

# Leadership – charismatic individuals or contingent characteristics

[Business](#), [Leadership](#)



Leadership- Charismatic Individuals or Contingent Characteristics? A brief analysis of charismatic and situational leaders, leadership and styles. Linesh Palayadan, Cass Business School, City university London, UK. “ Men make history and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skilful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better” - Harry S. Truman It goes without saying that human beings couldn't have achieved what they have achieved if they had not worked in groups.

Teamwork is probably one of the most important “ inventions” of mankind which does not get explicitly mentioned when one refers about the tools and evolution of human beings from the pre-historic times. None of the magnificent creations of human beings we see today could have been possibly achieved without humans coming in teams and working for a common goal. Teams by themselves cannot be successful if they do not have a clear direction or vision. The team is bound to fail in achieving the results if there is no coordination, synchronisation and communication between team members.

The concept of team itself comes into existence only because of the arising of a necessity or a goal that would benefit the society, and the means to achieve it cannot be implemented by an individual, however able and skilful he or she may be. Members of the team can be of extremely different personalities, skills and characteristics and every member has his/her own ideas on how to achieve the common goal. It is precisely at this point that the need for a leader arises.

What is required is a leader who can channel the necessary skills from the team members towards the common goal and maintain the harmony and coordination between them at the same time. Numerous theories have been postulated on how a leader should be and what the characteristics of the leader should be. Some theories hypothesised that leaders cannot be made but are born and those personalities or so called “ traits” cannot be cultivated in a person who is not already a born leader while others strongly suggested that given the right circumstances, leaders emerge based on situations and contingencies.

Organisations put forward certain requirements for interviewing candidates for its key posts. We all have come across requirements in Job advertisements like good communications, effectiveness in groups, taking initiative, firm under pressure etc. (S Fineman, Y Gabriel, D Sims, 2011). Are these the only qualities of leaders? Can a person with those qualities be successful as a leader? Do these qualities exist as inborn traits in a person? Or can these qualities be inculcated in a person through training and development? What are the different kinds of leaders?

What makes a leader outstanding from others? These are some of the questions that we will try to analyse with the help of some specific theories which have been proposed before. Two main theories that propose the idea that the qualities required for leadership are inborn in the person or are “ traits” of an individual are the “ Trait theory” and “ Charismatic leadership theory”. While the Trait theory has its origins in the early twentieth century,

charismatic leadership theory is more recent and is more or less a return to trait theory.

The Trait leadership concept was proposed in Thomas Carlyle's "great man" theory where he proposed that "The history of the world is but the biography of great men"(Carlyle, 1907). He believed that leaders have certain immutable traits which cannot be developed in others. Remarkable developments in behavioural sciences since have led to the decline in favour for the great man theory (David L Cawthon, 1996). The charismatic leadership theory states that the leaders have an innate set of abilities or charisma which cannot be explained (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

These leaders first try to understand the opportunities, possibilities and constraints as well as the preferences and needs of the team members. They then set a vision for a path which accommodates opportunities as well as the preferences and needs of the team members. The final stage is the actual implementation of the vision, motivating the followers in the process. At this stage they also stage demonstrations which projects their image, courage, dedication to the cause, sacrifice etc. (C Jacobsen, R J. House 2001).

Charismatic leaders are often value driven, visionaries and have a trail of success stories which motivates the followers. The primary risk of this style of leadership is that it may not be effective in all the contexts and such leaders can fade into oblivion as soon as the context changes. Perhaps the most striking example of Charismatic leadership is that of Sir Winston Churchill who proved to be a very effective war time leader and prime minister but was voted out when elections were held after Page 1 he war

because people did not consider him as somebody who could effectively handle post-war reforms (Roy Jenkins, 2003). One of the strongly criticized and censured leaders of all times is Adolf Hitler who because of his war crimes and atrocities, went down in history as a bad leader. How did he rise from his humble beginnings to the all-powerful leader of a country which had the potential to be the most powerful country in the world if had won in the Second World War? The art of leadership... consists of consolidating the attention of the people against a single adversary and taking care that nothing will split up that attention. – Adolf Hitler Hitler took advantage of the fact that people in Germany were disillusioned with the leadership at that time and they were looking for a leader who would turn their insult and injury into victory and fame. (Gardner, 1995, p. 334) He was a wonderful orator who could mesmerise his audience with his speech through which he was successful in convincing the people of Germany that he was their only hope and only he could catapult Germany to the realms of success and prosperity. His charisma in motivating the masses (John Dreijmanis, 2005) through speeches, vision and aggressive nationalism led to mass hysteria, hope and a sense of pride and nationalism in the people, which in turn catapulted him to the highest realms of power. His leadership notwithstanding the ultimate failures he had was instrumental in uniting German people and hence can be classed under strong Charismatic leadership.

One of the most recent, remarkable and widely reported event in India was the movement against corruption by a common man named Mr Anna Hazare (NY times, Oct 2011). Until recently little was known about the man

nationwide and in a p of about 6 months almost every household in India knew about him because of his protest against corruption and his demands to bring a corruption prevention watchdog with unprecedented sweeping powers which had the potential to put many corrupt politicians and officials behind bars (Reuters Aug 2011).

A social worker and an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi(N Y times August 18, 2011), Mr Hazare is a 74 year old man, who is not a mesmerising orator, but still managed to mobilise hundreds of millions of Indians throughout India and abroad to pressurise the Indian government to constitute such a watch dog. He later went on to sit for an indefinite hunger strike until his demands were met. The use of technology for the movement was unprecedented. Indians all over the world used online media web-sites like twitter and Facebook to move mass opinion in his favour and to hold protest rallies in major capitals of the world.

Such was the scale of support for him that Indian government finally relented to agree to his demands (Times of India, Sep 2011). In the Indian capital of New-Delhi, hundreds of thousands of people from different parts of India descended on to the venue of the peaceful protest, provoking government fears for law and order problems. Different Business schools in India conducted studies as to how this frail old man was able to mobilise masses in such huge numbers and provide leadership to them in what is described as one of largest protest movements in post-independence India (Business today, Aug 2011).

They wanted to know how his leadership example could be useful for the future business leaders. Under his leadership many volunteers and charitable organisations came together under one umbrella for organising and maintaining the venue and order, organising and coordinating media related activities, publicity, logistics etc. His leadership style is more of a democratic form of leadership although there is a major element of charisma attached. Weber, 1968 has pointed out that a charismatic leader is likely to appear when social situation makes people feel distress (R.J. House, 2001).

In this case the people of India have been so much frustrated with corruption that a right environment was created for the emergence of such a leader. Shamir, House and Arthur (1993) have described in a bit more detail as to what those conducive conditions could be. They have listed four situations that can catalyse the emergence of Charismatic leaders. First, the situation is perceived as a threat to important values. Second, relationship between goal accomplishment and performance is unclear. Third, the situation is unstable and fourth it requires exceptional effort.

These situations give rise to a weak psychological situation in which a charismatic leader can easily emerge and influence the followers provided he is able to offer hope and solution to the people. In the above example and also in case of post-world war I Germany, situations were quite favourable for the emergence of a charismatic leader. Bendix (1985) states that in such situations it is not certain that a charismatic leader will evolve in spite of the prevailing conducive conditions and utter necessity for such a leader (C. Jacobsen, R. J. House, p77, 2001). He also says that it is entirely possible that

a charismatic who possesses none of the above said characteristics may emerge a leader by articulating ideological, moral or other values relevant to the prevailing conditions. Another theory of leadership called behavioural model (Blake & Mouton, 1964) states that all leaders can be placed on a grid which evaluates them based on their people concern and task completion concern. According to Page 2 behavioural model, different kinds of leaderships may be prevalent in different organisations which may go from one extreme to another in terms of concern for people and concern for task.

A firm in which managers exhibit so called “impoverished or indifferent” style leadership, where managers have little concern for job completion or people, is rich in disorganisation, dissatisfaction and disharmony. The other extreme end of this style is “Sound style” where there is high concern for people and productivity. Such organisations are bound to succeed as they have high productivity and motivation and belongingness among employees is also very high.

Some organisations exhibit “country club style” leadership where concern for people is very high but not for productivity. The leaders do not want people to be unhappy and such organisations are not very successful. Another extreme is the “Dictatorial style” where there is no concern for people but very high concern for productivity. Productivity in such organisations may be very high in the shorter term but these organisations suffer from high employee turnover due to enforcement of strict rules, regulations and punishments.



Most of the organisations follow what is called the “ middle-of-the-road style” where leaders show some concern for both people and productivity hoping to achieve acceptable results. One of the most prominent schools of thought in leadership theories is “ Situational or Contingency theory”. Proposed originally by Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, it states that leaders must vary their leadership style based on subordinate’s competency and commitment. A leader’s style should be “ Delegation” if the team members are competent and committed, “ Telling” or directive if they are neither competent nor committed.

In case where the team members are competent but not committed the style should be “ Participating” and the final case in which the team members are committed but not competent, the style should be “ selling”. Fred Fiedler’s contingency model states the relationship between leadership style and favourableness of the situation (Fred Luthans, 1992). His studies suggest that situations are favourable for the leader if the three dimensions are high, the dimensions being 1. Leader-member relationship 2.

Degree of task structure 3. Leader’s position power through formal authority. He also found that if the above dimensions are very favourable or very unfavourable, directive or “ hard-nosed leaders” are more effective whereas lenient leaders are more effective in situations where the dimensions are moderately favourable. My extensive experience in various successful IT and engineering companies, compel me to come to the conclusion that these companies have adopted situational leadership as their main strategy.

The reason for this may be that such companies require their engineers to be productive from day one and as they become more experienced, they are expected to assume the ownership of the modules they work on and become the point of contact for all issues on the module. The leaders in such cases assume different forms of situational leadership to deal with different team members depending on their willingness and ability. Once the leader is convinced of the team member's competence and commitment, delegation is the form of leadership he or she chooses for that team member.

Since performance in terms of the quality of work done and sticking to schedule is the main criteria in assessing the performance in such companies, telling style of leadership is also very common and results in redundancies many times when the team members are unwilling and unable. In larger companies, Transformational form of leadership (Bernard M. Bass, 1985) is also not very uncommon nowadays in which the leader takes care to develop and transform his or her followers through, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealised influence and most importantly individualized consideration.

Leadership whatever form it may assume is an essential skill without which the society will have little progress. Leaders need courage, vision and determination to change things for better. The need for better leaders will never cease to exist and right people with right skills will always seize the opportunity to lead the world for a better tomorrow. References 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. Ann Florini. The Right to Know: Transparency for an Open

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movement Special thanks to Prof Cliff Oswick, Cass Business School, for

Guidance and permission to use his lecture materials and contents. Page 4