Charismatic leaders occasionally develop a sinister side—a tendency to manipulate and take advantage of followers. Here’s a probing analysis of why this happens, and how to avoid it.

The Charismatic Leader as Narcissist: Understanding the Abuse of Power

DANIEL SANKOWSKY

Today’s discussions of leadership emphasize organizational learning and follower empowerment—conditions that promote mutual respect and dialogue.

In this environment, one would expect leaders to be less autocratic and more careful in wielding the power that comes with their position. This is clearly not always the case. In fact, leaders can hide behind seemingly liberating concepts such as empowerment to enact subtle abuses.

This article focuses on one special kind of power and its abuse. Labeled here as “symbolic status,” it refers to a psychological phenomenon—the tendency for followers to tacitly regard leaders as parent figures, a tendency that becomes pronounced in the presence of charismatic leaders. This particular power is important because of its fundamental impact on the followers’ perceptions and beliefs. Abuse of this power can insidiously and significantly undermine the followers’ psychological well-being.

What enhances this power and what predisposes a leader to abuse it? This article suggests that several factors are likely at work. First, the simple fact that charismatic leaders have heightened symbolic power makes followers more susceptible to their influences. Second, the leader’s psychological makeup is itself a factor. A narcissistic leader tends to abuse symbolic status. When a leader is both charismatic and narcissistic, he or she is likely to successfully abuse the power of symbolic status—that is, to induce followers to buy into abusive behaviors.

Accordingly, the approach taken here is to first focus on power from behavioral and typological standpoints, and then to examine the abuse of power, notably the power of symbolic status. We then shift the focus to look at the typical follower’s response to abuse, and we illustrate this with three scenarios. Next comes a discussion of how abuse of power in the presence of charisma and narcissism impacts followers. The article ends

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Daniel Sankowsky is an associate professor of management and chairperson of the management department at Suffolk University in Boston, Massachusetts. He received his doctorate in mathematics from the University of California in 1967. He has since expanded his research interests to include organizational behavior. Dr. Sankowsky is the author of the book Unlocking: A Guide to Creative Living (University Press of America, 1987). He has pursued the connection between managing, teaching, and counseling in a variety of ways, focusing on such issues as abuse of power and learning anxiety. In recent years, his articles have appeared in such journals as the Journal of Management Education, Human Resource Management, and Psychotherapy. He lives with his wife in Wayland, Massachusetts.

with recommendations on how leaders can avoid inadvertent abuse of symbolic status.

POWER: BEHAVIORAL AND TYPOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Kenneth Thompson and Fred Luthans’ behavioral model provides a framework for understanding how power is acquired and exercised. It focuses on the interactions between antecedent conditions, behaviors, and consequences for both leaders and followers.

This model describes the use of power (the exercise phase) as a series of nine steps. Step one includes the antecedent conditions for both leader and followers, consisting of their separate assessments of the leader’s personal strength and organizational backing. Step two is the leader’s influence attempt. This behavior amends the followers’ antecedent conditions (step three). Step four refers to how followers respond—their behaviors, in terms of public compliance and private conviction. Their response engenders consequences for the leader (step five), in terms of strengthening or weakening his or her position, which, along with organizational outcomes, changes antecedent conditions for the leader (step six). In step seven, the leader subsequently responds to followers. The nature of that response has consequences for followers (step eight), moderated by the impact of external sources (step nine).

Consider an example: The director of nursing at a subacute facility was held in high regard by her superiors and known to be well “networked” within the profession (step one). She insisted that her staffers continually add new responsibilities to their workloads, well beyond the duties listed in their job descriptions (steps two and three). Her nurses, although often overwhelmed, nonetheless complied with her ever-shifting agendas (step four), generally believing they made sense. This consolidated her position (step five) and generally had positive organizational results (step six). There were enough problem cases, however, that the director did have to address complaints from patients’ family members.
about the nature of the health care provided. Whenever this happened, she tended to blame staff (step seven), who were burdened with trying to correct the problem (step eight) in the context of a hostile external environment (step nine).

Types of Power

Power is often defined as the capacity for one social unit (e.g., the leader) to determine the behavior of another (e.g., followers). Generally included in this view are the notions of dependency and control: the leaders’ ability to determine their followers’ behavior stems at least in part from the followers’ dependency on leaders. This, in turn, is based on leaders’ control over the various aspects of organizational life affecting followers or perceived as needed by the followers, such as material resources and organizational advancement.

A “type” of power can be defined in terms of its source, area of control, related managerial function, and managerial responsibility to the followers. For example, the type of power that might be called reward or remunerative power has as its source a leader’s access to physical and financial resources, which allows the leader to control their distribution. The attendant management function is the implementation of allocation and compensation practices. The attendant responsibility is to provide materially for followers in an equitable manner.

Symbolic Status

As indicated, the focus here is on the predisposition for followers to treat leaders as parent figures—to mentally construct their relationship with leaders on child-parent terms. In other words, followers view leaders as people from whom they are driven to seek approval. This predisposition constitutes a source of leader power that we can call symbolic status. It affords leaders some measure of control over their interpersonal relationships with followers and ultimately over the belief systems that followers adopt. The management function associated with such control is communication. The attendant responsibility is the free exchange of clear and unbiased information and the granting of respect for the followers’ views.

Symbolic Status as Transference

The term “symbolic status” has its origins in a concept known in psychoanalytic circles as transference. This occurs when clients “symbolize” their therapists as parents. Various management theorists have explored the parallels between the leader-follower relationship and the therapist-client relationship. Specifically, they suggest that transference is a phenomenon that inheres in both relationships. This means that followers tend to be highly motivated to gain the leader’s personal approval and are highly affected by the leader’s actions and beliefs. Followers are vulnerable to the way a leader communicates, particularly with respect to philosophies or visions, interpretations of shared events, and proposed courses of action. The motivation and vulnerability described go beyond the present-based “normal” reactions to a leader. The power of symbolic status, rooted in powerful, unconscious drives, enhances a leader’s potential to fundamentally alter followers’ perceptions, emotions, and thoughts.

In the story of the nursing director introduced earlier, the staff showed a strong transference reaction toward their leader. They felt “little” in her presence. They sought her approval on a personal level and were intimidated by her mood swings. One outsider observed: “She’s like the parent in a dysfunctional family.”

The recent departure of studio head Jeffrey Katzenberg from Walt Disney reveals elements of transference in his relationship with chairman Michael Eisner. Observers such as entertainment impresario David Geffen report that Katzenberg sought Eisner’s approval and praise with singular determination, aiming to be his “number one son.” Both men, according to Geffen, were mirroring aspects of their relationships with their own fathers in establishing the distance between them. For example, possibly because of the
### EXHIBIT 1
**Steps in the Exercise of the Power of Symbolic Status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step One:</th>
<th>Strength of leader's symbolic status, based on prior actions, demonstrated knowledge, values, personal qualities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step Two:</td>
<td>Leader's influence attempt: promotion of vision, request for course of action, interpretations of events (communication process)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Three:</td>
<td>Strength of leader's symbolic status, updated by influence attempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Four:</td>
<td>Followers' response in terms of public compliance and also private conviction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Five:</td>
<td>Consequences for leaders; effect on strength of symbolic status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step Six:</td>
<td>Changed antecedent conditions for leaders, including organizational outcomes resulting from leader and follower actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step Seven:</td>
<td>Leader response to followers, based on perceived level of follower compliance and on organizational outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Eight:</td>
<td>Consequences for followers, including effect on psychological well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Nine:</td>
<td>Moderating effect on consequences from outside agencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aloofness of his father, Eisner was reluctant to praise Katzenberg for his accomplishments, notably the success of "The Lion King."

This transference reaction is obviously even more pronounced when the leader is a parent. In the recent case of the Haft family, owners of a Washington-based real estate firm, the emotionally charged push and pull between father and son led a state of ongoing litigation and maneuvering to win over other family members. One can surmise that the need for approval and acceptance likely played a role in this course of action.

The behavioral model can be linked to the power of symbolic status. First, consider the leader's strength (step one) in terms of his or her persona, as demonstrated by prior actions, knowledge, values, and personal qualities. Then view the influence attempt (step two) in terms of the way the leader communicates: how does he or she promote a vision, direct a course of action, or interpret shared events? How do followers respond (step four)? This sets the stage for the remaining steps, as indicated in Exhibit 1.

We shall use the model later to focus on what can be termed abusive attempts to influence. In the face of such abuse, followers' responses often demonstrate a pattern of public compliance without private conviction. But, followers may see a charismatic leader's qualities, knowledge, actions, and values (in step one) in so positive a light that these perceptions actually sway many of their private convictions, bolstering leader power (step five). When leaders are also narcissistic, their tendency to promote grandiose and unrealistic visions often leads to poor follower and organizational outcomes, creating new antecedent conditions (step six). These setbacks provoke leaders to blame followers (step seven) and to question their compliance and conviction. This creates negative psychological consequences for followers (step eight) who accept the blame, not able to challenge the leader even in their own minds.

### ABUSE OF POWER

There are ways that leaders, even those who are otherwise well-intentioned, may abuse a
specific type of power. Abuse of power occurs when a leader acts in a manner that manipulates an area of control for personal gain at the followers' expense—all the while avoiding basic managerial responsibility. Intention may or may not be present.

Consider the power to reward. Leaders are in a position to grab up scarce resources for personal gain. In this context, the abusive leader avoids his or her basic responsibility to provide adequately for followers. The abuse issue here is whether or not leaders manipulate organizational resources (through the imposition of allocation and compensation practices) for personal material gain in a way that denies followers their share of opportunities and rewards.

Or consider the power of hierarchical status. Here, a leader is in a position to manipulate authority at the followers' expense by creating an excessively demanding workload; in effect, the leader may sacrifice followers on the altar of his or her personal mission. The abuse issue is whether or not the leader pushes followers to the point of burnout while still reaping the rewards of their efforts. In this context, the abusive leader is seen as avoiding his or her basic responsibility to promote professional development in followers.

For example, Fred Bucy and Mark Shepherd at Texas Instruments were known to generate an extraordinary amount of work for their managers through ubiquitous memos and directives, constantly demanding evaluation reports and performance charts. More recently, Richard Snyder of Simon & Schuster was fired in part because of the way he dealt with his managers—his penchant for "chewing them out" and "using them up."

ABUSE OF SYMBOLIC STATUS

The power of symbolic status is particularly susceptible to inadvertent abuse because so much of what underlies it is tacit. This power is abused when leaders manipulate their relationships with followers for personal gain at the expense of the followers' psychological well-being. This might be done by denying the followers a fair validation of their own views, for example, or by denying them access to appropriate information. Personal gain in this context might include self-aggrandizement, unchallenged follower support, and exemption from scrutiny. In this context, the abusive leader avoids his or her responsibility to provide clear and unbiased information and feedback.

A distinction may be helpful. A leader who browbeats his or her staff shamelessly might be said to be abusing hierarchical power, and a manager who shows blatant favoritism in distributing perks may be abusing reward power. But it is when the leader tries to persuade followers that all this was for their own good and in the interest of the organization that he or she abuses the power of symbolic status.

Symbolic abuse lies in the communication process itself and need not involve prior behaviors. The abusive process includes withholding and concealing information, undermining the followers' views, and shading the truth to promote one's own view. Returning to the Disney example, one might infer that abuse of symbolic status occurred in Eisner's communications with Katzenberg. According to those close to Katzenberg, Eisner promised him Frank Wells' position should it become available. After Wells' death, however, the offer was not forthcoming. This ultimately fueled Katzenberg's anger and feelings of betrayal and led him to confront Eisner. Although we cannot verify that the promise was ever made, Eisner had been known to make—and then later retract—offers for movie projects that he never intended to carry out.

Common areas of discourse with a high potential for abuse include the leader's vision, his or her interpretation of shared events (such as previous leader or follower behavior), and his or her direction for a course of action. The leader may disguise a personal agenda as a vision or philosophy. He or she may request the "extra mile" from followers by representing the request as a call for special effort to advance an organizational cause, when in fact he or she merely wants to test
loyalties. He or she may explain away aberrant behavior and make self-serving attributions about others' behaviors, masquerading them as real data and unbiased analysis.

For example, a leader might use the power of symbolic status to whitewash errors in judgment that created organizational and interpersonal problems. Or a leader who contributed marginally to an eminently successful organizational initiative may glorify this effort in an attempt to gain the reverence of followers.

Did the director of nursing we discussed earlier abuse power by continually and meagerly reassigning tasks that rewrote job descriptions? Or was she appropriately reengineering? Was she avoiding additional work by super-delegating, or was she empowering her staff? If her job-changing focus concealed a personal agenda, then she would be abusing (hierarchical) power. And if she then tried to convince staff that all of this constituted the kind of retraining needed for their own job security, she would be abusing the power of symbolic status. It might be hard for observers to judge by the nature of the proposed job changes alone—although a pattern begins to emerge, one that seems to indicate "change for change's sake." I.e., at the whim of some underlying personal need on the director's part.

Factors Contributing to Abuse of Symbolic Status

When are leaders likely to abuse the power of symbolic status? It is important to understand that leaders are susceptible to inner pressures. They may develop philosophies of leadership and generate visions grounded not in reality, but in the hope of fulfilling a symbolic quest. As Manfred Kets de Vries notes:

"The leader and his followers will have a regressive experience resembling a return to a state of childlike bliss in which fantasies of omnipotence and of being taken care of play a major role. The parallel with early childhood is striking. Power, apparently, not only 'corrupts' but may lead to a regression to attachment-type behavior which is itself based on early interaction patterns between mother and child."

Followers themselves can trigger unresolved issues from a leader's past, as can various organizational events. When a leader is fundamentally out of touch with such inner pressures, he or she is most likely to play them out in symbolic terms and yet might communicate a high level of confidence in the appropriateness of subsequent actions taken. This is when the leader is most prone to abuse the power of symbolic status and when followers are most susceptible to that abuse.

Followers Responses to Abuse of Symbolic Status

In considering the range of follower responses to leaders' attempts to influence (step two of the model), abusive or not, it is helpful to focus on two dimensions: compliance and acceptance. Compliance deals with the extent to which followers publicly "buy into" a task or philosophy or an explanation of events. Acceptance, on the other hand, deals with the followers' private convictions regarding the task, philosophy, or explanation. Three scenarios emerge around these dimensions. (In the behavioral model, these responses constitute step four.)

In scenario one, followers perceive the request, philosophy, attributions, or explanation as abusive and do not comply with it. In fact, they resist openly (direct confrontation or whistleblowing). For this scenario to take place, leaders must be generally weak, with little visible symbolic power—or any other power, for that matter. If followers confront them under these circumstances, the leaders will be weaker still. In terms of the model, step five is characterized by a general decrease in power.

With scenario two, followers perceive the leader's action as abusive but comply with it despite that perception. That is, they do the leader's bidding and overtly endorse his or
her views and actions, while covertly perceiving them as politically motivated and suspect. For this scenario to take place, leaders must be relatively strong with respect to other types of power, but their symbolic status is not sufficient to overturn follower skepticism. Followers remain "protected" psychologically against the abusive behavior. If this scenario takes place, leader symbolic power remains generally constant (step five).

Finally, with scenario three, followers both publicly comply with and privately accept the behaviors and views of the leader. They believe the leader's views are reasonable, even when these views are blatantly self-serving and undermining of others. Leaders in this situation are able to tap into their symbolic status to overturn their followers' skepticism; they can induce followers to endorse even the most extreme ideas and actions. In short, when leaders possess enough symbolic power, they are able to "get away with" abuse—not only in a public sense, but also in a private one—by infiltrating the followers' belief systems and subsequent actions. This puts followers in a particularly vulnerable psychological position. In terms of the behavioral model, step five is characterized by a general increase in leader power.

The Battleground

The issue of susceptibility to abuse is critical because of the psychological implications for followers. There are forces pulling them in both directions. On the one hand, the power of symbolic status predisposes followers to believe in leaders as powerful parental figures whose approval is sought and whose vision is accepted. On the other, organizational actors tend to subscribe to a theory of group interaction (described by Chris Argyris) that predisposes followers to be skeptical of leaders and to see them as politically motivated.

This "theory of action" posits that under conditions of threat (which can simply mean confronting any non-routine situation), followers and leaders alike act on the basis of certain fundamental values, such as control of the encounter and avoidance of negative feelings, and also on the basis of strategies such as concealing thoughts and feelings, advocating fixed positions, unilaterally saving face, and sending mixed messages. Each side proceeds according to these values and strategies and assumes the other is doing the same. Both sides tacitly "agree" not to discuss any of this. This set of assumptions effectively provides followers with a layer of psychological protection against the power of symbolic status. It makes them less likely to accept leader explanations and, consequently, less likely to abandon their own views.

Recent well-chronicled events have caused many followers to acknowledge leaders as potentially abusive. Leaders in all walks of life have come under intense media scrutiny in recent years. When top officials suffer a fall from grace, one might expect a carry-over disillusionment toward leaders in general. Nowhere is this more evident than in presidential politics since the Watergate scandal in 1974, which led to subsequent popular skepticism sparking unprecedented media investigations and disclosures. During recent presidential campaigns, relentless news analyses have tended to undermine the power of the candidates' rhetoric.

In addition, the media have targeted various religious leaders as either fraudulent or dangerously abusive of personal power, e.g., Jim Bakker and Jim Jones. Even doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, and teachers have been disgraced in numerous celebrated cases (the Pamela Smart murder case in New Hampshire, for instance). Organizational figures are certainly not exempt (Michael Milken, Robert Maxwell, Ivan Boesky, Charles Keating) nor are the institutions they manage (junk bond brokerages, savings and loan associations, even Congress).

Considering the strength of the forces counteracting symbolic status, it appears that scenario two is the most common follower response to leader abusive behavior and to leader behavior in general (step four). The result is effectively a stalemate in which the balance of power and subsequent behavior (steps five, six, and seven) remain stable, without disrupting followers (step eight). The
concern here, however, is with those instances in which the situation shifts into scenario three. For that to happen, i.e., for a large segment of followers to internally accept whatever the leader asks, states, or promotes without question, the leader’s symbolic status would need to increase significantly. What might bolster a leader’s power of symbolic status to that extent? Below, we explore the role a leader’s charisma plays in such situations, along with the psychological consequences for followers.

INCREASED SYMBOLIC POWER THROUGH CHARISMA

Why do so many charismatic leaders possess great symbolic power? According to prevailing theories, followers regard the charismatic leader as one or all of the following: an omnipotent archetype (evoking a highly charged group transference), mystical (in touch with “higher truths”), heroic (perhaps derived from past achievements), and value-driven (concerned with the collective and able to empower it). Followers are willing to give up their self-protective skepticism because the charismatic leader is perceived as someone they can profoundly trust. They have come to believe that (1) he or she will nurture and guide them (the leader as omnipotent parent); (2) he or she knows the way and knows the answers (the leader as mystic); (3) he or she can move mountains (the leader as hero); and (4) he or she is pure in spirit (the leader as value-driven). Going back to steps one and three (the antecedent conditions underlying leader power), the leader’s personal qualities, knowledge, actions, and values are seen in an extremely positive light.

The Dark Side of Charisma

While charisma is generally considered a highly positive and attractive attribute, it also has negative aspects. Jay Conger points out that there is a “dark side” to charismatic leadership in which untrammeled ambitions and powerful personal forces hold sway.

In general, a leader’s vision may project personal need based on underlying neurosis while misreading market demand and availability of resources. For example, Edwin Land of Polaroid sank millions of dollars into the development of his dream camera, priced six times higher than the successful Colorpaks then in high consumer demand. Steve Jobs, An Wang, and John DeLorean also appeared to make major market miscalculations, inducing investors to advance large sums of money for projects that promised to be state-of-the-art. Sometimes, charismatics may destroy a company through wild and unchallenged ambitions that produce an unrealistic vision. Consider, for example, the case of People’s Express. Donald Burr’s expansionism undermined his original success, which was based on no-frills, low-cost service solidified by a tight-knit workforce sharing the profits.

In general, such analyses have examined excessive and aberrant behavior in relation to the vision (and to subsequent organizational events) and to the leader as a psychological being. That is, the focus has been on what went wrong within the leader and the vision he or she created. Our main concern here, in contrast, is on the psychological impact such leader behavior has on followers—the interpersonal context, part of step eight in the behavioral model.

NARCISSISTIC CHARISMATIC LEADERS AND THEIR FOLLOWERS

Narcissism is a particularly powerful personality disorder. It generally takes the form of a grandiose sense of self-importance, a preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, or love, and an exhibitionist orientation. Narcissistic individuals act as if they are entitled to receive the service of others and tend toward exploitative and manipulative behavior. Elements of narcissism may have inspired Disney chief Eisner’s ultimate decision to release Katzenberg and to reorganize.

Our concern here is with charismatic narcissistic leaders—the power of charisma combined with the pathology of the narcissistic
personality. These people are particularly likely to promote visions that reflect their own sense of grandiosity (more than they reflect reality) and sweep up followers along the way (because of their charisma). These are the leaders who approach ventures with a sureness of self based on their own pathology rather than on their command of information or clarity of insight. In interpersonal venues, they tend to expect others to defer to them. Elements of both charisma and narcissism were probably operative in the leadership styles of both Frank Lorenzo, Eastern Airlines’ former chief, and Charley Bryan, then head of the International Union of Machinists. Followers of both appeared to blindly accept each leader’s version of reality. The result was a disastrous strike that led to the airline’s demise and the loss of many jobs.

The combination of charisma and narcissism is formidable. Heinz Kohut notes that narcissistic charismatics “have the uncanny ability to exploit, not necessarily in full awareness, the unconscious feelings of their subordinates.” In this process, some followers may try to embrace an “omnipotent” leader, one who will fulfill their dependency needs. In particular, a leader who is both charismatic and narcissistic may be able to make full use of his or her symbolic power to gain follower endorsement of views and actions. Because of his or her narcissism, such a leader may tend toward grandiose visions and bold actions, blaming others when things go wrong. Followers come under the leader’s sway and buy into actions and explanations they would ordinarily construe as excessive and self-serving. They would see the leader’s behavior not as abusive but rather as justifiable—an expression of frustration with the limitations of restrictive internal and external environments. In fact, even when leaders fail to make a strong case for themselves, supportive followers will invariably make the rationalizations on their own.

Not all followers will be affected so profoundly. Even the most symbolically powerful leaders will not convert all their followers to the cause. They can, however, polarize followers: those who comply generally do so out of private conviction induced by a process of identification; those who resist will generally choose (or be forced) to leave. This only heightens the psychological effect for the followers left behind. They are effectively self-selected for their vulnerability to the leader.

For example, a male executive at a financial services company was observed by outsiders to have an almost Svengali-like hold over a large segment of his staff. In particular, several women on his staff (and even some female executives from other departments) seemed to cater to his every need. Not-so-bemused onlookers dubbed the women “Roger’s harem.” These women would defend the executive’s outrageous and blatant attempts to raid resources from others in the organization as justifiable—his “energy” and “creativity” put him in a class by himself, so they reasoned—legitimizing the bending of the rules and the granting of special privileges.

When Problems Arise: Leader Reaction

Followers’ collusion with the leader—buying into his or her belief system—puts them at risk. First, the charismatic narcissistic leader tends to promote a grandiose vision and to exhort followers to put forth great effort toward achieving his or her goals. This is step two of the behavioral model. Then, those colluding followers who not only comply but privately accept this demand (step four of the model) find themselves in an untenable position. Since the leader’s grandiose outlook has caused him or her to misread real constraints, both internal and external, the followers typically lack the resources to implement the mission. Despite their willingness to act in accordance with the leader’s wishes—actions born out of real conviction—organizational goals will often not be met; as a result, individual follower performance will likely appear substandard. We can view this as a change in the leader’s antecedent conditions, step six of the model, in accordance with the attempted influence.

How does the leader react? If narcissistic, his or her tendency would be to hold others
responsible for substandard outcomes. While the leader may, at first, rail at outside agencies and the external environment in general for undermining the mission, ultimately he or she will turn inward and blame followers (step seven of the model). They are the perfect targets because they have been conditioned through their acceptance of the leader's belief system to maintain their collusion and thus not to challenge this assessment. The leader may even question their compliance: "If you were really committed, you would have found a way to make this work," using self-sealing logic to construe the poor performance as proof of noncompliance.

Often the failure scenario is more complex. Despite unrealistic demands imposed on them by the charismatic narcissistic leader, some followers do manage to succeed—both individually and organizationally, and often dramatically. Perhaps inspired by the leader's great drive and ability to communicate, perhaps meshing with his or her leadership style, or perhaps just lucky, these individuals provide further rationale for a leader to single out others who flounder as being inherently limited or flawed.

Consider the relationships financier Bernie Cornfeld, who led Investors Overseas Services in the '70s, had with his salespeople. He found a group of eager young men, stoked their desire for riches, and sent them out into the field on their own to try to sell mutual funds. One salesman, Lou Ellenport, made a financial killing in Indonesia after displaying only mediocre performance in a dozen other countries. He had been given little guidance and even fewer resources along the way. Others were not so fortunate. Cornfeld turned his back on them if they were not producing in a big way, making it clear that they were not good enough. As Ellenport put it, "With Bernie, you're either the greatest guy in the world or you're nowhere."

Going back to our nursing director, most of her staff bought into her job expansion agenda because she seemed the consummate professional with a good deal of charisma. She was apparently a truly modern leader, a manager of the '90s. She displayed flawless politi-
cal correctness in terms of dealing with her staff's concerns, even when these concerns touched on her: she could "hear them," would "empower" staff and "validate their reasoning." She encouraged a team orientation and of course was constantly "reengineering."

But there was another side to her leadership style. She was often very angry and verbally cutting whenever a problem arose. When she browbeat her nurses, yelling and pounding her fist on the table, they believed that she was justified because of her frustration at their blunders (which she unerringly pinpointed). Because they could vent with her and share problems, and because she was also warm and supportive, they tended to see her anger sympathetically, empathizing with the stress of her job (which she constantly pointed out) and understanding her volatility.

Outside observers (and even a few of her own nurses) saw her as irrational and power-hungry. In addition, they felt that she actually delighted in staff turnover, finding ways to discard anyone who confronted her or who had "an attitude." They described her as suspicious to the point of paranoia.

The tendency to blame others when leaders are confronted with failure, whether small- or large-scale (an individual's poor performance or the collapse of the entire mission), makes reevaluation of the vision and the resources needed for mission implementation highly unlikely. Such a refusal to reevaluate conditions and investigate the failure constitutes abuse of symbolic status, as it involves fashioning self-serving explanations and attributions for failure at followers' expense.

Psychological Consequences for Followers

Narcissistic charismatic leaders may be unaware of their abuse; in blaming others they are masking doubts about their own self-confidence and deceiving themselves about their role in the failure. How do followers respond? They tend to collude with their leaders and concur with their assessment. In fact, even when a leader conceals his or her culpability in a failed venture, followers will often not
EXHIBIT 2
THE STEPS FROM FOLLOWERS' PERSPECTIVE WITH NARCISSISTIC CHARISMATIC LEADERS

STEP ONE: We idolize our leader.
STEP TWO: We are asked to support our leader's vision, direction, interpretation.
STEP THREE: We continue to idolize our leader.
STEP FOUR: We comply with conviction.
STEP FIVE: We bolster the leader's strength.
STEP SIX: We do not fully succeed and thus let him/her down.
STEP SEVEN: We are blamed.
STEP EIGHT: We internalize the blame.
STEP NINE: We listen only to the leader.

only go along with the leader but even try to assume still more blame. They accept the leader's judgment and find fault with themselves ("I must have been inadequate"). Moreover, they bond even more strongly with a leader who also blames external agencies ("If the rest of the world is hostile, causing our difficulties, then whom else can we turn to?"). Not surprisingly, their psychological well-being is seriously affected by this. These psychological consequences take place at step eight of the model.

Just how powerful these psychological consequences can be is illustrated both by Steve Jobs (creator of Apple and NEXT) and by Lane Nemeth of Discovery Toys. Their followers would speak of their leaders' perfection and expectations that others should likewise be perfect. Many of these people felt diminished because they believed they could never be as good as Jobs or Nemeth. We can infer that it did not occur to these followers that their leaders should have provided additional resources, perhaps in the form of coaching, for everyone to reach the corporate goals. Instead, they simply believed that their own limitations created a gap between themselves and the leaders.

A standard attribution model posits that leaders and followers alike explain the followers' poor performance as the result of lack of ability or effort, difficulty of tasks, or random noise. Typically, followers of leaders with high symbolic power put forth adequate effort and are then left to conclude that their "badness" is due to the lack of innate ability. Believing themselves inherently deficient, they lose hope for success in future endeavors, even absent the leader's continued negative judgments. The result is often anxiety and depression. Many of these followers develop what is known as learned helplessness, the belief that future failures are inevitable.

The Primal Institute

Consider the following saga of a Los Angeles-based psychiatric clinic known as the Primal Institute and its founder, Arthur Janov. Janov began this organization in 1967 around one central idea—the primal. This term refers to the experiencing of deeply repressed emotional pain from childhood. Janov proclaimed that his therapeutic approach, which consisted of a natural method of inducing a series of primals in his clients, was the only way to truly "cure" neuroses. This was his vision, which he based on some startling breakthroughs in his private practice. His mission was to successfully deliver "primal care" to his clients—to see them all through the process, and to build a community of individuals free of "primal pain."

To do so, he put together a staff of mental health professionals, including some former clients. They were his followers in this brave new world. Instantly, Janov found himself at odds with the external environment; other therapists lambasted him for his claims and his controversial methods of treatment. After some initial dramatic successes, the next gen-
erations of clients began to run into roadblocks. How did Janov respond after repeated lack of success in fulfilling his mission? Here is what one former therapist had to say:

Art had always been very frustrated with the unwillingness of the greater therapeutic community to accept his ideas. He blamed that on their defenses— they were too scared to accept his ideas. Then, when we ran into more and more difficulty with our own clients implementing his techniques, he turned around and blamed us. We weren’t doing it right, that was why clients were unable to have the “right kind” of primal (when they had them at all). Most of my fellow therapists were very attentive to their clients and also to Art’s training methods. They should have known there was something missing in the approach. But they idolized him—they bought into everything he said. They never saw how his huge ego was stopping him from really seeing what the problems were. So they became plagued by self-doubt when things weren’t working. Some of them lost total confidence in themselves as therapists. Art would tell them they needed more therapy themselves and so they would go for that.

My case is somewhat different. I would fight Art and argue with him—that the resources for clients and therapists weren’t there, that you had to give more to get results. We had ideological conflicts. I would disobey sometimes and do stuff with clients he disapproved of. He would suspend me and yell at me: “whenever we argue, I’m right and you’re wrong.” He got to me. I tried to do it his way. Eventually, he fired me. Anyway, the irony of it is that I began to believe him also—maybe I was all wrong. Now, five years later, I see it more clearly—but then it was tough, even though I took a stand.

The progression from accepting the leader’s blame to questioning one’s ability, to concluding that future success is impossible, is devastating, quick, and generally tacit. Followers literally do not know what hit them. Their collusion with the leader is so entrenched it remains hidden from their consciousness as a possible contributor to their learned helplessness. Their belief in the leader prevents them from seeing that his or her grandiosity and unrealistic expectations set them up for poor performance in the first place. This learned helplessness is the ultimate step eight insult. Exhibit 2 summarizes the followers’ perceptions and actions in terms of the steps of the behavioral model in an environment of narcissistic charismatic leaders.

As the director of nursing example indicates, managers at all levels of the organization—not just the CEO—can be perceived as “charismatic enough” to push their own agendas with follower buy-in. It is certainly not uncommon to find elements of narcissism at any managerial level. A narcissistic leader with some degree of charisma may invoke buzzwords such as “follower empowerment” and “team building” to his or her advantage, covering up abusive communication practices more subtly than ever. This leader may sense that the appearance of a consultative style and a politically correct delivery will drive any manipulation of information underground, making it doubly hard for followers to detect and making them thus even more vulnerable.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AVOIDING ABUSE OF SYMBOLIC STATUS

Even leaders who are not narcissistic (or charismatic) can abuse their symbolic status via the same psychological mechanisms. Without charisma, the power of symbolic status is still strong enough to induce some followers to fully accept (with private conviction) the leader’s vision, direction, explanations, and attributions. Leaders who are not necessarily narcissistic may still tend to avoid
looking at their own contributions to poor performance. A follower who goes along with the leader's pronouncements will suffer the same psychological consequences we outlined earlier. A leader may make an inadvertently self-serving attribution at the followers' expense, but it still constitutes an abuse of symbolic status.

To minimize such abuse, it is helpful to consider what happens in the field of psychotherapy. Since the concept of the transference, the cornerstone of the symbolic perspective, originated from that field, it makes sense to look at the professional norms established to deal with it.

Therapists adopt certain practices and values to prevent themselves from abusing symbolic status. In particular, they monitor any tendency to respond to clients based on personal agendas triggered by client actions. They reflect on their own behaviors, paying careful attention to clients' reactions, consulting with others, and adjusting their behaviors as necessary. They are educated to be aware of the transference phenomenon, they endorse the value of taking responsibility for their emotional issues, and they accept the necessity of self-confrontation. They understand that abuse consists of using their power and clients' vulnerability to deflect self-confrontation—to avoid looking at their issues, to conceal them from others, and to blame others for subsequent conflict and problems.

Leaders should attempt to do the same—or at least the parallel self-monitoring, where appropriate. In particular, they should critically examine their own behaviors, especially in the light of negative signals from followers, investigating rather than blaming. They should consult with others. They should be aware of the general fact that specific followers may trigger emotional reactions and that the act of leading may itself trigger deeply rooted feelings. With such awareness, with such consultation and reflection, leaders are more likely to catch themselves taking advantage of their role and power (playing out hidden agendas and overreacting to triggering follower behavior).

Like psychotherapists, leaders who care about the psychological well-being of their followers can work to prevent abuse by developing commitment, awareness, responsibility, and self-evaluation. Commitment includes honoring both agreed-upon external values and an inner sense of morality and fairness—and not allowing moral expediency and convenience to determine decision-making. Leaders must be aware—they must develop the ability to distinguish between personal issues and an organizationally based vision in driving the mission and its implementation. Likewise, they must be responsible, making the time and effort to assist the followers' development, separate from the mission. Self-evaluation is important; leaders should assess their own contributions to successful and unsuccessful outcomes in a fair and honest way, through self-monitoring—and by addressing follower discomfort and poor performance, seeing these as signals to re-evaluate their management of various functions, particularly the communication process.

CONCLUSION

The power of symbolic status gains its strength from the followers' perceptions of a leader's knowledge, values, and personal qualities. Charismatic leaders, especially, have the ability to acquire this form of power. When a charismatic leader also has narcissistic traits, the vision he or she promotes tends toward grandiosity, and the leader's attempts to influence can lead to abuse of power—information is distorted and critical feedback rejected.

Often, followers will respond to a narcissistic charismatic leader by not only complying with his or her requests, but also by coming to believe in the requests themselves (private conviction). In essence, they collude with the leader, sometimes even sharing in his or her delusional belief systems. However, narcissistic leaders' grandiose visions often fail to materialize; this, combined with the followers' lack of necessary information, often leads to individual and collective poor
performance. Narcissistic charismatics will generally place the blame for any failures on followers, who in fact tend to accept that blame and who consequently experience a loss of psychological well-being. In some cases, the followers become victims of learned helplessness.

Leaders can learn to interrupt and even prevent these destructive cycles by modifying their behavior—in particular by self-monitoring and self-confrontation. They would also do well to adopt an investigatory approach to failure, rather than automatically casting blame on followers.

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