

The Power of Leader Charisma in Employee Engagement

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The last couple years have been tough on organizations on many fronts. One area organizations are now struggling with in particular is employee engagement. Through this trying time, much has been written about what it takes for leaders to create and develop engaged workers at all levels of the company. This paper pulls together some of those conceptual threads to suggest ways of using your personal charisma as a leader to help energize your employees.

Let's start with a quick look at leader charisma. First, what does charisma mean? Wikipedia defines charisma as a personality trait that features personal charm and magnetism, along with powerful interpersonal abilities. But what makes leaders personally charming or magnetic? It might be helpful to think about what charismatic leaders do and what they do not do, what they embrace as behaviors and what they avoid or totally eliminate.

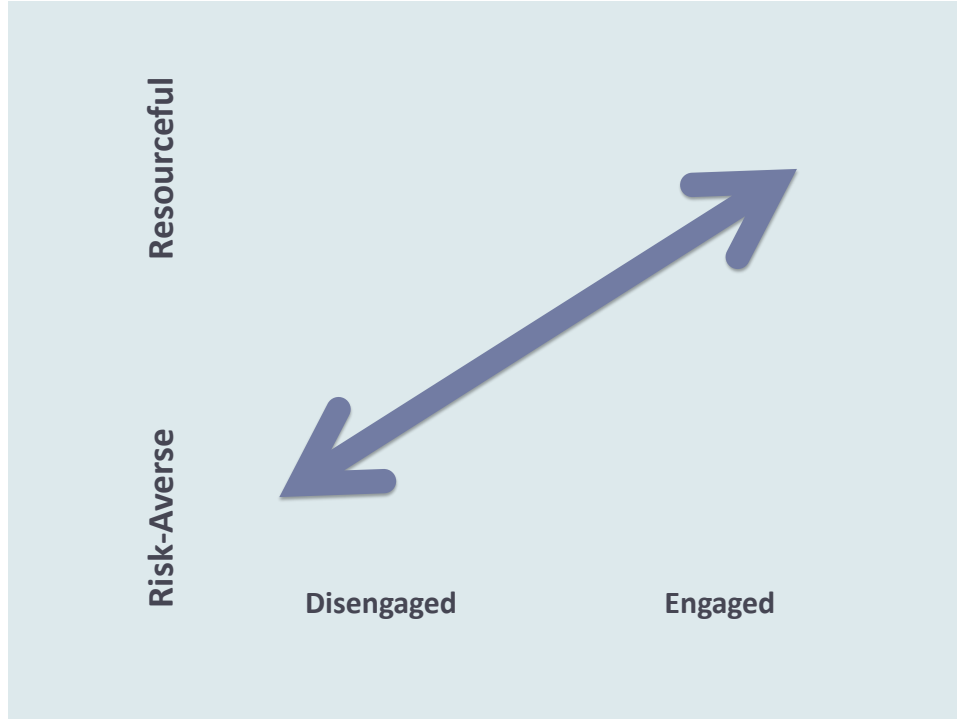
One way to think about it is in terms of the interpersonal signals leaders emit to others around them. This includes their non-verbal behaviors, like eye contact, facial and hand gestures, energy and enthusiasm, or how close they stand to people. Signals also include verbal behaviors like word choice, vocal tone, and clarity of articulation.

Successful, charismatic leaders. The most charismatic leaders are those who exhibit an energized, enthusiastic presence. They are verbal and talkative, but also spend a good portion of their time asking questions of others and deeply listening to the responses. They recognize and appropriately respond to people's interpersonal cues. They draw people out with their gentle queries and encourage others to speak up and participate in conversations or discussions. Optimistic and upbeat, they motivate others and help create a collaborative environment and culture.

Charismatic leaders often set high standards for their teams, and they hold themselves to the same metrics. They make their expectations clear, cast a motivating vision, and help remove obstacles so their team members can feel good about the progress they make. Though serious in their focus on achieving objectives at the highest levels of quality, they also exhibit an inclusive sense of humor. And they make it a priority to help their direct reports develop in their careers.

Sounds too perfect, doesn't it? The good news is that leaders do not need to be perfectly charismatic in order to have a very positive effect on their direct reports and others. Even if they simply avoid the opposites from those attributes and approaches outlined here, most people will view them positively as leaders. For example, just by avoiding things like accepting mediocre work, being closed to new ideas suggested by others, displaying a lackluster level of energy, and projecting a muddled vision, most leaders will exhibit a level of charisma. You do not need to be perfect to be charismatic.

Engaged, resourceful followers. You can also positively affect your team members by emphasizing the importance of facilitating "followership" as you lead. This graphic provides perspective on the various types of followers you may currently have on your team:



In the lower left corner are those followers who are relatively disengaged from their jobs and the rest of the team, and, at the same time, likely to avoid decisions or actions that seem risky to them. Your goal as a leader is to help team members move from this quadrant to the resourceful and engaged part of the graph. Followers in the upper right of the graph usually display a good level of energy related to their tasks and responsibilities, and they are capable of coming up with new ideas for improving their approaches. One way to dial up your charisma and encourage development on your team is to identify which of your direct reports would best be described as:

- Risk-averse and disengaged (lower left)
- Risk-averse, but engaged (lower right)
- Resourceful, but disengaged (upper left)
- Resourceful and engaged (upper right)

Each category, above, requires a different charismatic strategy to generate enthusiasm and optimism on the part of your team members. Of course, for the resourceful and engaged team members, the strategy is simple—keep doing what you are doing and try to stay out of their way! But, what about the other three follower types?

For the resourceful, but disengaged, the key is to figure out what is causing the disengagement. Perhaps you have not sufficiently reinforced them for their inventive ideas and actions, and, consequently, they have become discouraged. Maybe something outside of work related to their personal situation is

causing them to disengage from work. They might even be depressed on some level and not cognizant of their level of disengagement. Whatever the cause, your role is to point out examples of the disengagement and express your desire to help them re-energize and become engaged again. Reinforce any behaviors you observe that seem energetic and positively engaged.

In the case of the risk-averse, but engaged, the primary need is to help them experience success in taking risks. Start by giving them small responsibility “stretches” that might not seem risky to you, but may seem like major hurdles to them. Give as much support as they need to work on the task, and encourage every resourceful, confident step you observe them take. Continue to give them assignments that stretch their comfort with risk, and make sure you positively reinforce every resourceful idea or action they initiate.

The most entrenched and difficult to move are the risk-averse and disengaged team members. They need a consistent combination of reinforcement for small steps they take to optimistically solve problems or take a risk, as well as any expressions you observe that suggest energy and engagement. You might consider pairing them on projects with someone who is both resourceful and engaged, to see if the enthusiasm of the one rubs off on the other. As a last resort, you should consider replacing the person in the position. Disengaged, risk-averse workers are not happy in their work, and it is very possible that they actually might blossom in a different role or environment. Sometimes, the most compassionate step you can take as a leader is to help someone exit their role or the organization.

The bottom line. To function as a charismatic leader, you must exhibit energy, engage others in communication in which you listen and convey your thoughts and feelings, and use humor to disarm stressful situations. Make certain your expectations are clear, that you set high, attainable goals, and you ensure that the team makes good progress. Prioritize the development of your team members so that they become more engaged and resourceful in their work. The result will be one in which you, your direct reports, and the organization all win.