

What Matters More for Leaders? Charisma or Character?

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This is an election year. For many Americans, the two remaining presidential choices share a perceived concern that looms large related to personal character, or a potential lack thereof. This likely underlies the largest disapproval ratings of candidates, in both parties, we have ever seen. The political processes we have been following for years, with an emphasis on speeches and debates, most definitely emphasizes charisma, persona, and stage presence. Now, we've added social media management to the mix, another platform where candidates can manage their public image. What do any of these tell us about their character? Is character still important in leadership, whether from the White House or in any organization?

American culture for nearly a century has been going through a paradigm shift as it relates to our thoughts about leadership. People like Dale Carnegie taught us to manage our image, to be comfortable with selling ourselves. Trait theories of leadership reemerged in the 80s and 90s pointing us to the value and necessity of charisma as a key component of effective leadership. The stars seemed to be aligning. For followers to be transformed, we were taught, leaders must bring large doses of personality, namely extraverted and charismatic larger than life personality, to the task. Famously in 2002, research began to tell us explicitly that extraversion was the most important predictor of leadership emergence and effectiveness. Then, we began to rethink some of our conclusions. Corporate and political scandals made us

begin to question this assumption. The discussion on leadership, due to these recent events, began to turn toward ethics and authenticity.

Leadership, narrowly defined as charismatic influence, has a potential dark side. For each FDR who uses influence to guide a nation out of the Great Depression, there is a potential Adolf Hitler who charismatically convinced a nation to commit some of the most heinous acts of all time. Both were charismatic, but character was sorely lacking in the latter. One of the big differences between the two centers on their ideas about power. Negative charismatic leaders, like Hitler, are driven by a desire for personal power. Positive charismatic leaders have a socialized power orientation. They think about the values and goals of the group, not just their own objectives.

Character can be defined as emotional intelligence plus ethics. Emotional intelligence includes important aspects of character such as self-awareness, emotional self-regulation, and empathy – all of which were lacking in Hitler. Empathy connects us to others in a meaningful way. We think of power socially because we feel an intrinsic connection to others around us. Where emotional intelligence shapes our being, ethics shapes our doing. Our ethical system commits us to congruent behaviors and serves as a boundary against leadership abuses and missteps. In short, character-based leaders are defined by their emotional maturity and consistent ethical practices.

Leadership and management guru of the twentieth century, Peter Drucker, warned us about this wrong conception of leadership. For him, leadership had nothing to do with charisma or a larger than life personality, but was constituted instead of hard work, social responsibility, and earned trust – character traits. The way in which the leader develops this requisite character is by a constant pursuit of congruence, being true to self and to one's ethics, minimizing the gap between our

aspirational values and our practiced ones.

A given leader could actually be both, a positive socialized charismatic individual and a person of deep character. But, if we need to choose between these two aspects of leader traits, which should we give greater weight to? If we have a candidate with a little less extroversion and very well developed character, should we think of putting them at the helm instead of their more winsome but perhaps less ethical alternative? This was the very thing that many leadership theorists have been thinking about since about the year 2000. In the end, I believe Drucker was right. Not only does culture eat strategy for lunch, character eats charisma for dinner.

This discussion is relevant to every organization, non-profit, for-profit, or government. Like never before, we are in need of leaders who bring character to the position. Only character, consisting of deep levels of emotional intelligence and robust ethical systems can guard any organization against one of its biggest threats, decline from within. Sadly, as it is in our political system, it is often similar in our organizations – we look for leaders who are able to distinguish themselves from others on the basis of their outward appearance and charisma. In all spheres of our society, I think it's time to rethink the way we value charisma and prioritize character more highly.