

CHAPTER ONE

CHARACTER before charisma

Much of the time we follow people who are charismatic, people with big personalities. We enjoy being around them and hearing what they have to say. But I have found that having a big personality doesn't necessarily mean a person will grow as a leader and influencer, unless they have the strength of character to support them. Longevity as a leader and influencer requires character.

I have already mentioned an experience in the early days of my business when I met someone who had phenomenal charisma. I was so impressed with this guy. He knew just what to say to make me feel important and to convince me that the business I was setting up was a great idea. He was spellbinding and won my complete attention. Unfortunately, after doing business with him I discovered that he was also utterly dishonest. He had natural charisma, but no strength of character or respect for the truth, and I got burnt. This experience taught me that while charisma can be great, character and integrity are even more important.

Charisma

We are naturally drawn to charismatic people, attracted by their energy, their warmth and likability, even their looks and body language. They seem to say and do all the right things, and to know how to make the people around them feel special. Using all these appealing attributes, a charismatic person can easily influence others.

A charismatic person will have followers. After all, why wouldn't you want to spend time in the sphere of someone who is both attractive and makes you feel special? It's a good feeling, and a charismatic person can give you so much. They can draw on their attributes to lead and influence in a positive way. Think about some famous charismatic people in recent times. Take Barack and Michelle Obama, for example. In the White House and still today, they work to make the world a better place and they attract followers to their causes through their charisma and character. Charisma can be an incredibly positive attribute.

On the other hand, there are charismatic people who use this power solely for their own benefit. If they don't have integrity and a foundation that is truthful, then they won't help others and won't be positive leaders. Over time, the people around them will start to see through the illusions and self-serving behaviour and decide that they aren't really worth following.

As a leader and influencer, you should regularly check your own moral compass and ask, what standards am I setting for myself?

Do I speak up and act when my standards and values are threatened? Do I lead by example? In other words, do I show

others the strength of my own character through what I do in every aspect of my life?

A good leader — whether a politician, a managing director, a teacher or an influencer — can use their own charisma to help them convey their message. That is a good thing and something we can all aim for. But if they want to be respected over the long term, they need to match their charisma with character.

Character

In his book *The Case for Character*, thought leader and bestselling author Michael McQueen ‘highlights why character matters more than ever. In the coming years, consumers will demand ever-greater transparency, trustworthiness and values-alignment from the brands and businesses they engage with — a trend that leaders and organisations ignore at their peril.’

McQueen and I are on the same wavelength here. I believe that true character is even more appealing than charisma. As an influencer, a person of strong character who lives and leads honestly and ethically will outlast someone who is all about what they show us on the surface.

Character, for me, is a long-term game and is expressed through actions. Character means not giving up easily on relationships when things get tough. It means speaking truthfully, even when it’s hard to do. It means standing up for what you believe in and not being a pushover. It means being true to your values even when others criticise or ridicule you for it.

It also means those around you trust you deeply, knowing you have their back and will never resort to backstabbing, gossiping or making negative comments about them. It is about having

the courage to say what you really think. If you see or hear something you disagree with or you believe could hurt someone or harm your company or team, you call it out. That is strength of character.

Charisma is what we see, character is internal

For me, character is an internal quality. It's about looking deep within you and asking yourself, *Hey, is this what I believe in? Is this what I stand for? Is this my value system? Is this who I am?* Your actions and the way you live show your character.

Character is intrinsic to who you are and underpins your intentions. Charisma is external. It's what people see and hear. A charismatic person draws others to them by the attributes they show us. Charisma can be really positive. A charismatic person who also respects truth, has a strong character and works to improve people's lives, whether in the workplace, in the community or in their country, can be an outstanding leader. They can contribute so much to the people around them. Charisma can be wonderful, but character comes first; it is fundamental.

A strong character, being ready to stand up for the truth and for the best outcomes for the people around you, and charisma are a winning combination for a leader.

MICHELLE OBAMA AS INFLUENCER

Former First Lady Michelle Obama has become a major influencer over the past decade. She's a perfect example of an individual who has both strong character and great charisma.

The President of the United States arguably holds the most influential office in the world, which means the position of First Lady is also extremely important. Many of those who have fulfilled this role use their position to engage in philanthropy and do great work of their own. The First Lady is well placed to raise awareness about social issues. Recognising this, Michelle Obama worked hard to improve the lives of the people she and her husband served — in particular, women in the workforce and military families.

Her eight years as First Lady tell only a small part of her story. Michelle was an accomplished individual and influencer long before her husband attained America's highest office. Born in 1964, she enjoyed a distinguished career, graduating from Princeton University with *cum laude* honours in 1985. She also studied law at Harvard. It was while working with a Chicago-based law firm after leaving college that she met Barack Obama, and they married in 1992. She first came to national attention while standing by Barack's side when he was on the campaign trail to become a US senator.

In the years during and following her husband's presidency, Michelle revealed great charisma. She draws people to her with her warmth and her interest in them. She is also a person of great character who will speak out for what she believes in, even if others criticise her for doing so.

Her example shows that if you don't believe in yourself and your story, you won't persuade others to believe in you. To be an influencer, you need to stay true to your values.

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No matter how charismatic you are, if you fake it your clients, audience or colleagues will see through it. The moment they sense a whiff of dishonesty, they disengage from your message. And you won't get those people back, because they don't trust you anymore.

Michelle Obama is such a powerful influencer because, as she puts it, 'I believe my story, I bring my truth, openness. I hear you and hug you — that's real. It shines through and it's not something you can hide.'

She doesn't hide anything about herself. She's open and transparent, which means she shares the good and the bad. Because of that, people trust her and are more likely to engage with her. She says, 'Authenticity means Michelle Obama is the same Michelle Obama you see here and with my girlfriends, walking the dog, being First Lady, it is the same person, and it's a lot easier because I don't have to pretend.'

Michelle Obama has long been an advocate for the advancement of women. She has a great passion for this cause, which she believes has come under direct attack in recent years. In one of her last speeches as First Lady, Michelle confronted these attacks directly:

'I listen to all of this and I feel it so personally, and I'm sure that many of you do too, particularly the women.

'The shameful comments about our bodies. The disrespect of our ambitions and intellect. The belief that you can do anything you want to a woman. It is cruel. It's frightening. And the truth is, it hurts.'

Here Michelle Obama does nothing to hide her anger, contempt and pain. Instead, she displays a searing passion for one of the causes closest to her heart.

It's this passion that encourages so many to connect with her on an emotional level. She shows people how attacks on women hurt even those in positions of high standing. In that sense, she relates her message to everyday people, and inspires and influences them.

She connects with people because she fights for causes she truly believes in. Michelle Obama is authentic and passionate, charismatic and true to her character. She also understands how to get her message out to as wide an audience as possible. In addition, she has the ability to add depth to her story by linking her interests to her passion.

Can character and charisma be learned?

I believe strong character and charisma are innate. Some people are born with them. Michelle Obama, for example, is naturally charismatic and everything she does in her public life shows her strong, courageous character. However, I also think you can build your character by recognising what is important to you at the most fundamental level and by developing the courage to speak up, to defend your beliefs and to call out anything you believe to be untrue or unjust. Doing so requires a deep sense of purpose, and it may take time for you to recognise your own purpose. This doesn't necessarily mean you can learn how to develop a strong character, but you can strengthen the character you're born with. You can find a commitment and integrity within yourself that you can build on to become a stronger leader and influencer.

To some extent charisma can be learned by taking on board feedback about how you communicate. I don't believe that you can learn to be charismatic simply by watching and observing, though. You can only learn the qualities of charisma by interacting with others and receiving quality feedback about your interactions. And by doing so over and over again. The most useful feedback will be on first impressions, on how you communicate with others, how you show you're really listening to them and taking them seriously. You should welcome feedback on whether you show your excitement and passion for a project in a way that lets others feel it too.

Think about the energy you express. Is it positive? Does it exude charisma?

In my experience, it's easy to teach someone how to be excited and passionate when they communicate. It's much harder to teach someone how to follow their real truth. And that's character. We can teach the techniques, the secrets and the behavioural traits that are needed to appear charismatic. However, just because someone has learned how to develop their charisma, just because they're great up on stage as a speaker or when delivering an address in a board meeting, it doesn't necessarily mean they have character. You need both, and your character has to be genuine and come from within.

IN A NUTSHELL

Great leaders and influencers will attract people to them and their message through their charisma. Some people are born with an energy that draws people to them. Think of that old saying, 'You light up the room.' That is natural charisma. But if it doesn't come naturally, ask people around you to give you feedback on how you communicate, how you make them feel, whether they are persuaded that you really listen to them and make them feel special. Do you share your message with passion? These are aspects of charisma that you can learn and will need to learn if you want to be a great leader.

Even more important to the way you lead is that it is true to your character. Do you show strong values, ethical standards and integrity in your dealings with others, for example? Are you ready to stand up for what you believe in, even when you are the only one brave enough to do so? If others see you acting with courage and sincerity, with a commitment to improving your workplace, your community and your world, they will recognise the strength of your character. To be a great leader, be true to your character first; the charisma can follow.