

The Unspoken Taboos of Leadership

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Mark Herbert

Principal, New Paradigms LLC

mark@newparadigmsllc.com

541.741.3490



The Unspoken Taboos Of Leadership: Exploring Charisma

By Mark Herbert

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Principal, New Paradigms LLC
mark@newparadigmssl.com
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Leadership is messy — and *not* for everyone. It's a contact sport, and people get hurt.

Unfortunately, the subject remains poorly understood. 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.

From a psychological standpoint, we prefer our leaders to be like movie stars and elected officials—idealized versions of who we want to be. It's now time to tackle taboos: emotional hot buttons that are too painful, embarrassing, threatening or complicated to discuss openly.

Placing a Taboo on Taboos

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" 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. 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."

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).

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

A Developmental Path to Leadership

Anthony F. Smith lays out his 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

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 through persuasion, support and coercion.

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 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 explain concepts and goals, help others build their skills and serve as role models who adhere to high standards. They also must become pragmatists, exhibiting decisiveness, bottom-line orientation and effectiveness.

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 to the mix. 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 curious and want to learn more about them.

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.

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).

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.

Does charisma offer organizations a net benefit? Quite possibly. If a leader uses charisma well, it serves as a powerful influence tactic. In some circumstances, particularly the challenging times, charismatic leadership can pull a group together and inspire focus.