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Helping Companies Assess, Select, Coach
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Newsletter

The Unspoken Taboos of Leadership: Exploring Charisma

“Experiencing taboos is part of what makes us human. Understanding taboos is part of what makes us wise.” —Anthony F. Smith, *The Taboos of Leadership*, Jossey-Bass, 2007

Leadership is messy. It’s a contact sport, and people get hurt. Resentments escalate and lead to sabotage and misuse of power. Leadership is not for everyone, nor should it be.

On the other hand, if up-and-coming leaders see only strife and misery among top executives, they will be motivated to climb the promotional ladder for only one reason: money and power.

To quote Anthony F. Smith, author of *The Taboos of Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2007): “There are many, many perks and responsibilities to leadership; without an in-depth, brutally honest, and well-rounded understanding of what the job entails, how can any young person with high potential know whether he or she even wants to play the game?”

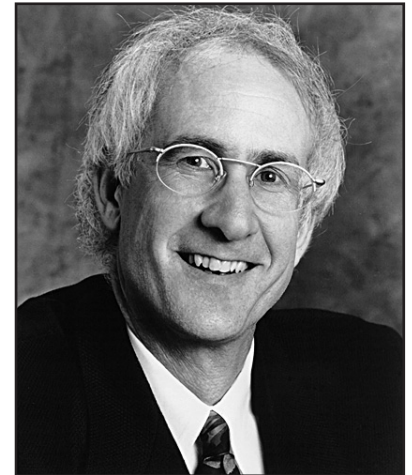
Unfortunately, leadership is still poorly understood. Despite the billions of dollars spent on leadership development around the world, results are mixed.

The reason is simple: We are unwilling to examine what it really takes to lead. Part of the problem is the expansion of the term “leadership” to refer to anyone who is relatively skilled, holds a position of some authority and has a modicum of charisma.

We talk about servant leaders who influence quietly, leading from the heart or by example, or passionate, irreverent, inclusive and visionary leaders. We fail to discuss the importance of power, intelligence, self-centeredness, political gamesmanship, double standards, insecurity, arrogance, competitive fire or manipulation – the unspoken leadership taboos.

Could we handle reality? From a psychological standpoint, we prefer our leaders to be like movie

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Dr. Brusman is a highly sought-after speaker and workshop leader. He facilitates mission, values, and vision retreats.

“Maynard Brusman is one of the foremost coaches in the United States. He utilizes a wide variety of assessments in his work with senior executives and upper level managers, and is adept at helping his clients both develop higher levels of emotional intelligence and achieve breakthrough business results. As a senior leader in the executive coaching field, Dr. Brusman brings an exceptional level of wisdom, energy, and creativity to his work.” — Jeffrey E. Auerbach, Ph.D., President, College of Executive Coaching

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stars and elected officials – idealized versions of who we want to be. So, how can we do a better job of identifying, developing, becoming and coaching leaders? It's time to tackle the taboos up close and personal.

Taboos are emotional hot buttons that are too painful, embarrassing, threatening or complicated to talk about openly. For example, we verbally support the concept of servant leadership, while admiring the charismatic take-charge CEO. We even try to emulate him.

In an age when leaders aspire to achieve sincerity and transparency, we agree people should speak from their hearts and never disguise an opinion, feeling or worry. But if this is the case, why is political gamesmanship such an unacknowledged aspect of surviving and succeeding in organizational life? Because leaders at all levels in the hierarchy are forced to be political.

Placing a Taboo on Taboos

Because taboos usually hide the good with the proverbial bad and ugly, we don't openly recognize them. This oversight, however, means we'll never fully appreciate what makes leaders successful.

Taboos are neither good nor bad. Some serve a legitimate purpose by placing limits on unacceptable behavior. Ultimately, however, they also obscure our understanding of important issues that must be exposed.

The *Harvard Business Review* article "Breakthrough Ideas for 2005" (Buchanan, 2005) included the idea of a "taboo on taboos." This requires us to examine them so we can determine the ones that should remain locked up and those that should be defused.

We empower false ideas when we fail to speak the truth when communicating with current and aspiring leaders. But if we offer them a sanitized, glorified picture of leadership, our actions disguise reality.

Taboo #1: Charisma Shouldn't Matter

We're taught that charisma shouldn't matter. Leaders are not supposed to be movie stars or royalty, and their authority shouldn't involve any tricks. Rather, it should be based on authentic credibility.

In reality, highly effective leaders often display great magnetism. And as an influence tactic, charisma is powerful stuff, akin to a drug we don't admit we need.

So, why are we afraid of charisma? And why do leaders cultivate it deliberately?

Jim Collins solidified the case against charisma in his

2001 book, *Good to Great*. He describes company leaders who made the leap from good to great as modest and willful, humble and fearless. They "never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes," Collins writes. "They never aspired to be put on a pedestal or become unreachable icons. They were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results" (p. 28).

Collins further asserts that most organizations believe "larger-than-life, ego-centric" leaders are necessary because few companies make the leap from good to great. In other words, charisma isn't just unnecessary for great leadership; it's actually a detriment.

Charisma Does Matter

Let's get real: Charisma plays a critical role in how we view people who have leadership qualities. Those who impress us have special qualities, many of which involve good looks, charm, communication skills and a leadership "aura."

Like it or not, societal norms regarding our definitions of leadership play an undeniable part in how we choose to elevate leaders. The basic urge to promote someone is biological, rooted in our need for survival. On a more primitive level, we look for the strongest, most powerful person to save us from tigers.

A Leader Like Me, Only Better

Part of what determines how we choose our leaders is a psychological drive called *homophily*. We seek to be led by those who look like us (or what we *think* we should ideally look like). We tend to follow or be influenced by those with perceived similarities to ourselves.

A second important concept is optimal *heterophily*. We also hope our leaders will have some positive differences. We want our leaders to be smarter, as well as more competent, visionary and articulate.

We're drawn to leaders we can look up to and idealize. If your organization's leader articulates values you embrace and a vision you share, chances are you're open to being highly influenced and directed by him or her. You believe this individual is like you at some basic level, but also capable of directing you to a place you couldn't reach on your own.

A Developmental Path to Leadership

Smith lays out his leadership development model in *The Taboos of Leadership*, demonstrating the journey one takes to achieve compelling leadership (p. 36). The pathway he illustrates—from technical

skills to charismatic power – is a worthwhile read. If you are trying to develop your leadership skills, you'll go through the following stages:

1. Facilitator
2. Teacher
3. Pragmatist
4. Motivator
5. Visionary
6. Mystic (magnetism)

Skill Builder

The first three stages of this leadership model (facilitator, teacher, pragmatist) are technical and can be taught. A young, emerging leader, ambitious to run the company one day, would do well to follow this path. He or she should ask insightful questions; engage with peers, customers and mentors; show emotional intelligence; and demonstrate rudimentary leadership skills.

Once aspiring leaders have gained a level of technical and leadership competence, they typically share the benefits of what they've learned with others. They explain concepts and goals, help others build their skills and serve as role models who adhere to high standards.

Finally, to be an effective manager, young leaders must become pragmatists, exhibiting decisiveness, bottom-line orientation, efficiency and effectiveness.

Motivator

To be an effective leader, one must demonstrate the ability to motivate and embrace the role of visionary. Motivation is a transactional activity in which a leader tries to improve performance levels among peers and reports through persuasion, support and coercion.

Visionary

Next on the scale, a visionary can discern connections and possibilities others miss, effectively communicating them as desirable future outcomes and inspiring a sense of common purpose.

The Mystic Factor

Charismatic leaders add the elusive quality of magnetism or intrigue to the mix. Their mystique is an invisible force marked by persuasive power and personal presence. They command attention through exceptional verbal and/or nonverbal communication styles.

Leaders who reach the mystic level have a unique way of looking at the world – one that's often contrarian. They create a fun, exciting environment and seem larger than life. We're always curious and want to learn more about them.

Mystique is a transformational, rather than transactional, quality. It affects our internal – not external – state. The charismatic leader changes the way we feel about ourselves, our values and our beliefs. Our behavior and performance are therefore influenced on a deeper level.

Transactional leaders who rely on carrots and sticks to move their followers hold influence only as long as they're in positions of power. But transformational leaders establish a sense of leadership beyond the managerial or supervisory role. They're able to motivate people to perform in ways that no other leader could accomplish.

How to Cultivate Your Mystique

Charismatic qualities cannot be manufactured because they must be genuine. They can, however, be cultivated and amplified.

In *Good to Great*, Collins writes about “Level 5” leaders, many of whom had lived through a formative experience that greatly impacted their lives.

Abraham Zaleznik described the same phenomenon in *The Managerial Mystique* (HarperCollins, 1990): “Leaders grow through mastering painful conflict during their developmental years, while managers confront few of [those] experiences” (p. 5).

Many of us have formative life experiences that never turn us into charismatic leaders. It's not really about what happened to us, but what we do with it and how we let it impact us for the greater good.

Traumatic events raise our levels of self-awareness, prompt questioning and reflection, deepen our sense of meaning, and create a drive for urgency and action.

The ability to influence others in a transformational way accompanies many other factors, including competence, responsibility, vision and circumstance.

Should Leaders Use Charisma?

Never underestimate the power of mystique, as it's the essence of charisma. We identify with leaders who are like us and who exemplify the qualities we admire and desire, but ostensibly lack. We consequently allow them to ensnare us with their air of mystery or intrigue.

Does charisma offer organizations a net benefit? Quite possibly. If a leader uses charisma well, it serves as a powerful influence tactic. Of course, it can also be used negatively or for a poorly considered cause.

In some circumstances, particularly the challenging times, charismatic leadership can pull a group together and inspire focus—more so than any other force.

If you deny charisma exists and underestimate its power, you ignore a fundamental social phenomenon. Failure to recognize it, as well as the ways it influences us, is an unwise professional decision.



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