

MINDSET



How to Spot if Your Boss
is an Extreme
Charismatic

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While being charismatic, in of itself, can be a good thing, nothing in its extreme form bodes well for organizations and the people that run them. For a leader to have *charisma* means there is strong respect and affiliation for that person, along with the belief that they hold wisdom which helps to empower others. This means a person, mainly through their presence, personality, charm, and behaviors, have a sort of attractiveness that compels people to become devoted to them.

Being an *extreme charismatic* is truly a rarity; however, it becomes very important to know when you are being led by one.

So, what is *extreme charisma*? According to Montgomery Van Wart (2005), “extreme charismatics are defined by their enormous referent power... [having] a magnetic appeal fueled by eloquence, emotional expressiveness, unusual self-confidence, and belief in their own exceptional abilities, insights, or sources of divinity” (p. 342).

This mixture of ingredients can create a fascination with someone, even if they are generally disliked by a lot of people. They are also people who have, historically, changed the world forever, for better and for worse.

Before you jump to conclude if your boss or leader might be an extreme charismatic, take a look at the following seven criteria.



How do I know if I'm being led by an extreme charismatic?

1. They have far-reaching referent power.

In the late 1950's, French and Raven postulated five main types of power in the social psychology literature. One of these is *referent power*, or the ability to gain and influence followership through friendship, loyalty, admiration, respect, affection, and people's desire to fit in and gain approval.

Extreme charismatics have a such a stronghold on their base of followers that they can effectively convince them to pursue their goals and vision through many obstacles and grave criticisms. This enormous personal power is usually supplemented by things such as their physical appearance, social esteem, gracefulness, intellect, and/or wealth.



2. They are very high in personal and social dominance.

People with *personal dominance* have very strong beliefs about what needs to be fixed with a current system, what exactly needs to be done about it, and the corrective actions that need to be taken to get there (Van Wart, 2005). Typical *social dominance* orientations call for leaders who prefer preserving only the structures that increase group differences in order to maintain their social status, organizational hierarchies, and ruthless competitive stance.

In the words of Van Wart, since “...they are convinced of their own self-worth and correctness, it means that they will persevere in achieving their vision and plans at almost any cost to themselves or others” and when given absolute power, “metamorphose into murderous and avaricious despots” (p. 343).



3. They are well known for engaging in unconventional behaviors.

The commonality here is the ability to inspire people to deviate completely from past principles and dogma, *to the point of completely disregarding any severe disadvantages*. They introduce radical changes and sweepingly new practices that go against common wisdom, sometimes through the use of new technological tactics (Van Wart, 2005).



4. They have a target portion of the population who perceives that person as a charismatic.

Two main items are said to be present for this to take place: *regression* and *transference*.

Regression is the psychological phenomenon of returning back to a time in people's lives when things were happier, more secure, and generally better for them. Who doesn't enjoy reminiscing over the "good times" of past nostalgia, and the prospect of bringing those memories back into current reality?

The second part includes *transference*, where past figures or archetypes' personality traits are projected onto the current leader, tapping into a follower's sense of security through the use of powerful models found in our history.

The words of Van Wart help us to understand that “[n]umerous studies have shown that followers of charismatics tend to be more prone to feelings of helplessness, frustration, loneliness, anger, distrust, and uncertainty”, and who can say they have never felt any, or some mixture, of these emotions in their lifetime?

Here’s the part that gets very interesting, though. These items, when present, create a sense of extreme personal identification, which “...results in the total and uncritical substitution of the leader’s beliefs for one’s own, slavish imitation of the leader, and unctuous adulation” (p. 343).



5. They become synonymous with the solution.

Followers who are disenchanted with the system see the unconventional ways of an extreme charismatic leader as the very answer they need for radical change and betterment, making the person the solution.

This can be confounded by the leader taking an initiative with claiming sole responsibility, reinforcing dependence, and leading some to exhibit social contagion behaviors, “...allowing them to be more local or visible in their beliefs” which can spread to other people who get “...caught up in the freshness and excitement of the new beliefs and adopt them, even though they did not formally hold them.”

One very important note to make here is that “it can lead to demagoguery that turns minorities into scapegoats” (Van Wart, 2005, p. 344). *Why does this happen?* Because once people have found their “savior” and formed an extreme personal and emotional connection with that person, their devotion and compliance becomes equally as extreme.



6. There is a presence or potential presence of crisis needing to be addressed.

Although there doesn't need to be a crisis present at all times, extreme charismatics will tend to push the immediacy of their agenda through the use of crises. If there is not one immediately available, the psychological power of an impending crisis will suffice.



7. They fully exploit the fundamental attribution error.

These leaders will “...seek to explain, not justify” in order to “successfully convince followers to be consistent with their ideas, voluntarily follow their plans, and be inspired by them” (Van Wart, 2005, p. 344).

The easiest way to explain the *fundamental attribution error* is to take apart the three terms for analysis.

It is *fundamental*, because all human beings are prone to it as part of our imperfect minds.

It includes *attribution* in the sense that we attribute outcomes as a consequence of external and internal variables – that smart people will rise faster in the ranks because of their inner strengths, and be able to conquer the externalities that exist, as an example of an internal attribution.

It is also usually an *error*, because we forget there is usually a complex mix of both external and internal attributes that create any one situation or outcome.

How do extreme charismatics exploit this? By placing blame on others when things go awry: a corrupt system, fake news, biased people in power – all external attributions which take the focus away from the leader and their own internal weaknesses.

Conversely, when things are going well, extreme charismatic leaders attribute this fully to themselves.



These insights can prove to be very valuable for us. An extreme charismatic leader engages in extreme forms of egocentric behaviors, can achieve cult-like status by making use of their powerful referent power, high need for dominance, and the use of consistently unconventional choices.

The situation is exacerbated, and their power made stronger, when they have followers who have longstanding, unmet needs and psychological dependencies that lead them to create an associated extreme personal identification with the leader, which becomes very difficult for followers to break away from.

Once these social depravations are tapped into securely by the extreme charismatic, it can create a wider flurry of followers through the use of social contagion. Additionally, the presence or potential presence of crises, and the facilitation of a savior mentality, where the leader becomes the sole source synonymous with making things great once again, solidifies and strengthens these beliefs.

This all leads to followers remaining vehemently consistent in their unwavering loyalty to that leader's goals, vision, mission, requests, and commands (Van Wart, 2005). Just think about that for a moment. All of this was written way before the year 2017, and yet, still has such great relevance to us today.



Understanding how we got to this point is the first step undoing it. If you feel you're being led by an extreme charismatic, it is never too late to "wake up" to what is really happening around you.

Once you do that, you may have no choice but to do something before things get way out of hand, and you become witness, and an accessory, to something you may regret for the rest of your life. That is, assuming you want the best for your organization, society at large, and this world. In other words, if you have a really good heart.

The majority of this article comes from the work of Montgomery Van Wart's text, "Dynamics of Leadership in Public Service: Theory and Practice" (2005).



How can I help you and your organization thrive?

Have questions or want to set up a time to chat?

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Dr. Josh earned his doctorate in business psychology at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, and has a passion for assisting people and organizations with projects that aid in increasing well-being, work-life balance, diversity/inclusion, and engagement.