Charismatic Leadership: A Case Study of Captain Bobby Hughes

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Introduction

This research starts with a simple question. Who is the most influential leader that I’ve encountered in my professional practice and why was s/he so impactful? I was immediately drawn to memories of Captain Bobby Hughes whom I worked with at the Macomb Correctional Facility in New Haven, Michigan for approximately one year beginning in 1994. This is a state operated prison facility that houses over one thousand adult male inmates of various custody/security levels. I was a new first line supervisor (sergeant) at the facility and was assigned to work for Captain Hughes who can best be described in a word as charismatic—and perhaps even an iconic figure within the organization’s history. However, what does it really mean to be charismatic within the frame of leadership? This is the research question under evaluation.

To simply state that he was charismatic does not adequately describe his impact and presence. When his name is mentioned even today within a group of Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) employees, those who knew him come together and exude enthusiasm about their experiences with him. Interestingly, many also acknowledge a shadow side which suggests a turbulent private life and perhaps some questionable professional judgments as well. When people describe him, there is an almost reverent charisma about him. His followers would do practically anything he said for his admiration and approval. Of course, this type of power can be dangerous if abused. I’ve often told others that he had a, “drink the Kool-Aid” aura about him in reference to the Jim Jones tragedy that played out in Jonestown, Guyana in
1978. I believe there are those who would have crossed the line professionally to please him. Or, perhaps some subordinates may have even crossed, or nearly crossed, the line to gain his approval and admiration.

His courage and interpersonal skills were legendary with prisoners and staff alike. I recall a prisoner approaching me and stating that if the prison were to ever riot, there would be a group of prisoners who would ensure that Captain Hughes was safely escorted to the front gate out of harm’s way. Of course, the credibility of a prisoner making this statement is somewhat suspect. Yet, the idea that a prisoner would even verbalize such an unsolicited statement to me in such a contentious environment as prison is perhaps telling of Bobby’s influence.

The focus of this research explores what specific observable behaviors by Captain Hughes constitute charismatic leadership based on a review of available literature. The data collected are compared with previous research findings surrounding this social phenomenon. Data was collected from informants who knew Captain Hughes both personally and professionally. In addition, my personal experiences will be provided as data for analysis. Unfortunately, this inquiry will not include an interview with Captain Hughes as he died shortly after his eventual retirement from the Michigan Department of Corrections.

Position of the Researcher

I worked for the MDOC from 1987 to 2007 in various capacities. Early in my career, I reported directly to Captain Hughes as I embarked on my first supervisory position at about age thirty. Captain Hughes left an indelible mark on me as a new supervisor by empowering me to make decisions—even if they were wrong—and treating my rookie mistakes as learning opportunities.
Captain Hughes was famous for saying, “you’re in charge while I’m out”. When I get back, tell me what I decided while I was gone.” I’ve had numerous conversations with other colleagues whom had worked with Captain Hughes over the years that have shared similar experiences. He seemed to elevate the performance and confidence level of others as there was an internal desire for subordinates to please him and be recognized for their efforts.

This research is conducted from the position of an insider to the organization and data originated from interviewing informants that I know as former colleagues. All of the informants worked with Captain Hughes before, during, and after my subordinate relationship with him. Although I’m no longer affiliated with Michigan Department of Corrections, the case study focuses on narrative stories and historical events that occurred while I was part of the organization.

Charismatic Leadership - Theoretical Framework

Charisma is a social phenomenon that many can understand intuitively. In other words, people generally know it when they see it. “Charisma is a Greek word that means ‘divinely inspired gift,’ such as the ability to perform miracles or predict future events”. (Yukl, 1998, p. 298) However, some critical reflection and analysis is needed to gain a more rational explanation within the frame of leadership studies. Within this frame, charisma is not a magical power or a supernatural experience according to the available scholarly literature. Rather, it’s fairly well defined set of observable behaviors that affect both the leader and followers according to many researchers (Avolio & Bass, 1988; Bass, 1985; Beyer, 1999; Burns, 1979). However, House
(1977) is frequently credited with being the first researcher to make the phenomenon testable rather than the aforementioned “magical” definitions from the earliest theories.

**Charismatic Leadership Traits**

“The term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber, 1947, p. 358). A more contemporary view offered by House (1976) postulates that the personality characteristics of a charismatic leader include the need for dominance, a desire to influence, confidence, and strong values. Other behaviors include strong role modeling, showing competence, articulating clear goals, setting high expectations, exuding confidence, and the ability to arouse follower motivation.

Hackman and Johnson (2000) go so far as to state that charismatic leaders are the “superstars” of leadership who are well known for their impact on the lives of others. There is a thread of storytelling ability suggested throughout much of the literature as well. Charismatic leaders often use this method of convening their messages. Similarly, charismatic leaders are able to mobilize followers to action by providing a vivid image of the future by linking performance to historical references or benchmarks of performance from the past according to Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993).

**Situational Characteristics**
Charismatic leaders are rare and are more likely to emerge during times of crisis according to Yukl (1999). As far back as Weber (1947) the idea that charismatic leadership is born out of a stressful situation is well documented in the literature. He used the term “heroic leadership” to define charisma and suggested that societies [organizations] progress through three distinct phases beginning with the charismatic followed by the rational-legal, and finally the traditional. Others further suggest that charismatic leadership is at the root of both transformational and servant leadership models and the sociological work of Max Weber (Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004).

Bass (1985) espouses that charismatic leadership is more likely to emerge in a dangerous or combat situation in which followers are required to set self-interests aside for the good of the unit or team. One could argue that a prison environment provides a similar opportunity for charismatic leadership to emerge. House (1977) writes how symbols such as uniforms and flags can unite troops against a common enemy and arouse one’s motivation to perform in concert with the charismatic leader’s wishes. While the military environment shares some likeness to the corrections environment; there appears to be a noticeable gap in the literature on charismatic leadership relative to prison leadership studies. This case study may stimulate further research and serve as a conduit for more comprehensive discussions.

Shamir and Howell (1999) suggest that charismatic leadership is more likely to take hold in a new organization when anxiety is high along with uncertainty. Followers in this environment are perhaps looking to a central figure for guidance and the shaping of the organization’s identity. This scenario was exactly the circumstance that Captain Hughes faced in
1994 during the opening of the then brand new Macomb Correctional Facility. The facility was staffed with newly graduated officer recruits who lacked experience and needed someone to look up to as a role model within this potentially dangerous and crisis-rich environment.

As organizations mature the need for charismatic leadership often fades and becomes counterproductive as members gain experience and develop their individual styles and the organizational culture begins to emerge. Heifetz (1994) reminds us that:

Creativity is stimulated by engaging with one’s environment, but the skill of sensing local environments becomes dulled as people fasten their gaze on the charismatic figure or the chain of command for direction. Focusing upward, people lose touch with their communities, markets, and personal resources. (p. 66)

Heifetz (1994) goes on to suggest that followers, over time, become too dependent on the charismatic leader and fail to develop their own competencies as they move on a continuum from dependent to independent agents within an organization. In other words, the charismatic leader provides a temporary anchor during a particularly stressful situation or as an emerging organization forms. However, once the organization stabilizes the charismatic leader tends to stifle the creativity of its members.

**Follower Characteristics**

The transformational impact that charismatic leaders have on their followers is perhaps even more interesting than the charismatic leader’s behavioral traits and characteristics. Yukl (1999)
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provides a clear and important distinction between the overlapping concepts of transformational leadership and charismatic leadership:

A transformational leader seems more likely to take actions that will empower followers and make them partners in a quest to achieve important objectives. A charismatic leader seems more likely to emphasize the need for radical change that can only be accomplished if the followers put their trust in the leader’s expertise. (p. 301)

The literature is clear that personal relationships are at the heart of a charismatic leader’s success (House, 1977; Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Hackman and Johnson (2000) label charismatic leaders as “relationship builders” as described below:

Charismatic leaders are skilled at linking with others. Their relationships with followers are characterized by strong feelings. As we’ve seen, such terms as excitement, adventure, loyalty and devotion are frequently used to describe leader-follower relationships. (p. 118)

Followers often feel an increased sense of self esteem and confidence when in the presence of a charismatic leader. “For followers, there is a hope or fantasy that somehow certain [attributes] of the admired person’s qualities will be acquired by association” (Conger & Kanungo, 1998, p. 216). A more technical term for this observable condition is transference in which the leader takes on a quasi-parental role in the relationship and the leader’s elevated status is leveraged to gain compliance from followers (Conger & Kanungo, 1998).
Yukl (1998) expands this idea and focuses on what he terms the “self-concept” theory of charismatic leadership. This model suggests that followers gain self identification, social identification, internalization, and self-efficacy from the leader-follower relationship. Similarly, the idea of transference is defined by Hackman and Johnson (2000):

Through regression, transference, and projection, charismatic leaders may help followers cope with their own feelings of inadequacy. In validating a charismatic leader’s extraordinary ability, followers may experience feelings of empowerment by submerging their own identities in that of a seemingly superior leader. (p. 114)

Yukl (1998) points out that the follower typically wants to please the charismatic leader as part of their self-identification and to be recognized as competent and may even imitate the leader’s attributes. There is a common theme in the literature which suggests that followers do not want to let the leader down which often results in an observable performance increase.

Shamir, et al. (1993) suggest, “...charismatic leaders achieve transformational effects through implicating the self-concept of followers” (p. 584). Finally, Bass (1985) notes that transformational [charismatic] leaders are able to elevate followers to a higher level according to Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs model. To summarize this point, followers seem to accept and embrace the charismatic leader’s influence to compensate for psychological deficiencies they may have. The relationship seems to be a sociologically significant dyad in which the leader maintains his/her need for control and the follower exploits the opportunity to enhance their self-concept.

*The Dark Side of Charisma*
Charismatic leaders do have many potential liabilities as summarized succinctly by Conger and Kanungo (1998) such as:

- Poor management of people networks, especially with superiors and peers;
- Unconventional behavior that alienates; creation of disruptive “in group/out group” rivalries;
- Autocratic management style; an informal/impulsive style that can be dysfunctional;
- False claims or responsibility for the ideas of others; creation of excessive dependency on themselves among subordinates;
- Failure to manage essential details;
- Attention to the superficial;
- Absence for operations;
- And failure to develop successor of equal ability (p. 220).

The authors go on to suggest that leaders can be blinded by their own success and develop behaviors consistent with ego-centrism and narcissism to the point of convincing themselves that they are infallible. In still another study, Deluga (1997) deals with the egotism of charismatic leaders and how this manifests itself behaviorally as inaccurate assessments of crisis situations and excessive risk-taking behaviors. This is based on the leader’s shadow needs to implement organizational change on behalf of the organization to feed the leader’s narcissistic desires and a grandiose self-image.

Another shadow side component of charisma involves the follower’s willingness to follow the leader blindly and not question orders or decision making. History reminds us of such events in the form of Hitler’s destructive rise to power in Germany in the early twentieth century and the deadly influence that the Reverend Jim Jones demonstrated in Jamestown,
Guyana in 1978 when nearly 1,000 people consumed a cyanide-laced beverage at his verbal command as part of a mass suicide grounded in religious convictions.

Yukl (1998) expands on the need for careful succession of a charismatic leader as introduced earlier and the difficulties organizations encounter during such a transition. Specifically, as a “routinization of charisma” takes place and once the charisma of the leader fades, or s/he moves on, it’s often difficult for the group to accept a seemingly bland bureaucratically minded leader (p. 310). This makes charismatic leadership a relatively short term phenomena often lacking long term organizational benefits. In another of Yukl’s (1999) works he further posits that charismatic leadership will fade over time as a crisis lessens and followers become more self-reliant and experienced.

**Methodology**

The literature review served as the guide to formulate semi-structured open ended interview questions to assess if what I observed in Captain Bobby Hughes was charisma, or something else, using my own experiences and the interview data collected from two other informants. This is an instrumental case study as defined by Stake (1995) to better understand the underpinnings of charismatic leadership and is qualitative in nature. Specifically, two one hour taped interviews were conducted and professionally transcribed for the benefit of accuracy and text analysis in an effort to look for patterns consistent with behaviors commonly associated with charismatic leadership. The informants were selected based on my prior relationships with them as co-workers in 1990’s as a sample of convenience. Moreover, each informant was particularly close to Bobby and worked with him for several years. Pseudo names of “Carl” and
“Mary” are used to protect the identity of both informants. However, I’m sharing my observations based on first-hand experience in the section titled “Tim’s story”. The research is grounded in the traditions of phenomenology as the dominant culture of inquiry. This approach was used to gain an understanding of observable behaviors as they relate to scholarly descriptions of charisma to provide deeper understanding and meaning within the framework of leadership studies.

My positioning is perhaps both a benefit and a liability. A major benefit for understanding this phenomenon is that I’ve observed the behaviors under study as a subordinate of Bobby Hughes for approximately one year. Conversely, my positioning may result in some looking at this research critically as I acknowledge that I was inspired by Bobby’s leadership and was part of his inner circle for a period of time. It’s reasonable for one to conclude that my bias would make it difficult to render non-bias conclusions. This may be a reasonable criticism. However, this study certainly is not the final word about what it was about Bobby that made him such an iconic figure; it begins to explore if charisma was perhaps a major factor in his professional persona and perhaps helps to substantiate previously documented definitions of charisma in the literature. One final limitation of this research is that the study was confined to behaviors within the workplace. It would be interesting to know if Bobby’s charisma spilled over into his personal life as well within family and other social structures.

Further, it so happens that the informants who agreed to provide data for this research also highly respected and liked Captain Hughes. In fairness, I’m certain that Bobby had his critics as well whose perspectives perhaps are not represented in this paper. Nonetheless, the
research remains focused on understanding if what Bobby displayed was charisma, or something else, that resulted in such a positive impact on the three informant’s perspectives offered here. Three informants were used to gain sufficient prospective keeping in step with the triangulation method suggested for phenomenological research.

Presentation of Data

Carl’s Story

Carl had worked for Captain Hughes for several years at more than one institution. He recalls Captain Hughes to be very likeable personality from Georgia who would laugh, joke, and have a good time. During daily rounds through the facility he would visit with everyone and get to know people. Carl recalls Bobby being very physical in that he would touch you while communicating with you. In particular, he had a tendency to grab your forearms while he was talking to you which took Carl awhile to get comfortable with. However, when it came to work it was all business. Although Carl had a close working relationship with Bobby, he described himself as, “not a joiner” so he did not feel as if he was in Bobby’s inner circle of friends. Although invited to take vacations with Bobby to the dog tracks of West Virginia; Carl declined and preferred to think of Bobby as an acquaintance rather than a close friend. As an employee, he felt like a very valuable asset to Captain Hughes and describes being called upon frequently for difficult duties such as the forced cell extraction of disruptive prisoners. Carl believes he was deliberately selected for these duties based to the high level of mutual trust and respect they shared as co-workers.
Carl would not go so far as to directly state that Captain Hughes may have used unconventional, or non-sanctioned, techniques on the job to gain support from followers or compliance from inmates. Further, Carl did not believe people would break the rules to please Captain Hughes. However, his story depicts incidents in which the video camera may become unfocused on the uncooperative inmates at strategic times. For example, Carl states that it was, “not unusual for the camera to run out of power [while] we were bouncing around [in a cell] and getting more wall footage than actual footage of what was going on.” In summary, there were unwritten rules about what was observed and not observed by staff during the report writing phase following a critical incident involving an unruly inmate.

Carl recalls Bobby’s leadership style as empowering in that he expected subordinates to make decisions. Moreover, Captain Hughes would support those who reported to him by backing them up without exception. He would take the heat for his officers and not believe the word of an inmate over a staff member. Carl recalls that he did not worry about things on shift as much when Captain Hughes was on duty. He attributes this relative calm to the Bobby’s willingness to support his staff and not be divided by inmates or others.

When asked if others tried to emulate Bobby and perhaps live vicariously through him Carl immediately responded yes. There were certainly people who tried to be like Bobby in an effort to be as well liked and respected. When asked if Captain Hughes generated more loyalty than other captains Carl stated, “Probably more, because he had more experience than other captains.” Carl believes that Captain Hughes had very high expectations for the officers and demanded that they do their jobs. Carl recalled that Bobby was especially effective in times of
crisis and stood out from the other shift commanders. There were plenty of opportunities to see Bobby’s skills in action during the 1980’s at Huron Valley Men’s Correctional Facility, according to Carl, which is described by many as “the war”. Stabbings and serious assaults were the norm with frequent bloodshed of both prisoners and officers including a well publicized hostage situation. During these times, Carl recalls that he did not trust any of the superiors above Captain Hughes. He further states that Bobby frequently “had problems” with his superiors because he wouldn’t go alone with their wishes. Carl suggests that upper management was fearful of Bobby but didn’t have the guts to go against him, however.

I asked Carl to think about the time when Captain Hughes was sent to open the brand new Macomb Correctional Facility in 1994 and how Bobby fit into that scenario. Carl stated that Captain Hughes was, “a perfect fit for Macomb.” Many of the officers at Macomb were recent academy graduates and needed a role model and the guidance of a veteran leader. According to Carl, Bobby worked hard to instill confidence in the young officers so they could handle the job.

Mary’s Story

Mary believed that she was in Bobby’s inner circle and felt very much protected by him. She traveled on vacations with him to the West Virginia dog tracks. She recalls Captain Hughes as being very generous in states that he frequently purchased meals for those traveling with him. Mary indicated that it was like traveling with someone who was both a fun loving friend and your dad at the same time. Safety on the job was a big concern for Mary. She was a young attractive female working in a male prison located in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan with little
to no prior experience other than basic academy training. Mary commented that the prison environment was such that an inmate would, “stab you for a box of frozen chicken” under the right circumstances from her frame of reference.

Regarding her safety she states:

> With me I just trusted him. I knew he wouldn’t ever put me in a situation that would—I guess I can’t say that would be dangerous because we worked in a prison – but he would never put me with people that would go against him [emphasis added].

Captains at correctional facilities change shifts with some regularity. Mary was asked how things were different for her when working for another shift commander. She states that she did not feel as safe without Bobby. Mary goes into more detail and states, “I would feel like when he was around it was like the corrupt officers or the bad inmates weren’t going to get me.” She also tells of an incident involving a hostage situation at another facility in which a female employee was held and raped for several hours by an inmate. In discussing this incident, Bobby told her that he would not allow that to happen and that if a hostage is taken; he would do whatever was necessary to get the hostage out quickly. This provided a great deal of reassurance to Mary.

When asked if Bobby used unconventional means to get things done she stated that people liked him so much that they would do things for him that they would not do for others. She indicates that prisoners also treated him “differently” than other officers or shift commanders. She went on to say that based on the respect that he earned, people would do whatever he wanted done. Although she never witnessed any inappropriate use of force or
other inappropriate behaviors firsthand, she spoke of a well circulated story that Captain
Hughes “beat the crap” out of an inmate. Mary states that she was shocked at first to hear of
this unsupported allegation but later thought, “Yes, that’s him. That’s his personality.” She
stated that he was “like a movie star, he could get away with stuff that nobody else could get
away with.” She went on to say, “what was cool about him is that he would bend the rules. I
think that’s what inmates liked about him too. If it made common sense, you don’t have to
follow every little rule. . .” When Mary questioned those who claimed to be there during the
incident and inquired about what will happen if someone tells she was told that nobody will
ever tell because they respect Bobby too much. Mary said that if she ever thought someone did
something wrong she would not hesitate to turn them in. However, she would never turn in
Captain Hughes because she liked and respected him so much.

When asked about loyalty, Mary states that everyone close to him was very loyal. In
referring to the alleged inmate assault incident described earlier she again reinforces the
intense level of loyalty:

If he did do something to an inmate, nobody would have turned him in for it. They just
wouldn’t. And because you kind of felt he was doing something good. Even though it’s a
weird way to look at it; what he was doing, he was doing for the benefit of everyone.

When I shared my belief that Bobby had the type of charisma that could be misused and asked
if were possible for someone like Captain Hughes (hypothetically) to misuse their power she
immediately reacted as follows:
Yes, definitely, you couldn’t help but like the guy. You did it, and you felt he was always doing what was best for you. That’s what people in cults think. They do that because—well he [emphasis added] knows what’s best for me. He’s never led me down the wrong path before. You can trust him.

Mary stated that Bobby had “all the confidence in the world” and he was “kind of like the most popular guy in school.” Everyone liked him and Bobby seemed comfortable everywhere that he went according to Mary. He was definitely a role model and Mary believed people did extra work for him because he was like the good teacher in school—you wanted to do well and gain his trust and respect. Mary said the officers did not want to look stupid in Bobby’s eyes because he never made mistakes and always did the right thing. If he did make a mistake Bobby was always so “cool and smooth” about it that you never know it. Mary related another story about attending a job interview at another facility and mentioning Bobby’s name to the selection panel as a way to make small talk. She states that formal interview process stopped and a 45 minute informal conversation about Captain Hughes ensued as the panel members reminisced with stories involving Bobby. She also mentioned that a correctional facility should be named after him, or at least a graduating class of officer recruits. This practice is not uncommon within the corrections field. Bobby Hughes is conspicuously missing from this honor in Mary’s view.

When asked if Bobby’s charisma faded in time as the facility stabilized after a few years she indicated that it did not fade with her personally. However, Mary did indicate that as more seasoned officers transferred into the new facility they attempted to “bring him down” and
claimed that Bobby was not the “Mr. Big Stuff” as espoused by the newer officers. She seems to think rebellion emerged out of jealousy as those in Bobby’s inner circle were treated special which suggests there may have been in-groups and out-groups at during these times.

Mary indicated that she worked harder for Captain Hughes than others because she did not want to let him down. She states that he made work fun and interesting by sharing stories and somehow motivating everyone to do as he wished. She recalls him sharing photo albums of stabbings and other injuries that occurred at his previous assignments at Huron Valley Men’s Facility which is a high-security male facility known for its mentally disturbed inmate population in the 1980’s along with photographs from the infamous Jackson Prison which was once considered the largest walled prison in the world housing several thousand male inmates. Bobby would show these images to new officers in order to prepare them, in his mind, for the job ahead of them and to instill the importance of backing each other up.

During these show-and-tell sessions, Bobby would describe the officers in such vivid detail that they seemed like such heroes to Mary. She told of pictures in which officers who were stabbed smiled while they displayed their wounds and posed for the photograph as if it were a badge of honor. Mary stated that Captain Hughes portrayed the officers that were stabbed as “superheroes” as he told the stories of each incident in vivid detail. Mary states, “I think it made us kind of more on our toes in the beginning, and the fear probably kept us safer.” Mary recalls another related incident in which Bobby told the new officers:
There is no black [race], there’s no white [race], you’re all in the same uniform and you need to watch out for each other. If you have a problem with someone, take care of it yourself. That’s what the parking lot is for.

Mary states that Captain Hughes would back his officers up no matter what even if it meant that he would get in trouble with upper administration. Bobby was not afraid to make the tough decisions that were unpopular with his superiors according to Mary. He didn’t care if it was the warden that he was confronting for that matter. Mary thinks this attitude cost him in the end, however. She indicates that Bobby really felt let down by the Michigan Department of Corrections near the end of his career and felt that he did not get the respect and treatment that the deserved for his contributions.

When asked if she observed others trying to emulate Captain Hughes she immediately recalled employees who wanted to gain the same respect that Bobby had but were unsuccessful in their attempts. This attempt at emulation made sense to her because, “why wouldn’t you copy somebody that you think everyone respects.”

Tim’s Story

When I first met Captain Bobby Hughes I was a six year veteran of Michigan Department of Corrections starting my first day as a sergeant at the Macomb Correctional facility. I was approximately 30 years old and I’ll never forget our first meeting. I was assigned to the afternoon shift –as most new supervisors are—and I was greeted by Bobby as I entered the prison. Before me stood a silver-haired, well groomed man of a medium build with pressed uniform creases and highly polished shoes. I’ll never forget his broad grin and bright blue eyes
that seemed to cut right through me. Although it was a very welcoming gaze, I could tell he
meant business and I intuitively know that he was in charge of the operation. I was immediately
welcomed and felt special to be one of his direct reports. He made it very clear from the start
that he would do anything to help me out and I never doubted that commitment.

Being on Bobby’s inner circle was like no other work related experience that I’d had in
twenty years of professional practice with the agency. With Bobby, the rules were always
“guidelines” and I had the freedom to make my own decisions with his full support. If he
disagreed, he would certainly tell me to do things differently next time. However, he would
never second guess me publically and I always felt that he would cover my mistakes and claim it
was his idea if things went terribly bad on the shift. His support seemed unconditional which
allowed me to perform at a higher level with abundant confidence in my abilities.

There was a certain privilege to being a friend of Bobby’s in that he’d frequently
purchase food for me and others on shift. It was not uncommon for him to attend weddings of
corrections officers and other celebratory events such as parties following a promotion. These
acts were intended to show his support and genuine care for staff and cultivate loyalty and
trust. He would occasionally allow fellow supervisors to leave work early if there were a
sufficient number of staff on duty to run the shift. This was perceived as a perk for a job well
done and in recognition for supervisors who performed according to his standards. This gesture
was viewed as courageous by his subordinates because in a bureaucratic organization, such as
corrections, there is a heavy reliance on time clocks and stringent accountability. However,
there was a feeling that if Bobby authorized the “unofficial” leave; then it was be alright and
nobody would question it. In retrospect, I’m not sure that I was as insolated as perhaps I once thought and could have suffered consequences for my actions despite having Bobby’s blessing. However, at that time, he ran the shift and if he said I could leave early—I would not question it.

He had a way of getting things done very quickly on his own authority with little resistance. I recall an incident in which several prisoners refused to lock in their cells for the evening at the officers’ command. The officers called the control center (centralize command post) and told Bobby the prisoners would not lock up for the evening as required by rule. He said, “Don’t call me, it’s your job to lock them up and hung up the phone.” After a few minutes, the unit officers called back and again stated that the prisoners will still refusing to lock up. Captain Hughes told me to get the video camera and follow him to the cell block. I reminded Bobby that the camera did not have a VHS tape or a charged battery as the facility had just opened and equipment and supplies were arriving daily. Captain Hughes said, “it doesn’t matter, when they see the camera they will run to their cells like cockroaches.” He was absolutely correct. I entered the building with the non-functioning video camera on my shoulder and the resistant prisoners immediately pulled clothing items over their faces and ran for their cells. The reason for this is that if caught on film behaving in this manner they could be charged with a serious institutional misconduct for creating a disturbance or incite to riot. Both charges have severe consequences for the prisoners impacting their security level, visiting privileges, and release dates. The officers involved in this incident respected Bobby’s ability to improvise and resolve issues quickly and efficiently by any reasonable means necessary. These “heroic” acts leave an impression on subordinates; especially young impressionable corrections officers.
I recall having the impression the Bobby had superior inside intelligence information from all around the state prison system. He’d frequently pull me aside tell me that he received a call from another facility regarding information about possible prisoner unrest at other facilities and to be extra alert as these issues can spread from facility to facility. Given his experience, I recall being attentive to every word that he said and being hyper vigilant toward security matters for the balance of the shift. Perhaps this was his way of showing me that I was dependent on him for critical information which is consistent with research findings focusing on charisma. Or, he may have had legitimate intelligence information that I was not aware of but I did not question the information at the time it was given.

There was another incident in which a young male prisoner would not stop kicking his steel cell door. The prisoner was lying on the floor on his back slamming both feet into the door at full force causing a thunderous commotion in the housing unit. This behavior went on for hours and the housing unit officers called the control center to report the incident to Captain Hughes. Again, his suggestion was for the officers to figure out how to make the prisoner stop the behavior. The door kicking persisted until near the end of shift. Captain Hughes decided that he did not want to leave this unresolved problem for the midnight shift commander to deal with and decided to intervene.

Just prior to the end of our afternoon shift around 9PM, as I recall, I accompanied Bobby to the disruptive prisoner’s housing unit to address behavior. Bobby walked in and asked the officers on duty what was going on as the prisoner continuously kicked on the cell door in the background. Captain Hughes proceeded to take off his glasses, remove the ink pens from his
pocket, roll up his shirt sleeves and give us the following order. “Stay here and don’t come to his cell for any reason. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Bobby proceeded to walk down the cell block and when he approached the disruptive prisoner’s cell he ordered us to open the door (this was an electronic cell door which was operated remotely from the officers’ station). Once inside – he yelled, “close it”. Approximately three officers and I stood in amazement wondering what was going in the cell. Was it right? Should we back him up, or follow his order?

A few minutes later we heard Bobby yell for us to open the cell and let him out. Bobby emerged and walked to our location at the officers’ desk and calmly rolled down his sleeves, put on his glasses, returned the ink pens to his pocket and advised us that the problem was resolved and the prisoner will no longer kick the door. He proceeded to make a note in the unit logbook that he had addressed the issue and if the prisoner started kicking the door during the midnight shift, Captain Hughes was to be called at his residence and he would return to the facility. The prisoner stopped the disruptive behavior and there were no further issues. The question remains, however. What happened in the cell during that 5-10 minute timeframe? Many of us speculated the Bobby most likely sat down next to the young offender and talked to him like a father might counsel and discipline a child.

Bobby’s influence to control the behavior and performance of others extended beyond officers to inmates as well. I can imagine Bobby telling the prisoner what behaviors were acceptable and which ones were not going to be tolerated. I also imagine Bobby giving the inmate a pat on the back or a slight hug at the conclusion of the meeting followed by a stern warning that his next visit would not be as friendly. Of course this is speculation on my part.
However, the officers and I were left to fill in the blanks of what Bobby did while he was in the cell. I’m suspect some may have preferred to think that Bobby assaulted the young prisoner or threatened him in some way. This mystery just adds to the legend and influence of Captain Bobby Hughes.

*Analysis and Interpretation*

Was Captain Bobby Hughes a charismatic leader? Interview data are compared to existing models of charisma from frequently cited literature to analyze this question. The analysis will begin within the context of the environment in which the informants knew Captain Hughes. In 1994, the stage was set for this phenomenon of charismatic leadership to take hold as Captain Hughes was charged with opening a new correctional facility staffed primarily with recently graduated officer recruits beginning a career within the potentially dangerous confines of a state prison. The literature review suggests that charismatic leadership tends to flourish in a new organization and/or ones that are perceived to be potentially dangerous. It’s not difficult to argue that prison constitutes both a dangerous and stressful environment. Each respondent agreed that Bobby was well situated to take a leadership role with the new recruits who needed guidance and a confident role model to show them the way. Further it could be argued that Bobby filled the role of “heroic leader” as well by providing a sense of safety for those he influenced as told by the informants during the interviews.

The literature also provides numerous hallmark traits of charismatic leadership (House 1977; Hackman & Johson 2000). They espouses that some of the classic behaviors include confidence, role model projection, competence, a desire to influence, high expectations for
followers, the ability to motivate others, relationship building, loyalty, adventure, and excitement. Each informant provided vivid examples for each of these elements. Captain Hughes was viewed as extremely confident (which may have been a liability as discussed in the dark side of charisma discussion) and able to influence others. The data reveal that he was able to influence both staff and prisoners to act according to his wishes.

There was unanimous consensus about Bobby’s competency as a prison official. The informants frequently noted that they felt safer when Captain Hughes was on duty and perceived there to be less of a threat level at the prison. The data collected is consistent with studies focusing on loyalty as it relates to charisma. Bobby’s ability to generate loyalty and exploit his charismatic attributes were perhaps due to his experience working within stressful environments such as the Vietnam War, police work in the State of Georgia, and ultimately the prison system. This idea of crisis-rich and stressful environments as fertile ground for the emergence of charisma is cited in the literature review. Similarly, there was consistent evidence to suggest that Bobby set high expectations for his officers and provided a great deal of motivation for those working for him to perform. This too is yet another indicator of his charisma as defined in numerous published studies.

The informant’s stories convey an image of a man who was well liked by most; and someone who was concerned for the personal well-being of his followers. This kindness was demonstrated by his willingness to have conversations with everyone on the shift in an effort to make a personal connection. In addition, stories about him taking employees on vacations with him are somewhat extraordinary behavioral examples along with his attendance of personal
celebrations, providing meals at his expense, and rewarding high performers with his trust to perform difficult and sensitive duties. Bobby was also known for his use of physical touching to convey sincerity during personal interactions to build relationships. Mary went so far as to liken Bobby to a movie star which is consistent with some of the literature regarding the traits of a charismatic leader being described as the “superstars” of leadership. Again, these findings are consistent with published works that suggest relationships are at the heart of charismatic leadership.

The focus will now shift toward the effect that Bobby had the followers in terms of self efficacy and performance. As mentioned previously, there is clearly an emphasis on the perception of increased safety during Bobby’s watch based on informant data. In addition, all noted instances of subordinates attempting to emulate Captain Hughes to be as well like and respected as he was. During the research interviews, there was no hesitation during the informant’s responses which suggest a very strong affirmative reaction to this line of questioning. I must admit that I still make conscious efforts to emulate some of Bobby’s behaviors. Specifically, as an introvert attempting to become more balanced and appealing to more people, I purposefully take time to talk to subordinates in an effort to get to know them better and often purchase food for those within my sphere of influence. I recall how special I felt when Bobby did the same for me. Although these types of extroverted behaviors do require effort on my part, I consciously make the effort to build personal relationships with colleagues.

The literature review revealed this idea of emulation as a typically follower behavior within the realm of charismatic leadership. Sometimes, emulation is attempted to compensate
for one’s weaknesses and there is a tendency for some followers to live vicariously through the leader according to the literature. The informants were quick to name names of individuals who attempted to emulate Bobby as they reflected on their career experiences.

There is much written about how charismatic leaders are most aligned with theories containing threads of transformational and/or servant leadership. Bobby seemed to transform many within his inner circle. The respondents stated consistently that there was a desire to not let him down and to please him. This presumably, was a result of followers seeking his attention and approval which tended to feed back on itself resulting in followers gaining more respect and the trust to handle increasing more complex assignments. As the trust and complexity of the assignments increased so did the self confidence of followers.

The literature makes many references to self concept and social identification issues. Data collected supports this assertion as all informants believed they accomplished more under Bobby’s command and felt a social identification with him personally and an identity to the shift at large. In other words, officers on Bobby’s shift felt somewhat protected and different from all others. Storytelling is interesting social aspect of leadership behavior and was a tool used effectively by Bobby to motivate his officers and gain their trust and loyalty. Mary recalls being shown photos of corrections officer stab wounds from Bobby’s historical collection of previous incidents involving assaultive prisoners. She believes he used these photos to instill the importance of following security procedures to remain staff on the job. An often cited trait of a charismatic leader is the use of historical events to make more contemporary issues seem relevant to followers. The display of stab wounds seems like a classic example of this behavior.
One wonders if this was done to perhaps place fear in the minds of his followers to gain trust and compliance. In other words, listen to me or the officers depicted in these images could be you.

Mary suggests that her loyalty to Bobby was so strong that she would be unlikely to report him if she were aware of misconduct on Bobby’s part. In a similarly powerful remark she further states that Bobby knew what was best for everyone so he should not be questioned. She acknowledged that this type of followership is often observed within a cult like setting. She further commented that he was like a father figure. This idea of transference is another common thread within the literature in which the charismatic leader is able to transfer this fatherly identity to group members.

The dark side of charisma is widely discussed by academics in their writing. The data collected suggests that Bobby had the potential to use his influence for less than noble purposes if he elected to do so. He seemed to have an inordinate amount of influence over those around him. The earliest theories would suggest this power was a divine gift or magical power. However, more contemporary psychological explanations suggest that it’s more likely a result of the leader filling the unmet needs of the follower resulting in an increased spike in performance or loyalty.

Perhaps the most consistent and dominant theme contained in the interview data involves the assertion that Bobby would support and back up his officers no matter what. Of course, this steadfast position is desirable and appealing from the officers’ perspective. However, it does come with a price as the literature reminds us that charismatic leaders have a
Charismatic leadership tends to create in-groups and out-groups which can cause divisions within an organization. Such divisions were noted in the data analysis as Carl and Mary both point out that Bobby had difficulty, at times, interacting with superiors and peer supervisors. This tension perhaps resulted from Bobby’s overbearing position that he was right and nobody had better question the performance of his officers.

The literature warns of other dark side issues that can be observed in the wake of a charismatic leader. Such pitfalls include an autocratic style which was definitely the case within the paramilitary structure of a prison operation. However, it did not seem oppressive at the time as I reflect on the working conditions. In addition, there tend to be impulsive acts resulting in unnecessary risk taking and ego-centric behaviors on the part of charismatic leaders. The story about Bobby entering a disruptive prisoner’s cell without backup seems to illustrate this point. The risk happened to pay off as it resulted in the officers increasing their respect for Bobby’s courage at that moment and his ability to resolve conflict. However, if the risk did not pay off it could have had devastating results and been a case study in what not to do to calm a disruptive prisoner. Was it his ego or sense of infallibility that drove him to enter the cell as the literature would suggest? Or, was it his experience guiding his professional judgment?

Charismatic leadership is not a long term phenomena according to the literature. It tends to fade as the danger passes and the organization begins to stabilize. The data support this hypothesis as Mary points out that as more experienced officers began to transfer into the facility some more veteran officers began to temper Bobby’s influence over the young inexperienced officers. Further, he seemed to lose some credibility with his superiors and fell
out of favor with the warden resulting in a transfer to another prison to finish his career. Mary furthers this point by sharing that Bobby left the department feeling that his efforts were not appreciated by management and seemed rather subdued and disappointed as he reflected about the end of his career.

Conclusion for Leadership Studies

The data support that Captain Bobby Hughes was a charismatic leader as defined by much of the literature. In fact, this seems like a classic case when one looks at espoused traits affiliated with charisma. Much of the situational aspects are also on point as the prison environment provides the perfect venue for a charisma to emerge given the danger and stressful situations encountered on regular basis. He was well liked by most which made it easy to accept his autocratic style and desire for control.

The followers seemed impacted in very predictable ways which are consistent with published research. The findings support the expectation that performance was enhanced based on Bobby’s charisma and his ability to build relationships with others. There is an extraordinary amount loyalty among his followers contained within the data and a clear desire to please him at all costs which is the essence of charisma.

The research also confirmed the existence of the dark side of charisma as Bobby did operate in unconventional ways to get things done on his authority. This resulted in him gaining quick respect from his followers while at the same time slowly eroding relationships with peer supervisors and upper management as he occasionally practiced outside of the established professional boundaries.
In summary, the original assumption that Bobby Hughes may have been a charismatic leader is supported. His impact and influence were far reaching and I am eternally grateful for the support and professional development that I achieved under his leadership as are many others within the agency. I dedicate this paper to his memory and his decades of public service. He was known by many and respected by most and remains an iconic figure forever etched into the history of the Michigan Department of Corrections.
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