoring), pro-social and self-serving impression manage-ment strategies, charismatic leadership, and performance in a sample of managers drawn from a large information technology (IT) consulting firm. IT consultants interact with associates and clients in a turbulent and dynamic industry and often work under extreme challenges and time constraints (Carey & Nahavandi, 1996). A dynamic context has been shown to be important for the emergence of charismatic leadership (Beyer, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Weber, 1947). The IT industry should provide an appropriate context for studying how charismatic images are constructed and how they relate to follower perceptions of leadership. Furthermore, this study provides initial empirical tests of core aspects of Gardner and Avolio's (1998) self-presentational theory of charismatic leadership, which are discussed in more detail below.