

The Charismatic Organization

Five Steps to a Strong Core

*How to create social capital
by building a strong core*

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We define a charismatic organization as one that has a high degree of social capital. Social capital enables an organization to attract employees, volunteers, donors, and champions, who in turn make available resources like money, skills, sway in the policy arena, media attention, and new friends and followers. The first step in creating social capital is to build a strong core—an effective organization that gets results, serves a cause people care about, and creates the bonds that connect the people who made the program happen. The following describes the five essential qualities of a strong core.

1 Compelling Mission

Every charismatic organization starts with something worth supporting: a compelling purpose that motivates people to take action. The mission is the clarion call and the guide star; it moves people to action and points them in the right direction. Everyone involved in the organization must own the mission. It's the reason they come to work or take time out of their day to help. The specific wording of the mission is less important than the concept behind it. If everyone involved with the organization can accurately articulate the mission in his or her own words, that's better than rote memorization without real understanding.

What's yours?

2 Can-Do Culture

Culture provides the team spirit that keeps everyone going even when things are tough. It reinforces the important values of the organization, its character, and its style. Much as charismatic leaders attract disciples by painting a picture of a better future, an optimistic organizational culture is a strong magnet. Culture varies widely among charismatic organizations because no two organizations (or two people) have the same personality. Clues to culture are everywhere, from the stories that everyone knows to the way the office looks, from the organization chart to the pace of the place. A positive culture draws people in; a negative one reflects and reinforces dysfunction.

3 Data-Driven Decisionmaking

An organization seeking to raise its charisma must work to achieve an impact. Whether they are working for free as volunteers, drawing a paycheck from the organization, or writing a check to support it, people are drawn to nonprofits because they want to make a difference.

One way that organizations move toward impact is by knowing what they are trying to achieve, having a tested theory about how to bring that about, and ways to measure their progress. While a mission may tell us where we're going, the essential tools of data-driven decisionmaking give us a clear road map. They tell us that we're not just heading north; we're taking this road and stopping at this town. We need mapping tools to take the right route. These elements help everyone make major and everyday choices and build a climate of trust. All of these factors make an organization more attractive.

4 Purposeful Innovation

Charismatic leaders typically emerge during times of crisis and unrest and offer a vision for change. Like charismatic leaders, charismatic organizations are often created out of a desire for change. They retain the ability to innovate as they mature.

Innovation matters in two ways. The first relates to impact, which can create powerful appeal. Innovation inspires midcourse corrections. To continue our travel analogy, when the road is closed or the car breaks down, or someone on the team invents a flying machine or discovers a better path, the innovation still gets us to the same destination, but in a better way.

The second relates to the general human tendency to desire the latest new thing and reject things that seem old-fashioned. Innovation keeps an organization up-to-date with changes in its environment and allows it to attract new friends and followers.

There are two important kinds of innovation, and charismatic organizations often excel at both. First, adaptive or sustaining innovations help an organization continuously improve its programs and keep up with the times. Even if data have demonstrated that a program has a winning formula, an organization will still need to make adjustments to respond to changes in the external environment. Sustaining innovation is the ability to make large- and small-course corrections, using data as a guide. Without sustaining innovations, organizations may be frozen in time and lose their freshness, relevance, and effectiveness. Failure to innovate in this way has led many once-successful organizations gradually to lose members, donors, and volunteers. ▶

