



The Power Personality Problem

Relationship Impact, LLC
December 2008

Charisma

All too often people look to powerful personalities upon whom they may project their fears. “If we only had a leader all of our problems would be solved!” Our memories echo with stories of heroic personalities. From Hercules to Joan of Arc to Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama. In what ways do powerful personalities undermine the development of leadership in organizations?

Max Weber, a seminal thinker in the area of leadership and the life of organizations wrote in the early part of the twentieth century promoting a primitive model of leadership dressed up in modern clothing. His social context was post World War One Germany. His concern was to understand how a German government could reestablish legitimacy following the catastrophic collapse of Kaiser Wilhelm’s regime.

His – perhaps unconscious – interest was the continuation of a Prussian model of leadership that had persisted for countless generations, but one that had been challenged by the victorious democratic allies. His thinking advanced the simplistic authoritarian model of leadership that prevailed in his day, but not by much.

Weber promoted what he called “Leadership Democracy.” According to Weber the purpose of a democracy was to rise up a charismatic leader who possessed the character, courage, and Kraft to wield the power of state. His vision of democratic society was a pluralistic soup that through the rough and tumble of local politics elevated certain individuals who possessed gifts to hold the attention and the admiration of the masses. For Weber, “The cream rises to the top.”

This charismatic leader possesses a certain quality of authority. It is “the authority of the special personal gift of grace (charisma). . . . This is ‘charismatic’ authority, such as that exercised by the prophet or— in the political sphere— by the elected warlord or the plebiscitary ruler, the great demagogue and the party leader.”¹

General Eric Ludendorff, the embodiment of German authoritarian ambition during World War One, once asked Weber his definition of democracy. “In a democracy the people choose a leader whom they trust,” Weber replied. “Then the chosen man says, ‘Now shut your mouths and obey me.’”²

Now that, Ludendorff thought, is a democracy I can believe in. ³

¹ John Dreijmanis, ed., Gordon C. Wells trans, *Max Weber’s Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008) 157.

² Dreijmanis, 22.

³ Too impatient to wait for the slow march of democracy, Ludendorff participated in the failed Munich Putsch that attempted to bring Hitler to power in 1923.

Max Weber drew on a very ancient understanding of leadership. The Greeks and Romans believed the Fates signaled out individuals to rise above their peers. In the age of the Church, the laying on of hands transferred the power of the Holy Spirit to those deemed worthy of leadership by Prince Bishops. Monarchs claimed a similar gift by divine right.

Up until the recent global financial crisis a combination of education, opportunity, dumb luck and a good public relations team elevated celebrity leaders among the business class. What else but the continuing luster of Weber's theory of charismatic leadership explained stockholder tolerance of the stratospheric ascent of executive compensation in recent decades?

The One

In 1988 the Harvard Business Review published an article called, "In Praise of Followers."⁴ Robert Kelly called into question Max Weber's fundamental premise about what he described as the "Great Man" model of leadership. The memory of ancient heroic tales suggests how long the "Great Man" mystique has prevailed in the popular imagination. It portrays The Leader – singular, exceptional, and heroic – as the source of social change and achievement.

Leadership takes place in business organizations, schools, non-profit agencies, families and even among casual groups of friends. It can begin in the board room, the corner office, the copy room, the storeroom or the basement. Wherever people gather to address the challenges of their lives you will find leadership.

Leadership describes a quality of community rather than the character of an individual. Real change only comes through the partnership of leaders. A leader is anyone in relationship with others who takes responsibility for their common life. A leader who lacks opportunity to partner with other leaders is powerless. The "Great Man," in other words, is much overrated.

Weber's charismatic leader and the "Great Man" misrepresent the genuine nature of leadership. It undermines empowered communities, turning potential leaders into slaves and sycophants. The higher you go up the organizational ladder, the greater your profile, the more difficult it becomes to limit the detrimental effects of Great Man thinking.

In the recent Presidential election Barack Obama's campaign drifted toward a Great Man narrative as he sought the nomination of the Democratic Party. Oprah Winfrey actually risked Obama's potential for leadership when she introduced the future President at a rally in Des Moines, Iowa.

⁴ Robert Kelly, "In Praise of Followers," *Harvard Business Review* Nov-Dec 1988: 66.

"For the very first time in my life," she said, "I feel compelled to stand up and to speak out for the man who I believe has a new vision for America. . . . I am here to tell you, Iowa, he is the one. He is the one!"

The Republican presidential campaign lampooned Winfrey's endorsement with a television spot that featured messianic overtones. They hoped to cast Obama as an anti-Christ figure to raise the anxiety of their conservative religious base. Following Obama's successful visit to Europe the Republican campaign mocked Obama's appeal calling him "The Biggest Celebrity in the World."

As Barack Obama's Great Man status grew he risked undermining his capacity to lead. The Republican campaign further tapped into the native American suspicion of elitism and privilege. The first populists, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, appealed to the "common man" of the American farm and frontier over and against the money interests of bankers and merchants. Harkening back to Jackson era democracy the Republican ticket carried a war hero and an Alaskan governor cast in the role of a woman of the frontier.

The attempt to undermine the elitist pedigree of Columbia and Harvard University-trained Obama failed. Obama artfully managed the Great Man mystique. Despite Oprah Winfrey's over-zealous endorsement and the Republican Party attempt to exploit the vulnerability of his growing stature, Obama consistently shifted the focus of his campaign to his supporters. He balanced the challenge of self-promotion with keeping the work of social change among the people. The words, "We," "Us," and "You" came to define his campaign much more than the narcissistic language of "I" and "Me." Through the innovative use of communication technology Obama turned his would be "followers" into leaders. His inaugural address conveyed confidence in a nation of 250 million leaders.

My fellow citizens, I stand here today humbled by the task before us. . . . Forty-four Americans have now taken the presidential oath.⁵ The words have been spoken during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace. Yet, every so often the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms. At these moments, America has carried on not simply because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbearers, and true to our founding documents.

Obama demonstrated a simple and profound truth. The quality of our relationships defines the nature of our leadership. Leadership is not the function of an individual, but a responsibility of a community bound together by shared values and a common mission.

⁵ Pundits were quick to point out that the new President had made the first misstatement of his administration. Only 43 Americans have taken the Presidential Oath. Grover Cleveland took the oath *twice*, having been elected to two non-consecutive terms. Obama's error served him well in directing our attention to the clay of the Great Man. In addition, Chief Justice John Roberts misspoke the oath of office, causing the new President to stumble, and sending legal scholars into debate over the legitimacy of Obama's authority. The Chief Justice re-administered the oath the following day, just to keep the bases covered. Of such mishaps is our common humanity celebrated.

A Changing Social Character

Knowing the communal nature of leadership, why does Great Man thinking persist? It is a habit of mind that has shaped our perspective for generations. “Old habits die hard.” How people respond to different types of leaders depends on a specific social context. Although our social context has changed, heroic tales persist from an earlier age. They keep the embers of the Great Man fire aglow even though the fire itself has long since gone out.⁶

The leader as Great Man emerged at a time when a man’s physical size and courage prevailed in violent conflict. Remember the story of the great Achilles dragging Hector around the walls of Troy in Homer’s Iliad. Even though it was wily Odysseus who came up with the idea of the Trojan horse that finally got the Greeks inside the fortified city, Achilles gets most of the glory. Note that women, with few exceptions, were generally excluded.

As society changed a new model of leadership emerged. In the Industrial Age physical strength no longer prevailed. The mighty warrior gave way to the military strategist and logistical expert who could provision soldiers. Great feats of planning now prevailed over great feat at arms. Wherein agrarian communities physical strength defined leaders, in factory towns careful planning determined who claimed the high ground over hierarchies of power.

Max Weber’s notion of “Leadership Democracy” was perhaps the last appeal for a dying idea that no longer fit in an increasingly democratic world. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and Mao wrapped themselves in the Great Man mantle of leadership. They were perhaps Weber’s ideal. But he failed to consider what might happen when a democratic society elevates a charismatic leader who no longer sees the merit of being bound by the petty interests of the people.

By the 1970s the American social context was changing yet again. The old Industrial Age was already giving way to a new consciousness. Communication satellites brought images of distant lands into people’s homes. The Vietnam War was lost in the living rooms of ordinary Americans who lacked the stomach for the carnage portrayed on their television screens. The Great Man – whether William Westmoreland, Lyndon Johnson, or Richard Nixon – no longer provided a compelling image of leadership.

Elders bemoaned the “loss of respect for authority” among young people. But it was not that the young lacked respect for authority. Rather, the center of authority had shifted. It marked a turning of the age. The Great Man was already dead in the imaginations of the emerging generation. The new center of authority was community.

⁶ Michael Maccoby, *The Leaders We Need: And What Makes Us Follow* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

The Paradox of Leadership

This changing social context revealed a paradox in the old leader-follower relation. The “follower” sets the leadership agenda in so far as leaders must be in touch with the followers they lead. They must know what they value, what they care about. They must know what moves them.

How much authority, then, does the Great Man really have if his agenda fails to correspond sufficiently with the agenda of those who would be “led?” This points to an important paradox. Who leads who? The Leader-Follower Paradox has deepened in an era of global communications.

Joseph Rost argues the word “follower” no longer carries significant meaning in the leader relation. “The word followers is a very industrial term,” he writes, “connoting subordination, submissiveness, passivity, lacking responsible judgment, and willing to allow others to control their lives and activities. . . .The word followers will never work in the postindustrial view of leadership because it comes with too much baggage. . . .”⁷

“Followers” today possess access to information to an unprecedented degree. Anyone with a cell phone equipped with a video function and a data plan is no longer just a consumer of information. Anyone can now participate as a global information provider, distributing ideas and images through a global communication network around the world. Virtually everyone possesses power as influencers. The question is no longer, can we lead? But, will we?

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⁷ Joseph Rost, “Followership: An Outmoded Concept” *The Art of Followership*, ed. Riggio, Chalef, and Lipman-Blumen (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 57.

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Heroic tales arose at a time when the social context responded to Great Man leaders. Today Great Man thinking persists as a habit among those old enough to have grown up in the Industrial Age. It is also evident among those who seek to avoid responsibility for our common life. The habitual response of some, "I could never do that. I am not a leader," is not a reason, but an excuse. It allows us to avoid the hard work leadership ourselves.

The age of the follower has come to an end. The age of leadership has begun. Relationships have impact. Organizations that acknowledge the leadership capacity of others will endure.

The heroic tales of the 21st Century will not be about the Great Man, or even the Great Woman. The heroic tales of the 21st Century will relate the power of Communities that developed their capacity for leadership and prevail.