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# Leadership today: less charisma, more consensus



By [Shellie Karabell](#)

**When you think of words to describe good leadership, ‘charisma’ usually comes somewhere near the top of the list. After all, all the good ideas in the world won’t get anywhere if you aren’t compelling enough to get people to listen to you. But not all successful CEOs are charismatic and today’s complex and profound economic crisis has created a real challenge both for executives and for the professionals who train them.**

INSEAD’s Leadership Initiative staged a Leadership Development Conference earlier this month entitled *‘Developing Leaders: Challenges to Concepts, Practices and research’* to identify some of the issues faced today in the field of leadership with the aim of sparking more research into training programmes.



“Leadership development is at a crossroads today,” says conference organiser **Gianpiero Petriglieri**, Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. “At a time of crisis the temptation is enormous to put all our hopes in the hands of a few charismatic individuals, and leadership development can be co-opted to reinforce this illusion that a handful of well-trained great leaders is all we need. But we have to ask ourselves what kind of systemic cultural drivers led to some of the crises we’re facing today.”

Therein lies the rub, and so some 50 academics and professionals gathered for the INSEAD conference: scholars of psycho-dynamics, of cognitive sciences, ethics; leaders from industry and the military. Today’s leaders face challenges cutting across all those disciplines, and the old ways of training are becoming less and less effective.

“The model based just on the acquisition of theories and reasons and skills, which are obviously very important, has proven itself to be very limited,” says Petriglieri. “What we need is both deeper and broader forms of leadership development.”



Deeper and broader because at the same time leaders today face far-flung governing responsibilities and in order to direct such complexity they first need to understand their own motivation, or fall victim to the temptations of pride. “If you think of the word ‘charisma,’” Petriglieri says, “it comes from the Greek and refers to a gift from the gods, and when gods endow individuals with that gift, they can also take it away. And we’ve seen many such examples of that in excessive amounts in recent years, in dramatic fashion.”

“I think it is extremely important for us to go the opposite way,” he continues. “Not to say that the individual doesn’t matter, but as we develop the individual to become more sensitive, skilful and responsible, to also create forms of leadership development that empower communities to take on the challenges we face.”

That means combining several streams of research and tearing down pedantic barriers. “Separate disciplines are not so helpful if we have to understand the parameters of leadership development,” Petriglieri adds. “We need to review the actions of leadership -- how can we help leaders become more effective at what they do? Then there’s the meaning of leadership -- how can we help leaders become more mindful, more aware of what they represent, of how they articulate and embody a set of values for their organisation? Some of us are going to be focused on the ethics of leadership -- how can we help leaders develop a moral compass for this day and age?”

When you consider the expanded realm of responsibility for today’s leaders -- industrial or political -- given globalisation and instant interconnectivity, you realise the challenges. Petriglieri adds: “It’s the amount of information (the leader) has to deal with, the emotional intensity, the sheer complexity of some of the challenges we face. All this does not lend itself to any one individual, no matter how smart or capable or morally-grounded he or she is, to come forth with a solution and then persuade others of its soundness.” And due to organisations expanding across the globe, this person may not even have met the company’s representative in another part of the world or share the same culture.

Leaders today also find themselves in a field of “enormous collective anxiety,” says Petriglieri. And that puts strains on their performance as leaders. “They’re asked to provide greater visibility and at the same time to foster significant change; to act decisively but also inclusively; to take a stance but to take into account the values and needs of a diverse set of constituencies; to be self-confident but also to be able to question themselves.”

Are we echoing the last Caesars, trying to rule an empire that has grown too big to manage? Or, in this case, too complicated to cover? “What we need to develop,” says Petriglieri, “are what I’d call leadership communities, rather than great leaders. Therefore, the question we need to ask is, ‘what do we need to know and how can we provide opportunities for these kinds of leadership to be developed? The sheer cognitive complexity and emotional

intensity of the challenges that leaders face today mean that they need a different kind of leadership development. It's very important that we move leadership development from just an application of a body of knowledge to a more central place as a field of inquiry."

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