

The Power of the 'Charisma Arrow'

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everal years ago, I was mingling at a nonprofit event when I was stopped in my tracks by an incredibly powerful presence behind me. I turned around, and there was Hillary Clinton. Although not previously a big fan, I felt almost giddy — as if I had been hit with a "charisma arrow." This experience illustrates how charismatic leaders have the capacity to make us feel their power almost instantaneously without necessarily doing or saying anything.

Succession is a process that begins on the leader's first day.

The word charisma comes from the Greek charis, meaning "divine favor" or "gift from the gods." So, are the Hillary Clintons of our world bestowed with charisma by some higher power? By genetics? Do they develop it through experience? Or is it some combination of the three? Whatever the source, charisma is clearly rooted in a facility to very quickly connect emotionally, to inspire, and to persuade people, often, to become followers.

Sometimes, charismatic leaders can be positive change agents like Martin Luther King Jr. or Mother Theresa, motivating people to contribute their best. However, there is also a dangerous side to charisma — when leaders abuse their power. Does charisma cause leaders to lose touch with their own humanity and their ability to manage their ego? Does it invite them to give the "fireside confessional" that is en vogue without actually changing their behavior?

Indeed, there seems to be an extremely slippery slope between captivating people's sense of possibility and hijacking their agency. Not infrequently, charismatic leaders have trouble navigating this slope. They take the devotion of their followers as proof of their special powers and of a status where ethics don't apply. They neglect to see their ability to move others as a gift to be handled with humility and care, used to unlock other people's access to their own gifts and power.

The enticing invitation to misalign with power goes both ways in the charismatic leadership equation. Whether or not someone is a full-fledged devotee or momentarily jolted into a charisma trance, as I was with Hillary Clinton, it's relatively easy to externalize our authority

— to follow someone, rather than to take responsibility for self-leading.

Charismatic leaders have a particularly tricky time letting go of power and making room for a replacement. When such leaders finally decide to leave their positions, they and their supporters often seek someone who will follow in their footsteps; alternately, they find an inadequate replacement so their absence will be felt.

This dynamic is rooted in a misunderstanding of leadership succession: It's not an event, but rather a process that occurs over time. It begins on a leader's first day, and it is the culmination of a process of sharing conversations, building relationships, visioning, and more. It's a mindset — a way of being curious about self and others and using one's abilities to repeatedly activate the power, ideas, and talents of people. Ultimately, by doing so, the leader's presence is not needed on a daily basis.

In a traditional view of leadership succession, leadership and charisma are in short supply; they are qualities to be coveted. But these two qualities exist — to a greater or lesser extent — in all of us, waiting to be uncovered and nurtured.

In an alternate view of leadership succession, a leader's mission is to be present and self-aware, to know who he or she is, and to thoughtfully use his or her strengths to benefit the larger whole. Charisma, in this case, is used, modestly, to inspire people to share their best. Moreover, a leader who steps into a new role needs to strategically build on what exists — to utilize the bounty, the challenges, and even the charisma of the outgoing leader to move forward in ways that consider the unique needs and opportunities of the current moment.

Imagine what our workplaces, our country, our world, and even our homes would look like if more people knew how to access and share their charisma and leadership. How would doing so affect what we expect from both public leaders and from ourselves? Perhaps, then, we might not even need the term "leadership succession." Instead, we would put more emphasis on continually growing our own leadership skills along with the skills of those around us to create a rich tapestry that is truly a 0 reflection of what we all have to offer.

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