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Leadership: From Charisma to Character

Character is different from personality in that character implies making the choice to act in line with one’s principles

by Nandani Lynton | Dec 13, 2011

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A favourite subject of historians has been great men – occasionally great women – since Homer sang about Odysseus. In the last decades, psychologists and management theorists have focused on contemporary great men – usually CEOs – in order to define leadership characteristics and establish skills inventories for use by HR and leadership development departments. Yet this exercise does not seem to have improved our ability to nurture and select sustainable leaders consistently.

To a great extent, this characteristics-and-skills approach has focused on functional knowledge and personality traits. In reality though, most leaders are chosen because they come across well and they have strong, big personalities. Most are male; they are even physically taller than the average employee; and they have voices a half-octave lower than average. They are warm and they can tell a great story. They have charisma. They talk the vision and make individuals feel special, feel spoken to. However, recent research shows that people who think highly of themselves often overreach, believing they have more control than they actually do (Fast et al. 2009). This means big personalities tend to make big mistakes.



What they are missing is the discipline of reflection, of testing their assumptions and of assuming that rules apply to everyone – present company included: in short, what we will call ‘character’.

‘Character’ refers to a person’s moral or ethical qualities, especially integrity, but it also includes traits like honesty and courage. Character is different from personality in that character implies making the choice to act in line with one’s principles. Ideally, character determines a person’s reactions regardless of the circumstances but, in fact,

character is constantly tested and may not always be strong enough to resist temptation. Leaders are in particularly thorny positions for, as Abraham Lincoln observed: “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

This article reviews first some of the recent cases of charismatic leadership gone wrong and its impact on the public. It then considers recent research on character in leadership especially in the light of changing attitudes among the younger generation. Drawing on extensive experience working with leaders in the US, Europe and Asia, the article closes with observations of a trend towards a character-based leadership model in business.

Bad Behaviour and its Impact

An expert on the magical power of the word ‘strategy’, Andrew Rumelt (2011), dislikes the way “ritual recitations tap into a deep human capacity to believe that intensely focused desire is magically rewarded”. But that is exactly how people react to charismatic leaders.

Leadership literature would fill library rooms and much of it is focused on individuals, detailing personality traits and telling stories of great men. In Exploring Leadership, Bolden, Hawkins, Gosling and Taylor look at popular television programs such as The Apprentice or The X-Factor as evidence that the public wants leaders who seem special, which usually means they are “glamorous, charismatic people who attract strong followings.”



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Witzel (2011) underlines this: "In other words, we tend to follow people who are good looking, well-spoken and have nice personalities, regardless of whether they are any good at actually leading."

In exasperation at the shareholder-value-led models of leadership, Paul Lawrence turned to Darwin for a broader human view of what drives leaders and followers. His Driven to Lead: Good, Bad and Misguided Leadership (2010) identifies four innate drives to survive and belong that need to be balanced for healthy leadership. These drives are:

1. To acquire in order to ensure continuity
2. To defend what we have
3. To comprehend our world, and
4. To bond with our fellow human beings.

After testing this in hundreds of firms, Nohria, Groysberg and Lee (2008) proposed a model for motivating employees that balances these four drives.

When the drives are out of balance, people grow anxious and fearful so the drive to protect what they have becomes strong, as Maslow (1943) showed long ago. This explains why we tend to choose the leaders we believe will keep us safe. Having put our safety in their hands, when the leader falls, he or she damages more than their organization, their peers, and their family. They fail the population who yearn for role models. And their failings have economic consequences – most recently demonstrated by the impending financial collapse of Greece and, following the arrest and subsequent resignation of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, by a leaderless IMF trying to pull together the rescue.

It is not just politicians who fail. In 2002, Percy Barnevik's name and face graced the cover of business and news magazines around the world, proclaiming ABB the company of the future. He enjoyed a wonderful reputation

until the pension scandal broke, and he was forced to resign from his position and pay back half of his pension payment. Likewise Jack Welch, who was loved for results and hated for abusive power practices. At retirement he left his long marriage for the journalist who wrote his biography, prompting his estranged wife to air details of how he continued to have General Electric pay not only for private jets but even for toilet paper. In both of these cases, money was a symbol of recognition and importance.

This spring in one of China's most successful international companies, global information and communications technology solutions provider, Huawei, the founder and CEO, Ren Zhengfai, was preparing for dynastic succession as he tried to push aside the popular chairwoman Sun Yafang to make room for his son, Meng Ping. Within Huawei and then on the active Chinese blog-sphere, Ren's blatant act of nepotism was decried to the extent that the government intervened to stop the family succession plan.

As I write, Silvio Berlusconi faces trial in Italy on charges of corruption, tax fraud and sex with a minor, while Italy's credit rating falls; and Rupert Murdoch is questioned in the UK by a House of Commons Committee over allegations that he was aware of the practice of phone hacking by journalists in one of his newspapers. Every day in busy hubs, someone falls for financial or business misdoings, sexual involvements, addiction or abuse. The social costs translate directly into a net negative wealth effect for society.

We must expect more from our leaders.

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|------------------|-------------|---|---|
| SINGLE PAGE VIEW | PAGE 1 OF 3 | < | > |
|------------------|-------------|---|---|

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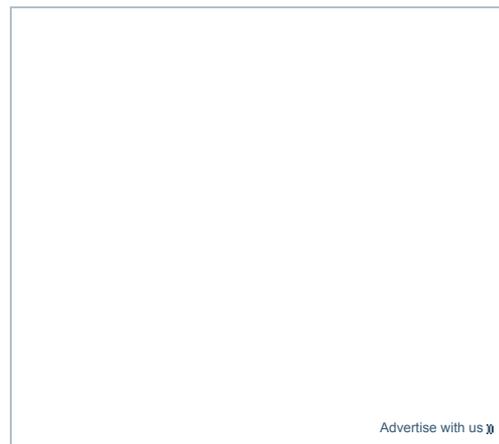
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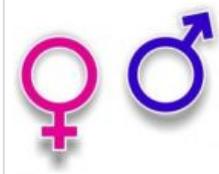
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