

Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On the self deception of:

The Charisma Excuse

In the literature about business management, the focus is on the manager as hero. Jack Welch arrives at General Electric and, all by himself, wrestles the monster into profitability. Just ask him. He tells us all about it in *Jack: Straight from the Gut*.

We don't have to take Jack's word for it, however. The management shelves are full of books by others celebrating Welch as the modern, executive equivalent of Hercules: You can buy *Big Shots: Business the Jack Welch Way*; or you can pick up *Jack Welch & The G. E. Way: Management Insights and Leadership Secrets of the Legendary CEO*; or you can read *Jack Welch: The Giant of Corporate Management Who Created Billions for Investors*. Even in the 21st century, we crave myths, and the story of Jack Welch satisfies our need for a contemporary Ulysses.

Welsh is not the only larger-than-life managerial hero. From Thomas Edison, to Lee Iacocca, to Andrew Grove, to, now, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, we continue to celebrate our executive superstars. They are smart, talented, and charismatic. How else could they build their empire?

In the public sector, we too are fascinated with heroic, managerial leaders. Dwight Eisenhower organized D-Day. David Lilenthal rescued the Tennessee Valley Authority. Hyman Rickover created the nuclear navy—despite

the aggressive resistance of his superiors in the Navy and Defense Department. And at the top of the list of current public-sector managerial heroes is Rudy Giuliani—who, on September 11, 2001, single-handedly saved New York City. The Lone Ranger rides again.



Even in the cool and careful, non-celebratory academic world, we create managerial heroes. We don't call them that. We don't label them "big shots" or "giants" or "legendary." Still, when we write a teaching case about the manager of a public agency and when we teach that case to thousands of people

—both students earning a degree and practicing managers attending a two-week executive program—we are implicitly creating heroes.

Why else spend any time studying this case? Why else try to learn something from this case? Because the manager in the case was (it goes without saying) a big shot, a giant. Through the case, the manager becomes legendary.

And, although we may only read about these managers—although we may never meet them—we attribute to them one other characteristic: Obviously, they must be charismatic. Otherwise they could never have pulled it off.

Yet, when we actually meet one of them in person—when we first see one of them in

action (if you can describe running a meeting as “action”)—we are immediately struck: They are not at all charismatic. Sure, people give them a little deference. But that respect is derived from the office they hold plus the accomplishments they have gotten their organization to achieve. The fact is: They aren’t John Wayne or Katharine Hepburn.

Learning from charismatic heroes isn’t much help to those of us who are downright dull. We aren’t going to wake up a room; we’re more apt to put it to sleep. Nobody is going to salute us.

“Sure, if I had charisma, I could do what Jack Welch or Rudy Giuliani did. But I don’t. It’s not my fault. My parents failed to pass on to me the charisma gene. As a result, there is nothing glamorous, or charming, or alluring, or captivating about me. I’ll just have to face it: I’m boring.”

This is the charisma excuse.

As an excuse, it is extremely serviceable. It vindicates everything—or, at least, everything about an absence of leadership: “If I had been born with the charisma gene, I could lead my department [my agency, my small unit]. Unfortunately, I wasn’t. It isn’t my fault. It’s just the evolutionary hand that I was dealt.”

Nevertheless, the charisma excuse is just that: It’s an excuse. It’s not an explanation. It’s not even an apology. It’s just an excuse. The assumption behind this excuse is that (once offered) no explanation, no apology, no further clarification is required.

This would be acceptable if—and only if—the charisma of personal magnetism was essential to leadership. It isn’t. Most leaders don’t beguile their organization. Most leaders don’t charm their people into working hard and smart, into producing wondrous results.

People aren’t cobras who will dance at the command of a few notes from a flute. People require neither music nor charm. Rather they require a clear explanation about *where* they are going, about *why* they are trying to get there, about *how* they will get there, and about *what will happen* if they do get there.

It might help if the agency’s managerial team could provide this explanation in an enchanting way. That, however, is not essential. But it is essential that the managerial team provide a clear sense of direction: Here is

what we are trying to accomplish. Here is *why* we are trying to accomplish it. Here is *how* we will accomplish it. And here is *what will happen* if we do accomplish it. Then, they have to repeat and repeat this message until everyone gets it.

If this message can be delivered in a non-boring way, that will help. But the managers of public agencies cannot wait for some DNA transplant. It isn’t coming. They have to deliver the message with the communication skills—boring or beguiling—that they have been able to learn and develop.

Public employees need real, straightforward leadership. Their managers should not hide behind the charisma excuse. **B**

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