

Charisma

A POLYCENTRIC LEADERSHIP TRAIT

Charisma: A Polycentric Leadership Trait

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Charisma as a Foundational Theme of Polycentric Leadership

Executive Summary

Polycentric leadership (PCL) is an emerging theoretical model designed for effective leadership in complex, globalized, and multipolar environments (Handley, 2020). PCL is defined as collaborative, communal leadership that empowers multiple centers of influence and a diverse array of leaders (Handley, 2020; Yeh, 2016). This model is characterized by six core themes: collaborative, communal, diverse, entrepreneurial, relational, and charisma (Handley, 2020).

In this framework, *charisma* is not associated primarily with flamboyant personality but rather with strength of character, trustworthiness, and a robust spiritual foundation (Handley, 2020). This interpretation aligns with broader leadership research distinguishing personality-driven charisma from character-oriented forms, where excessive charisma can hinder strategic and operational effectiveness if not moderated by integrity and emotional

maturity (Vergauwe et al., 2018). Evidence from the GLOBE study of global CEOs, interviews with mission leaders, and polycentric leadership studies confirms that character-based charisma is among the most determinative traits for leadership success in complex systems; serving as a catalyst for movement mobilization and collective vision (Handley, 2020; House et al., 2014; Pierson, 2009).

I. Introduction to Polycentric Leadership

Polycentric leadership is increasingly recognized as essential for mission leaders, NGOs, and organizations facing disruption and complexity in the modern world (Handley, 2020; McChrystal et al., 2015). It represents a shift away from hierarchical, unicentric models toward decentralized systems based on multiple centers of influence (Franklin, 2016; Handley, 2020; Ostrom, 2010; Carlisle & Gruby, 2019).

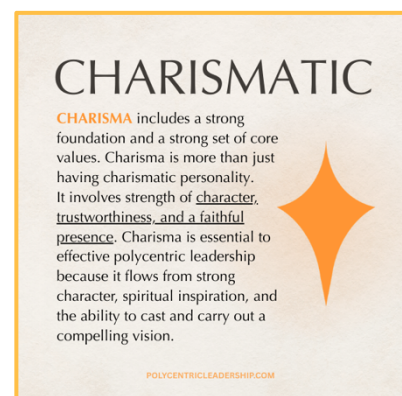
The theological foundation of the model lies in a Trinitarian paradigm of leadership: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acting distinctly yet in unity through their interrelated roles. This divine communion provides the blueprint for a polycentric system (Franklin, 2016; Handley, 2020; Zscheile, 2007). Drawing from this, PCL integrates six interdependent themes that together generate a more resilient approach to leadership (Handley, 2020):

- Charisma
- Collaborative
- Communal
- Relational
- Entrepreneurial
- Diverse

II. Defining Charisma in the Polycentric Context

In polycentric leadership, charisma extends beyond personality or rhetorical skill. It is informed by research in global mission, governance, and organizational behavior (Handley, 2020; House et al., 2014; House et al., 1991). Three essential components define charisma within this model (Handley, 2020):

1. Charismatic
2. Value-based
3. Spiritual



Emphasis on Character and Integrity

Charisma in PCL emphasizes strength of character, trustworthiness, and faithful presence (Handley, 2020). It represents “mature faithfulness that is attractive to followers” (Handley, 2020, p. 34). This corresponds to leadership theory’s distinction between socialized

charismatic leaders; supportive, egalitarian, and collective; and personalized ones, who are self-serving or exploitative (House et al., 1991).

This understanding parallels the “charismatic/value-based” dimension identified by the GLOBE study of CEOs (House et al., 2014), which differs from popular notions of charisma as charm or showmanship. For both frameworks, charisma embodies vision, inspiration, decisiveness, high integrity, and performance orientation (House et al., 2014; Handley, 2020). However, studies note a curvilinear relationship in which moderate charisma yields the best outcomes, while excessive charisma risks overshadowing operational discipline (Vergauwe et al., 2018; Fayad et al., 2024).

Charisma as a Determinative Trait

Charisma emerges as a decisive leadership trait across multiple disciplines:

- The GLOBE study found charisma to be the single most determinative predictor of leadership effectiveness (House et al., 2014).
- Within qualitative research on global networks such as the Lausanne Movement, thirty of thirty-three interviewees identified charisma as the defining factor for effective leadership (Handley, 2020).
- In PCL, charisma serves as the unifying force for shared vision and catalytic innovation (Handley, 2020; Addison, 2015).

III. The Foundational Spiritual Dimension

Among mission leaders operating polycentrically, charisma derives its enduring power from spiritual depth and devotion to Christ (Handley, 2020). Empirical studies confirm spirituality’s role in transforming organizations by infusing meaning, ethical behavior, and purpose (Milliman et al., 2005).

Spiritual Foundation and Values

Charisma rests upon spiritual formation and a consistent set of biblical values (Handley, 2020). Leaders are appreciated for being Christ-centered and oriented toward servant leadership. Cross-cultural studies further demonstrate that vision and calling correlate with higher organizational commitment and performance, though these dynamics vary contextually (Samul & Wangmo, 2021).

Faithfulness and humility remain inseparable from charisma’s spiritual thread (Handley, 2020). Leaders stress that integrity—financial, moral, and sexual—is the foremost qualification for sustained credibility (Handley, 2020).

Polycentric charisma ultimately draws its inspiration from God, the sustainer of both leaders and movements (Handley, 2020). Rooted in the Trinitarian model, leaders cultivate strength by abiding in the “true vine.” In Christian mission contexts, charismatic leaders embody

servant-hearted imitation of Christ rather than personal celebrity, functioning as spiritual change agents who inspire follower commitment (Perna & Knight, 2018).

IV. Charisma as a Catalyst for Polycentric Action

Charisma is indispensable for mobilizing and sustaining decentralized networks (Handley, 2020; Wei-Skillern et al., 2016).

Charismatic leaders articulate compelling vision and invite participation in transformative goals (Handley, 2020). In mission movements, such leaders combine spiritual grounding with the gravitas necessary to inspire collective change (Fayad et al., 2024).

Within polycentric governance, charisma enables empowerment and shared direction (Handley, 2020). The charismatic leader mobilizes sub-leaders to pursue aligned micro-objectives, ensuring cohesion without coercion (Frederiksen, 2022; Franklin, 2021).

Charisma establishes the moral and relational trust essential for interdependence in complex systems (Handley, 2020; Kanter, 1994). Mutual accountability and shared values—anchored in character and faith—form the glue that holds decentralized networks together.

V. Conclusion: Charisma and Distributed Leadership

Charisma; understood as value-based spirituality expressed through character and integrity; is central to the coherence of polycentric systems (Handley, 2020). Although PCL deliberately moves away from autocratic centralization, the charisma theme provides moral authority and direction for collaboration, community, diversity, freedom, and relational unity (Aligica & Tarko, 2012; Handley, 2020).

This form of charisma transcends personality, aligning instead with the moral and relational competencies needed for non-linear, global networks (Logan et al., 2011). Spiritually grounded charisma nurtures fulfillment and ethical growth within organizations, fostering long-term transformation and sustainable mission impact (Milliman et al., 2005; Perna & Knight, 2018).

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About the Author



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Joe Handley is currently CEO of A3 and serves ex-officio on the Board of Directors. Rev. Handley is a seasoned mission leader with over 30 years of global experience. Born and raised in Southern California, he received a B.A. in psychology and an M.A. in theology from Azusa Pacific University. In 2020, he completed a Ph.D. in intercultural studies from Fuller Theological Seminary. Joe served nine years at Azusa Pacific University as the founding director of their Office of World Missions and director of one of the first multi-national high school mission congresses in Mexico City in 1996. In 1998 the Lord called him to Rolling Hills Covenant Church where he served as the Global Outreach Pastor and shortly thereafter as Associate Pastor for Outreach Ministries. In July of 2008, Joe answered God’s call becoming the fourth president of A3, a developer of Christ-like leaders seeking to accelerate Christ-centered movements around the world. You can find his articles at polycentricleadership.com and a3leaders.org/.



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