
Charisma: The Quintessential Leadership Skill

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Charisma separates great leaders from good ones

Defining charisma

What is it that enables leaders to establish an immediate rapport with their listeners and hold their attention while they persuade and inspire them?

This rare phenomenon is often called “charisma” and it seems like a magical and mysterious quality that only a few, chosen individuals have. When leaders are enthusiastically and energetically engaged in communicating with their listeners, they are often perceived as “charismatic.” It is their unselfconscious and passionate involvement that is so attractive to others.

The good news is that communicating charismatically is a learned skill.

Three myths about charisma

Myth #1: It's about status.

Charisma is not about being rich and powerful. It's not about being beautiful or talented. We can perceive charismatic qualities in every sort of person. The skills related to these qualities can be learned and developed with knowledge and practice.

Myth #2: Charismatic people are born that way.

Actually we are *all* born charismatic. As children we engage in what interests us, unselfconsciously and enthusiastically, and we behave that way until social interaction persuades us to adopt “appropriate” ways of behavior. We become increasingly “self-conscious” and lose some of the ability to be “just ourselves.” We are also born with personality traits that are innate. Some of us, often described as extraverts, thrive by interacting with the external world and learn by talking, while others, often described as introverts, enjoy their lives and learn through solitude and reflection.

Myth #3: Only extraverts can be charismatic.

Traditionally, the legal profession has been suited to introverts, and emphasized less interpersonally related job tasks. In recent years, however, lawyers' job demands have changed to emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication and interaction with coworkers in team-based activities.

You may be one of the majority of lawyers who are introverts; if so, you are in good company with noted introverts including Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, Winston Churchill and Hilary Clinton. Lawyers have above-average levels of conscientiousness compared to other professions. Using thorough preparation and effective practice techniques, many introverts can surpass "naturally spontaneous" speakers.

Recent research has shown that introverts are capable of opening up and becoming more extraverted. Moreover, studies show that introverts who practice being more extraverted actually feel happier and more authentic. The best method for practicing is to seek safe and pleasurable activities – such as reading aloud, mentoring and teaching – to gradually build skills and self confidence in verbal communication.

Three keys to being a charismatic communicator

1. Energy

You may not be enthusiastic about all of the presentations, particularly presentations for non-experts. Remember: that is not the listeners' problem; that is your challenge.

The charismatic speaker will always find material relevant to their listeners about which they can genuinely enthuse. It is work, both before and during talks, but it is enjoyable work, and it makes speaking much easier.

You need physical energy, too; speaking is a whole-body experience. You feel better, you sound better and you look better when you are using your physical energy. So "warm up" before you speak – go for a walk or work out – and practice your presentation out loud. (Deliver your talks or your planned responses into your cell phone – no one will pay any attention.)

2. Engagement

"One-way" speaking is unnatural; it will make you self-conscious, and make you and your listeners nervous. Communication with no eye contact is a major cause of fear of speaking. Without continuous eye contact, speakers cannot adjust the volume and speed of their delivery, nor adapt their content to the listeners' responses.

Eye contact with your listeners establishes and maintains rapport, the most essential aspect of effective verbal communication. This visual contact creates an emotional and personal link between you and your listeners, which enhances your credibility and impact.

By delivering each point directly to an individual, you will pause instinctively between major points to confirm that your listener has grasped the concept, just as you do in informal conversation. Your ideas will be conveyed with understanding and maximum impact. In meetings and in presentations, continuous, respectful eye contact will enable you to "control the room."

3. Empathy

We don't care what you know until we know that you care.

Speaking is more of an emotional experience, for the speaker and the listener, than the intellectual relationship that's formed between the writer and the reader.

This empathy becomes apparent to the audience quite naturally through your tone of voice, your body language and how sensitively you are responding to it.

Presentations should never be about the speaker; they must be about the listeners. Charismatic speakers focus exclusively on what their listeners want and need to know – and how they feel right now.

To summarize: without energy there can be no engagement and without engagement there can be no empathy. Use all three in

your preparation and in your delivery – and you can achieve charismatic communication.

A final piece of advice: Speakers cannot improve their skills, nor achieve charismatic communication skills, without immediate and continuous application. Obviously, this means finding more speaking opportunities. Most great speakers learned their craft in safe situations, such as volunteer teaching, mentoring and providing breakout sessions at conferences, to build their confidence. Aspiring leaders must establish the development of speaking skills as a priority in their career development.

Just do it! Failure to develop the “charisma” component of your leadership may be the only thing holding you back.