

Research reveals dynamics behind magical thinking and charismatic leadership

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Research by Columbia Business School's Michael Morris, Chavkin-Chang Professor of Leadership; Maia Young, assistant professor of Human Resources and Organization Behavior, UCLA Anderson School of Management and Vicki Scherwin, Assistant Professor, Management and Human Resources Management, California State University, Long Beach, suggests that we attribute certain leaders to be charismatic through "magical thinking". The paper, recently published in the *Journal of Management*, reveals how this deep-seated process in human cognition is involved in the attribution of charisma.

The researchers wanted to explore why some managers become hailed as charismatic, visionary leaders, with consequences for employees' attitudes and actions toward them. A well-known example of this phenomenon is [Steve Jobs](#); his mystique as a charismatic visionary has been earned in part by his spellbinding presentations of Apple products. Would audiences be as wowed by his informal, spontaneous pitches if they observed the ten hours of practice Jobs commits to every ten minute pitch? Would knowing his method make him seem less magical?

The study features three different experiments. The first tests whether ascriptions of mystique are associated with perceptions that the manager is visionary and will succeed in forecasting future business trends. The second examines whether managers who perform well in the absence of an obvious success-mechanism, such as extensive practice or technical skills, are more likely to be imputed mystique and judged more capable at tasks that require vision but not those that depend on administrative

skill. In the third study, subjects judged two executives – one succeeded through vision and the other succeeded through hard work. The results show that, compared to the hard-working executive, the visionary executive was judged to be more creative, curious, and charismatic.

The research results suggest that charisma is sometimes an illusion. While managers can establish a reputation as a transformational, charismatic leader in a number of valid ways, managers can also gain the mystique of charisma by veiling how they accomplish what they do, like a stage magician. Prof. Morris, who leads Columbia Business School's Program on Social Intelligence, elaborated on a point elucidated by this area of research, "Winning in business and political endeavors comes not only from performing well, but also from managing the interpretations that others make of your performance."

While the organization may benefit from the establishment of a new executive as a leader in the eyes of the followers, such theatrics can also be dangerous, as they limit the transfer of skills from this manager to others. Hence, the research findings suggest that firms should probe more deeply when recruiting executives on the basis of [charisma](#).

Provided by Columbia Business School

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