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CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP: CONCEPT, SOURCES AND EFFECTS[*]

Abstract

The paper discusses the characteristics of charismatic leadership, as one of the major styles of leadership within the organizational context. The concept of charisma is defined, as well as the most important characteristics of charismatic leaders, in an attempt to answer the questions of where these leaders' capability to influence others stems from, what is it that distinguishes their behaviour from that of other types of leaders, and what are the most important positive and negative effects this style of leadership has on the followers.

Key words: Leadership, leader, charisma, organization, changes

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is one of the most complex and most important behavioural phenomena, and as such, it is the subject of multidisciplinary studies in various scientific fields. Decades of research of leadership have re-

sulted in the formulation of many theories, approaches, and models, which have sought to define its different types, and to explain its essence from various aspects. Charisma has been incorporated in most these models, as a phenomenon immanent in the leadership process, whether it is viewed in the political, sociological, or organizational context. Despite the fact that today the theory and practice of organizational leadership feature a number of styles of leadership, charismatic leadership is one of the most common ones, and, according to many, the most effective leadership style. This is particularly pronounced in crises, coloured with uncertainty, unpredictability, and the absence of a clearly defined direction of action, with which a huge number of organizations are faced almost on a daily basis in today's circumstances. If such situations are supported by the specific cultural context, such as, for example, a high level of power distance, strong collectivism and extremely low tolerance of uncertainty as the key features of the national culture (as is the case in our country), it is clear that charismatic leadership with its peculiarities has an excellent background to become the dominant style compared to all other models of leadership.

THE CONCEPT OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

As it is well-known, the word *charisma* is of Greek origin, and its original meaning was "a divine gift". When used in modern languages, this term denotes special, often hard to define qualities that make a certain person attractive and desirable in the eyes of others.

Until the early 80's of the twentieth century, the study of charisma in leadership was largely associated to social movements, religious cults, and the political sphere, where the term *charisma* explained leaders' phenomena whose impact on the broad masses were otherwise difficult to explain. In recent years, however, research of charisma is present in the field of organizational leadership, although there is still no consistent definition which would identify the concept precisely and clearly. Thus, charismatic leadership is defined as a "divine gift," "specific commitment and heroism," the process of influence that inspires blind devotion," or "leadership with magnetic effects" (Du Brin 1995, 59). Regardless of the differences in the understanding of the term, it can be concluded that charisma is a specific quality of leaders which the followers perceive as desirable, and therefore are willing to follow it, sometimes unconditionally.

Early studies of charisma are linked to the sociologist Max Weber (1968), whose ideas still represent a strategic basis for the study of this phenomenon. The initial impetus for Weber's study of charisma was an interest in the manifestation of the mechanisms of power and authority. This sociologist argued that charisma is one of the three basic sources of authority (in addition to the legitimate and traditional), where the term charisma was applied to

> "a certain qualities of an individual which separate him/her from ordinary men and are treated as inherited with supernatural, superhuman, or at least, extraordinary powers or abilities" (Bryman 1992, 24).

Charisma is, therefore, something that is inaccessible to ordinary people, something that has a spiritual origin, and something on the basis of which individuals are treated as leaders.

Considering that leadership charisma is manifested primarily at times of social crisis, Weber believed that it stems from "the collective excitement produced by unusual events and yielding to heroes of any kind" (Bryman 1992, 26). Charisma is most often manifested in a crisis, when the leader appears with a specific personal characteristics and radical vision, which offers a solution to the crisis and attracts followers who believe in the vision and extraordinary powers of the leader. As it is difficult to implement a radical vision within the existing organizational relations, a great number of charismatic leaders are trying to destroy the old and establish new organizational frameworks (or political, religious, etc.), for which charismatic leadership is often identified with the transformation. "Charismatic domination transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms" (Bryman 1992, 26).

In addition to binding it to emergency circumstances and innate, above-average abilities, Weber established another premise, extremely important for understanding the phenomenon of charisma, which refers its ethical isolation. In fact, the essence of charisma is that it is attractive for the followers, who exhibit complete commitment to the leader regardless of the moral dimension of the vision and the activities aimed at its realization. Therefore, charisma can be identified with people who have made outstanding contributions to their human environment, or humanity in general, but also with those who have committed terrible crimes by means of manipulating their skills, engaging their followers as well.

It is necessary to emphasize that the early understanding of the manifestation of charisma is usually associated with direct personal contacts of leaders and followers and, hence, it is from this understanding that it is probably experienced as a great gift, inherent only to the chosen ones. Modern media of mass communication are able to produce different effects, and to deliberately create an image of some leaders, portraying them as charismatic figures. It can be said that a great number of charismatic leaders are products of the media and public relations experts, who tend to create an aura of uncommonness, excellence around them (Murphy and Ensher 2008). This type of media-created charisma many people call pseudo-charisma, in order to differentiate it from the inherent, natural charismatic gift, which manifests itself spontaneously (Bryman 1992, 32). However, even if it is artificially stimulated, charisma is hard to catch if a person does not have the potential and if it does not create specific conditions for activating that potential.

Although the concept of charisma has, compared to Weber's early views, evolved over the years, and even though almost no one believes in the superhuman qualities and the divine nature of leaders, there is still some controversy regarding the factors that dominantly influence its development and manifestation, as well as regarding the question of whether it is the result of the attributes of leaders, the characteristics of the situation, or the interaction between leaders and followers.

Early approaches to charismatic leadership remained in the domain of the "trait" theory, associating charisma primarily with the physical and psychological characteristics of leaders, and trying to establish a specific charismatic personal profile that includes attractiveness, penetrating glance, pleasant voice, intuition, and so on (Bryman 1992, 37). This approach, however, does not explain why some people who have the most desirable features do not have charisma, neither is it possible to explain, by means of isolated observation of personal characteristics, why someone becomes a leader, while others do not.

A number of theories dealing with charismatic leadership rely on the psychoanalytical tradition and the theory of Sigmund Freud in the study of charisma. Although Freud himself had never used the term charisma, his works possess certain elements of the analysis of leader-follower relationships, primarily in correspondence with charismatic leadership. Psychoanalytic theory in the study of these relationships is oriented towards mechanisms of subconsciousness, by which it seeks to explain the unusual and very often completely irrational influence of some charismatic leaders, who are idealized and admired by their followers.

Intense personal identification of the followers with charismatic leaders is interpreted by psychodynamic processes, such as projection, transfer or regression. Thus, for example, followers may transfer their feelings toward important figures of the past (e.g., father or mother) onto the leaders (transfer), or in relation to such leader to demonstrate an unusually infantile behaviour (regression). It is also possible to project unrealized desires and unmet needs, or various positive and negative emotions onto the leader. Followers who have a sense of guilt, fear or alienation may experience the fulfilment, a sense of power and euphoria in the process of identification with the dominant leader.

People experiencing the crisis of identity, who can not properly experience themselves and their role in the environment (according to psychoanalytic theory, because of the too strong or too weak roles of their parents in their childhood), develop a strong emotional relationship with and dependence on the leader, who becomes the object of worship. People who did not have a resolved enough relationship with their parents tend to identify with leaders who, in a sense, symbolize a father figure, and to express in such a relationship the feelings of typical child dependence, which abound in fantasies and demands on one hand, and obser-

vance and obedience, on the other hand. However, the paternal figure of leaders is not the only thing that starts the process. It is believed that charismatic leaders exhibit the so-called mechanism of reverse transfer. They are prone to externalizing their own problems and needs, transforming them into a vision that becomes common for all their followers. In this way, the vision carries a specific message, which provides the followers with the feeling of their needs and problems, while the charismatic leader who broadcasts such a message becomes a kind of saviour and therefore someone who should be followed obediently.

SOURCES OF CHARISMATIC LEADERS' INFLUENCE

It is obvious that psychoanalytic theory advocates the idea that emotional problems, guilt, intrapersonal conflicts and many other problems, mainly related to subconscious processes, represent a very fertile ground for the emergence of charismatic leadership. It can be partially valid for understanding the leadership process in general, offering an answer to the question of why some people need to be guided, and why they are ready to surrender their lives and their fate to people who believe they have a special gift and great abilities. History offers various cases of collective transfer or collective regression, when entire groups and whole nations blindly followed the idea of the leader, although it was difficult to find a rational explanation for that. It is likely that most people have subconscious mechanisms that guide their behaviour and that we are all prone to occasionally exhibit elements of regression, transfer, projections, or some other psychodynamic process in relation to other people. However, the existence of these processes can be considered as a prerequisite for the emergence of charismatic leadership, rather than as its basic cause.

Charismatic leadership (and leadership in general) is based primarily on the interaction of leaders and people who follow it, so in order to understand it we need to review all dimensions of this relationship. It is believed that charismatic leadership should be viewed as a collective process, which takes place through personal and social identification and internalization (Shamir et al. 1993). Personal identification is one of the key elements in the development of charismatic leadership, particularly for followers with low self-esteem, problems of personal identity, and the need for high dependency on the authority. Equally important is the process of social identification, which affects the way people define themselves, primarily in relation to membership in a group or organization. Those who identify themselves with the group become proud of their membership in it and perceive it as the most important part of their social identity. When a social identity is so strong, people are ready to subordinate their individual needs to those of the group, thereby sacrificing their personal interests in favour of the group. Charismatic leaders are able to

increase social identification in various ways (e.g. giving the group special features, symbols, rituals, and making it different from other groups) and thereby increase their own influence in the group.

Another very important process of charismatic influence is reflected in internalization. In the process, the values associated with the followers are associated with those of the group, that is, organization, by enabling the followers to express their own values in the way which is not in contradiction with the vision, mission and goals of the organization. The appearance of a charismatic leader is more likely to happen when his vision is congruent with the existing values of the followers. Individuals internalize the identity of the leader or the follower, and those identities become relationally recognized through reciprocal role adoption, and collectively endorsed within the organizational context (DeRue and Ashford 2010). The charismatic leader underlines the important aspects of the work because it seems important, desirable and moral itself. In this way, internal motivation is encouraged and people are encouraged to focus on internal motivational factors, such as self-expression, promotion, and self-confidence, experiencing their work as part of their own concept of values, that is, their nature, and considering themselves as an indivisible part of the organization.

The processes of identification and internalization of charismatic leadership are facilitated by the desire of the followers to identify with the leader, whose energy and confidence are the subject of idealization and admiration, to the extent that the leader's approval and acceptance become the followers' most important measure of values. Many followers see the charismatic leader's approval as the primary source of motivation. On the other hand, they are motivated by the fear of the leader's rejection as well.

In addition to the relationship between leaders and followers, understanding of charismatic leadership requires the study of the interaction and mutual influence between the followers themselves. This process, which some call "social contamination" (Meindl 1990, 189) explains the development of charismatic leadership when there is no direct interaction between leaders and followers, so it can not show the direct influence of leaders. Social contamination includes the spontaneous spreading of emotions and reactions in a certain group, which occurs after yielding inhibition due to the fact that the member of the group observes the same or similar behaviour with other members. It is believed, namely, that the true social identity of people is inhibited by social norms and standards of acceptable behaviour and that people therefore do not always behave in accordance with their true nature, but in accordance with the rules of the group which they want to fit in. If there is a leader with a behaviour that deviates from the usual standards, he/she will be accepted first by those members who do not share a strong identification with the group. Because they can not identify with a group, they will seek to identify with

the leader, by imitating the non-specific behaviour, symbols, rituals and the like. In contact with these members of the group, other members will, in time, accept such behaviour (even if it initially seemed unacceptable). The more the mechanisms of inhibition are easing, the more members will accept the new model of behaviour, even if they are not in direct contact with the leader, which is a result of mutual interaction and imitation of the members. However, the attributes of charisma will be ascribed to the leader, because of the need of individuals to rationalize their feelings and their behaviour. Since people have already accepted the leader's behaviour which does not match the usual social norms, they will justify it by means of attributing exceptional qualities and abilities to the leader (if one is worth that much, it is acceptable to identify with him).

This brings us to the field of attributive theories of leadership, the essence of which is reflected in the attribution of charismatic attributes to the leaders whose behaviour is perceived as charismatic (Conger et al. 1990). There are patterns of behaviour that are more prone to the attribution of charisma. Thus, for example, charisma will be attributed to the leader whose vision bears significant discrepancies compared to the existing state of affairs, as well as to the leaders who use unconventional methods of its implementation (as a strategy to achieve multiple objectives deviates from the usual, the leader will be attributed several extra abilities). This also applies to the leaders who are prone to taking big risks, especially if the risk is related to their personal status and position, and to those who show great confidence and "infectious" enthusiasm.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHARISMATIC LEADERS

One of the most popular theories, oriented primarily to the characteristics of charismatic leaders and the effects such leaders produce, was presented by Robert House (1995, 60). He estimates that charismatic leaders have a very strong need for power and a strong belief in their own beliefs and ideals. Their behaviour is designed to impress followers in terms of leadership competence and quality, they tend to express self-esteem and they frequently remind other people of their previous success. The charismatic leader easily articulates the ideology of the vision and mission with the values and beliefs of the followers, which results in a greater emotional involvement of the followers and their commitment to the goals of the group. They also impose their own patterns of behaviour, making it suitable for imitation, which encourages the process of identification and facilitates the impact on the followers. Charismatic leaders often express very high expectations of their followers, but at the same time communicate confidence in their abilities, thereby promoting their self-confidence and faith in their own values. This is a very important component of the charismatic process, as the followers who are not convinced

that they can respond to the demands of leaders often resist attempts to be influenced, or refuse to engage seriously. Another characteristic of charismatic leaders is the ability to foster strong motivation of the followers, needed to carry out complex, challenging tasks that require initiative, determination, perseverance, professionalism, cooperation and so on.

The most important manifestations of charismatic leadership are reflected in the following (House 1995, 60):

– confidence of the members of the group in the correctness of leader's positions;

– similarity in values of followers and leaders;

– unconditional acceptance of the leader;

– appeal to the leader;

– voluntary submission to the leader;

– identification with the leader;

– emotional commitment to a common mission;

– group members feel that they can contribute to achieving a shared vision;

– high group goals.

Charismatic leadership involves a great commitment of the group members to the leader, which is a result of strong identification arising from the belief of the followers in the leader's exceptional abilities. This type of leadership emphasizes symbolic leader behaviour, visionary and inspiring messages, often transferred by nonverbal communication, appeal to ideological values, the expression of confidence and faith in the followers, as well as the expectation that the followers should sacrifice their own goals and interests for the sake of the common ones, if necessary (Kreitner et al. 2000, 567).

EFFECTS OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

While the charismatic leader can arise in any situation, it is considered that there are certain prerequisites that make it more likely. Different conditions operating at the environmental, organizational, group and individual levels influence the emergence of different types of leaders (Mumford et al. 2008).

It is believed that crises are a very fertile ground for the emergence of charismatic leaders. Research on charisma in organizational settings often focuses on leaders who found new organizations or transform organizations in crisis (e.g., Beyer & Browning 1999, Janicijevic 2010, 318). As previously mentioned, Weber believed that this was one of the basic preconditions for the manifestation of charisma, and what makes it such is the existence of discontent and expectation that someone or something would appear that would reduce dissatisfaction. That is why it is considered that the crisis objectively does not necessarily exist, but that

leader may be able to create a feeling of dissatisfaction with the current situation and, simultaneously, offer the possibility of solving problems in an unusual, unconventional way, especially if the followers realize that the existing approaches and strategies are not sufficiently effective. It is therefore logical that the charismatic leaders often appear in organizations that are yet to be established, when there is no clearly defined system of roles of employees, when jobs are not structured enough, and when there is some confusion about the functioning of the organization. In these situations, members of organizations do not understand their position enough, they are not quite sure what to do to ensure the survival and prosperity of the organization, and often are in the state of tension and fear, so the emergence of the leader who provides a resolution of the crisis and an acceptable strategy is seen as a salvation (Boal and Brysen 1998, 11). It also applies in the case of organizational changes, which abound in uncertainty, insecurity, frustration, and fear.

The appearance of a charismatic leader is more likely to happen when his vision is congruent with the existing values and identities of the followers. This is, in a sense, the result of an interactive, reciprocal process of influence in charismatic leadership, which is reflected in the fact that followers elect leaders whom they intuitively believe to share their system of values.

Due to the strong identification with the leader and to the encouragement of internal motivation, charismatic leadership can have significant effects in terms of increasing the engagement of the followers, and provoking exceptional commitment to the joint cause, which can be even fanatic. However, whether the commitment will give positive or negative effects depends on the type of charisma, that is, on the leaders who manifest it. In cases when charisma is strongly expressed, it is difficult to make a precise distinction between its positive and negative effects. One way to do that is by studying the consequences of the charismatic leadership process for the followers, in terms of whether they gain or lose in the process. Another possibility is related to the assessment of the personality and values of the leaders who demonstrate charisma.

In this regard, one can speak of two basic types of charismatic leaders: leaders who demonstrate socialized charisma and those who express a personalized charisma (House 1992, 81). The first type of leader uses his power for the benefit of other people, working to achieve group goals and providing constant intellectual stimulation for his followers. This type of leader is trying to develop a congruent value system with his followers, who are motivated, autonomous, and responsible. On the other hand, leaders who have personalized charisma tend to use power to achieve their own interests. They impose their goals onto the group, manipulate its members, and are willing to provide support only when the protection of their own values is provided.

Both types of leaders seek to develop a strong commitment of the followers, whether to themselves or to the common goals of the group, but leaders with negative charisma seek to develop a more dominant commitment of the followers to the leader compared to the commitment to the goals. Therefore, they emphasize personal identification; they are prone to glorify themselves and to behave narcissistically, while ideological messages function as means of increasing the power and influence. Leaders with positive charisma encourage the commitment to the goals, force the internalization as the most important dimension of influence, and as a result, there are much greater benefits to the followers. In most cases, however, it is difficult to define a clear boundary between positive and negative charismatic leaders, due to the fact that most of them are somewhere in between, and because followers' opinions about them are mostly polarized: the same leader can cause admiration and worship of one group of people, or, conversely, scorn and hatred of another. In any case, the presence of a strong leader with exceptional charisma can have negative effects that are reflected in the following (Conger 1999, 313):

– unrealistic expectations of leaders from followers;

– very strong dependence of followers that could block their initiative and make them passive;

– loyalty of some followers may cause negative reactions in others;

– lack of desire or fear of confrontation with the leader, which can lead to the situation in which all the leader's actions are approved of unconditionally, even when they are not correct;

– a sense of being betrayed by the leader, in case he is unable to meet the often unrealistic expectations (that is how sometimes highly unpleasant actions of the followers towards once respected leaders can be explained);

– the risk of the abuse of power by leaders.

There is evidence that charismatic leadership can sometimes act in resistance to change and in defence of the *status quo* when the interests and values of established groups are jeopardized (Levay 2010). Anyway, faced with the changes, followers do not understand what they are supposed to do next. They often feel tension and anxiety, so the emergence of a leader who provides a resolution of the crisis and a new strategy, is perceived as a salvation (Boal and Brysen 1998:11-28). Open communication about the perceived effects of the organizational change is a way to reduce resistance and fear (Babić and Savović 2009:47-61).

However, despite the shortcomings, charismatic leaders provide psychological drivers; they increase hope and aspirations of the members of an organization. They serve as very powerful role models, whose actions and personal energy demonstrate desirable behaviour patterns that inspire their followers. By means of their personal energy and appeal, they generate a personalized and intimate devotion of their followers, in-

creasing their energy and willingness to engage, which in crisis situations, as well as in the process of organizational change, may be of vital importance. What is also significant is the fact that the emotional moment has an important role in the formation of the charismatic leader – follower realtionship, which is why the development of these relationships, and, therefore, of charismatic leadership, is difficult to predict. Therefore, the process of change led by a charismatic leader can take a very uncertain character, especially if the leader has a personalized type of charisma.

The effects of charismatic leadership can be very strong, and their manifestations, as already mentioned, are most prominent in the emotional sphere. It is reflected in the expressed confidence, respect and loyalty, which result in a willingness to completely follow the ideas of the leader, that is, the visions and missions promoted by the leader. The followers of charismatic leaders believe unreservedly in his assessment, attitudes and values, as well as in the fact that his vision is of great importance for the organization, and due to the pronounced loyalty to the leader, his ideas are seen as their own, so their commitment to their implementation is extremely high. This relationship between the leader and the follower, which is characterized by a strong identification with the leader, usually leads to greater self-confidence, self-esteem and sense of security, and the followers of charismatic leaders are satisfied with the leader, their job and the general status within the organization (Stojanovic Aleksic, et al. 2010, 1:86). An emotional relationship with the leader and internal motivation by his vision together result in higher commitment and a desire to invest more effort in the implementation of goals, which results in a greater willingness to accept changes in the organization and to apply those changes with less stress and resistance. However, despite the generally positive effects of charismatic leadership, there are situations where its application is more effective, as well as those which are less effective.

CONCLUSION

Considering the characteristics of charismatic leadership, it is quite logical that its greatest effects should be related to the situation of uncertainty, of rapid and radical changes in all spheres of the organization, and of course, to all emergency situations. Experience has shown that within the organization, as well as in the wider social environment, drastic changes in value systems, the so-called "cultural shocks," contribute significantly to the increase of the importance of charismatic leadership. The absence of usual norms of behaviour, the loss of existing positions and values and a potential threat to their own status, result in the charismatic leader being considered as a lifeguard, who will, in the absence of structure and clearly defined roles and interactions, offer his vision as a uni-

versal solution to the existing problems. If we carefully consider current events in today's environment (in global, not just domestic frames), it is clear that it is characterized by precisely those features that represent an excellent foundation for the development of very charismatic leadership.

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