CultureCase

The consequences of focusing on charismatic leadership in the arts

This research was conducted by **Melissa Nisbett** and **Ben Walmsley** at at **King's College London** and the **University of Leeds, UK.**

Summary

This study sets out to assess the role of charisma in cultural leadership, noting that the arts sector seems to be particularly invested in individuals perceived to be inspirational or visionary leaders. The authors propose that the focus on charismatic leadership in the sector has become excessive, and suggest that organising an institution around a figurehead individual may contradict the explicit aims of public institutions to serve a wide audience.

Charismatic leadership is a feature in stakeholder attitudes to arts organisations

The impetus for this study came from the unexpected stress placed on charismatic leadership by respondents in two previous studies. The first study considered the role of cultural diplomacy within UK arts policy and its relationship to the management of museums. The second data set came from a study that explored audiences' motivations for attending the theatre and the impact the theatre had on them. The second study was conducted in the UK and in Australia. Surprisingly for the researchers, respondents repeatedly felt compelled to praise the charisma of particular leaders, or to focus their responses to broad questions about an organisation on one key individual. Loyalty to an arts organisation was even seen to hinge in some cases upon a respondent's attitude to its leader.

What does this mean for the ethics and strategy of arts organisations?

The authors call for further research into the dangers of an overemphasis on talented individuals at the top of arts organisations, and question the fate of leaders who are perceived to be uncharismatic. They suggest that a focus on charisma might 'supplant ethics, strategy, and reason' in the operation of arts organisations.

This summary is by **Richard Mason, King's Knowledge Exchange Associate**

Keywords

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