

Charismatic Leader's Act is Tough to Follow

Charismatic Leader's Act is Tough to Follow

By Mortimer R. Feinberg and Bruce Serlen

Managers Journal

When Citibank chairman John Reed announced on May 19 that the bank would be putting aside a \$3 billion reserve fund to cover future loan losses, it was significant on two fronts: not only was Citibank telling the financial community it would be talking a hard line on its Third World loans, but that John Reed had now personally come into his own.

Observers said the announcement signified Mr. Reed had finally emerged from the shadow of his illustrious predecessor Walter Wriston, who had headed the bank for 14 years. Though the formal succession occurred in the fall of 1984, the loan-reserves decision was seen as one of Mr. Reed's first major initiatives. In the public's mind, the "Reed era" has now formally begun.

The phenomenon is not that uncommon. Many leaders in business as well as government one day find themselves-at times unexpectedly-inheriting the mantle of a charismatic figure. The same applies when the person being replaced is much lower down the corporate ladder but engenders that same respect. The office manager or shop foreman—whether benevolent or otherwise—may well have built up a considerable reputation over the years. Employees may feel they even "grew up" under the tutelage of these parental figures and experience a real sense of dislocation when they are replaced.

Given this situation, how do you then proceed? How do you carve out an identity separate from that of your predecessor? And even more to the point, how do you go about introducing your own agenda without de-motivating those in the organization whose allegiances may well be rooted to the previous regime?

The first three to six months of a successor's reign will prove to be most significant. In this period, you'll be easing into your new responsibilities and gradually be ginning to establish your own reputation. Yet it can take a year or two, if not longer, before your full agenda starts to emerge.

"Don't try to go for the brass ring right away," confirms E. Garrett Bewkes Jr., chairman of American Bakeries Co. It is far preferable to let some time go by before introducing any major initiatives. Keep a low profile for a while, so that the luster of the predecessor can grow a little dimmer. "Yet remain alert at all times to the possibilities of becoming your own per son," advises Mr. Bewkes.

"Never force your own priorities or agenda. Implement your plans very cautiously, step by step," adds Dennis C. Bottorff, chairman of Commerce Union Bank. "Understand the way things work before making any changes. Comprehend the culture and how your predecessor used it to forward his or her special agenda."

The issue of timing aside, consider the following recommendations that managers need to weigh when succeeding a charismatic leader, whether a CEO, a division head or a line supervisor:

- **Develop your own style.** In the most fundamental sense, charismatic leaders are irreplaceable. They are very much the products of their generation and the cultural referents of their time. You may have been selected for the new job in part because of your ability to attain a consensus and in particular your ability to get along with your predecessor. But those days are now over.
- **Embrace what you can from the prior regime.** While you'll want to initiate your own programs, there may well be projects you've inherited that are compatible with your own vision. Rather than reject them out of hand, adapt them for your own purposes. After all, they'll still be infused with your predecessor's aura of credibility. "Make your agenda seem like the unfinished business of the former leader," says Lorian Marlantes, vice president of Rockefeller Group.

- **Discreetly assemble your own team.** In the 1500s, the Italian statesman/philosopher Machiavelli warned that "a new prince should organize the government entirely anew . . ." Move with restraint in appointing supporters to key positions. To do otherwise runs the risk of alienating co workers and subordinates alike, including those who up to that point have remained neutral as* to your prospects.

"Part of establishing your own style will mean putting your own team in place eventually," confirms Hugh Chapman, president of Citizens & Southern Corp.. a banking concern. When you do put together your team, choose players whose strengths compensate for your own weaknesses. "Where you are weak, they should be strong," says Mr. Chapman. This entails recognizing your own drawbacks, at the same time making sure you're not aping any weaknesses of your predecessor.

- **Carve out your own territory.** Once you have made the best use of programs already under way. turn to your own projects. By taking the company or division in a new direction, you will further distance yourself from your predecessor and, in the process, create your own legacy.
- **Remain respectful.** When taking over from previous leaders, it is often tempting to belittle their contributions. "Avoid this at all costs," notes Kishori Mahbubani. Singapore's ambassador to the United Nations. "Sycophants may want to hear you do this, but it is always a mistake. More often than not, ill-spoken words will come back to haunt you later, making you look small-minded."

Mr. Feinberg is chairman of BFC Psychological Associates in New York. Mr. Serlen writes on management subjects from. New York.

Article ID: 83

Last updated: 12 Apr, 2013

Revision: 1

Feinberg Insights -> Published Articles -> Charismatic Leader's Act is Tough to Follow

<http://www.sliwainsights.com/kb/index.php?View=entry&EntryID=83>