Definition Essay – The Meaning of Charisma

Leaders have long had the ability to galvanize populations either in support of terrible atrocities or in opposition to them. From Adolf Hitler, who produced a mass of support in Germany in the 1930s, to Martin Luther King, Jr., who rallied support for racial and economic justice in the American Civil Rights Movement, leaders have been able to pull together this support largely because they have had charisma. Charisma is a mostly a positive word today, associated with people who have energetic, attractive personalities. It has not always been this way, though, as charisma has gone from being a neutral word to describe leadership characteristics to a positive word describing leadership for worthy causes.

Over the course of history, charisma has been a word used to describe people who were able to use their communication skills and understanding of human nature to make their case. Adolf Hitler is the seminal example. In the 1930s, with Germany struggling and economically and the country looking for a group to blame, he stepped in, giving impassioned speeches in which he claimed the greatness of the German people while also giving those people someone – in the Jews – to blame for their troubles. Later, Martin Luther King, Jr. made his case with charisma, piecing together a coalition of civil rights leaders to march on Washington and produce a host of different boycotts and efforts throughout the South.

In the past, one might have defined charisma just as the ability to attract people to one’s cause, as with Hitler (Lepsius). That meaning has shifted, though, and there are several positive qualities associated with charisma. Charismatic leaders care about their legacy, understanding that good actions in the long-term trump short-term gains. Likewise, charismatic leaders tend to be selfless, sacrificing their own wants and desires in order to provide opportunities for the people around them. In many cases, the leaders are deeply spiritual people. Even if they are not necessarily associated with a specific religion, they are often people who are guided by a sense of faith in one way or another. Perhaps most of all, charismatic leaders tend to have enduring values that allow them to communicate a great vision to their people. These are lasting, enduring elements that they hold to be true. Rather than just having a transient sense of what is important, these leaders recognize that over the long term, it is a steady values set that will produce the best possible results.

To this point, many leaders are associated with specific elements of charisma. For Martin Luther King, Jr., it was his vision that made him special and continues to make him such an inspirational figure, even after his death. Gandhi, in the same way, had the ability to engender trust among his followers. He was serene in many respects. Nelson Mandela was highly relatable. He had been to prison and had been involved in the struggle. Likewise, he had a unique capacity to foster the sorts of relationships that could be meaningful for his movement. David Koresh, leader of the Branch Dividians in Waco,
Texas, had extreme self-confidence that tended to bring people to him. These are the elements that tend to define charisma, though the phrase itself has shifted over time from being a neutral term to being a positive term among leaders.

While people in the past may have recognized that charisma was the ability to win people over to one’s way of thinking, individuals today recognize charisma as being able to win people over to a positive cause. For instance, people are said to have charisma if they are a transformative type of leader. These leaders are strong role models, who lead by example in order to provide their people with precisely what those people need from a psychological perspective. In addition, they build teams of individuals where there is truly an investment from all in the goals of the organization. This is called getting people to buy-in, and it is a skill of the charismatic leader. They also empower people, sometimes by producing relationships where there is a closeness between the leader and the follower. They do not simply use their power, but rather, they work hard to make people feel special within an organization. These things help to define the positive connotation, rather than the neutral connotation, of charisma.

Effective communication is also an important element of charisma. With good communication skills, individuals are able to inspire the people around them. Good leaders are able to inspire their colleagues to work harder and to put in more effort toward a goal. Likewise, they are able to clarify expectations in a meaningful way. Effective leaders know how to craft messages in order to meet the needs of a specific listening population, which is a skill that lets every person in an organization understand the goals and expectations of that organization.

It is clear today that charisma, and charismatic leadership, is associated with heavily positive traits. It is something associated with better performance in companies and better corporate social responsibility. In the past, charisma might have simply been defined as an ability to get people to believe in one’s ideas, but that concept has evolved in a positive manner over time. Today, the word almost certainly refers to leaders who show the positive qualities and the vision on those things that tend to have a positive effect on society as a whole.

Works Cited