

# Managerial Mystique: Magical Thinking in Judgments of Managers' Vision, Charisma, and Magnetism

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*Successful businesspeople are often attributed somewhat mystical talents, such as the ability to mesmerize an audience or envision the future. We suggest that this mystique—the way some managers are perceived by observers—arises from the intuitive logic that psychologists and anthropologists call magical thinking. Consistent with this account, Study 1 found that perceptions of a manager's mystique are associated with judgments of his or her charismatic vision and ability to forecast future business trends. The authors hypothesized that mystique arises especially when success is observed in the absence of mechanical causes, such as long hours or hard-won skills. In Study 2, managers who succeeded mysteriously rather than mechanically evoked participants' attributions of foresight and their expectations of success at visionary tasks yet not at administrative tasks. The authors further hypothesized that as mystique is assumed to spread through contagion, observers desire physical contact with managers who are attributed mystique and with these managers' possessions. Study 3 found that managers described as visionary as opposed to diligent are judged to be charismatic and ultimately magnetic. The authors discuss the implications of these judgment patterns for the literatures on perception biases and impression management in organizations.*

**Keywords:** *mystique; vision; contagion; attribution*

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A stroke of genius. A flash of brilliance. In a famous scene from the film *Amadeus*, Mozart wows a court audience by generating a composition on the spot that betters the piece that his rival Salieri has worked on diligently for weeks. This success affects the film viewer's opinion of Mozart; he is perceived to succeed through special, mystical talents such as envisioning an entire sonata in one instant, unlike the plodder Salieri, who relies on long hours and labored techniques. This perception prepares us for other judgments about Mozart such as the perception that he is personally charismatic and magnetic. Similarly successful businesspeople often take on a mystique in the eyes of observers. In the TV show *Mad Men*, Don Draper is an advertising executive who can generate slogans and campaigns in flashes of spontaneous insight, to the frustration of his duller rivals who rely on diligent work and careful analysis. These successes create a Draper mystique: His coworkers attribute to Draper not only visionary foresight but also irresistible charisma, and each in their own way seeks closer contact with him.

This article investigates this phenomenon of managerial mystique—the attribution of mystical powers to managers—and investigates some hypothesized antecedents and consequences. We propose that these attributions arise from a mode of intuitive, preconscious processing called *magical thinking* (Lawrie, 1970; Nemeroff, 1995; Tylor, 1871/1974), the same intuitions that magicians and traditional witchdoctors exploit. Hence, much as audiences attribute magical power to a magician when they cannot see the mechanical means through which effects are achieved, audiences who observe a manager succeed without seeing any of the mundane causes of success (such as diligent work) are more likely to attribute mystical talents related to vision and charisma and to form corresponding expectations about the manager's future success. Further, given that magical powers are understood to transmit through contagion, another consequence of a manager's mystique should be a desire for contact with the person and his or her possessions.

### *Mystique and Vision*

Magical thinking involves attributing effects to powers that go beyond the natural and the mechanical. It entails that some actions are thought to have a “special kind of effectiveness, quite different from their mechanical effectiveness . . . and usually this is not of the same order” (Mauss, 1902/1972: 25). People do not consciously believe in such powers, but they make intuitive judgments that reflect an unconscious belief in them.

In the case of managerial success, magical thinking shows up in accounts of success that connote special mysterious powers—*intuitive*, *talented*, and *charismatic*. Indeed, *intuition* is defined as the quality of knowing “without evident rational thought or inference” (“Intuition,” n.d.). While some researchers use the term to refer to specific mental processes, as a lay explanation it primarily conveys that the person reaches answers spontaneously rather than through a particular analytic procedure.

Explanatory references to talent similarly posit a mysterious gift. People believe that the highly talented are innately endowed with something qualitatively different than what normal others are endowed with (Howe, Davidson, & Sloboda, 1998; Winner, 2000). Although scientific research programs have set out to document that what is perceived to be talent is in fact the product of diligence (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993), this research does not yet seem to have influenced lay individuals' perceptions of talent. Even coaches, who are involved in training athletes daily and are thus acutely aware of the role that hard work plays in achieving

exceptional outcomes, rank talent as the top attribution for sports performance (Hyllegard, Radlo, & Early, 2001). To impute talent is to create mystique around the person's performance, raising expectations that are different than those for a player who succeeds through effort.

Charisma is another attribution that involves a degree of mystique. The term *charisma* originates in the Greek word for "divine favor," which is described in Weber's conceptualization of charismatic leaders as "set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least . . . exceptional powers and qualities . . . [which] are not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as of divine origin, or as exemplary" (1925/1968: 358-359). In modern usage, *charisma* refers to special powers through which a leader affects followers (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991). Contemporary researchers have identified specific behavioral characteristics of charismatic leadership, such as strategic vision and inspiration (Conger & Kanungo, 1994). However, some scholars argue that this distracts researchers from Weber's insights about charisma as an attribution of mystical powers (Beyer, 1999).

These three descriptors—intuitive, talented, and charismatic—connote mystique because they portray the manager as a Mozart-like genius rather than a plodding Salieri. Although the contents of these attributions differ, we expect that they will be psychologically associated. They all convey mystique, the inference of mystical powers. The power we focus on is visionary foresight. Foresight is little understood, as in most professions experience does not predict one's ability to make accurate predictions (Camerer & Johnson, 1991), and many types of business forecasting have been shown to be pseudoscience (Sherden, 1998). However, research shows that managers who are perceived to have visionary foresight are more likely to advance (Bass, 1990b; Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999; Kilpatrick & Locke, 1991).

*Hypothesis 1:* Perceived managerial mystique is positively associated with expected visionary foresight (Study 1).

Regarding antecedents of managerial mystique, Malinowski (1955) observed that magical thinking is more likely to emerge in contexts of high uncertainty about what caused prior successes. In his ethnography of Trobriand Island culture, he found that Trobriand fishermen have more magical rituals associated with ocean fishing than with lagoon fishing, where the forces that shape people's outcomes are more identifiable and predictable. In this way, magical thinking emerges in situations like ocean fishing, where there is high uncertainty about what caused success.

We assert that in place of having a mechanical explanation for success, individuals infer that the person who achieved success did so through mystical powers. Indeed, obscuring the real causal sequence of an event is how magicians create attributions to magic in their audiences (Kelley, 1980). A magician violates the natural expectations of the audience and creates a magical effect by veiling the mechanical explanation altogether or misdirecting attention away from the real cause of the effect. Like the magician's audience, individuals also turn to mystical explanations when lacking a mechanical explanation for an effect; as mentioned above, the mystical power we are most interested in is the power of vision, the ability to predict future events with accuracy. We hypothesize that perceived mystique leads to predictions of success on visionary tasks.

*Hypothesis 2:* A manager's mysterious (vs. mechanical) success gives rise to expectations of visionary foresight (Study 2).

## *Mystique and Magnetism*

A central principle of magical thinking is that powers can be transmitted through contagion—physical contact with a person or the objects he or she has touched (Frazer, 1890/1981; Mauss, 1902/1972; Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990). For example, many cultures have practices of avoiding individuals thought to be cursed with negative essence and of touching individuals thought to be blessed with positive essence. If managerial mystique is rooted in magical thinking, we would expect that observers should desire physical contact with managers they hold in mystique.

Psychology experiments have offered empirical support for magical inferences of contagion—for example, that objects become vested with essences that produce good or bad outcomes (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994)—distinguishing it from reasoning based on scientific understandings of contagion, such as germ theory. For example, research participants in a decision experiment were strongly averse to the option of wearing a sweater formerly owned by Hitler, and they would not consider wearing it even if it had been washed in hot water or unraveled and reknit (Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990). Yet participants indicated they would be willing to wear the sweater if it had been purified spiritually, such as by having Mother Theresa wear it first (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). In another study, 80% of college students said that there was at least a 10% chance that donning one of Mr. Rogers’s sweaters, even without knowing it was his, would endow wearers with some of his “essence”—improving their mood and making them friendlier (Johnson & Jacobs, 2001).

Although there is abundant experimental evidence that people assume contagion of negative essences (Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986), there is much less evidence for contagion of positive essences. However, people’s belief in positive contagion is described in ethnographies of traditional cultures (Meigs, 1978, 1984). Moreover, examples of behaviors premised on positive contagion can be cited in everyday life in Western cultures. For example, fans vie for sweat-drenched towels from rock stars, and evangelicals “lay hands” on church members in need of blessings. Actions premised on the supernatural transfer of positive essence are also seen in business settings: Warren Buffet’s wallet sold at a charity auction for over \$200,000 (Kilpatrick, 2000)!

The current research experimentally investigates individuals’ behavioral impulses toward others who are ascribed mystique, specifically focusing on positive contagion. We submit that people are drawn to such people and their possessions. Mystically described success creates a desire for contact with the individual who achieved the success.

*Hypothesis 3:* Desire for contact with an employee will be greater when success is achieved mysteriously than when success is achieved mechanically (Study 2).

*Hypothesis 4:* Desire for contact with a leader will be greater when that leader is described as a visionary than when he or she is described as diligent (Study 3).

## *Overview of Studies*

In these studies, we investigate implicit magical thinking in explanations for successes. Study 1 tests whether ascriptions of mystique are associated with judgments of charismatic vision and expectations of aptitude for making business forecasts. In Study 2, we test whether

managers described as succeeding mysteriously (vs. mechanically) evoke greater ascriptions of visionary aptitudes and expectations of success at visionary tasks, not administrative tasks. We also investigate whether desire for contact with an employee is greater when success is mysteriously achieved than when success is mechanically achieved. In Study 3, we investigate whether leaders who are described as having mystique are also seen as charismatic and if this perception evokes a desire for close contact.

## Study 1: Managerial Mystique and Vision

We started by exploring whether the perceived mystique of an executive is related to expectations of the leader's capacity for business foresight. In addition, we investigated the extent to which this relationship is based on the leader's charismatic vision.

### Method

*Participants.* The sample consisted of 78 individuals (34 men, 44 women) recruited to participate in online behavioral studies. The mean age of participants was 31.30 years ( $SD = 9.70$ ). The average number of years of work experience was 10.03 ( $SD = 10.16$ ). Of the participants, 3 self-identified as African American, 11 as Asian American, 61 as Caucasian/White, and 3 as Hispanic/Latin American. Participants, who signed up for the study online, received a separate email with instructions for completing the study via the web. Participants received an online gift certificate of \$5 for their participation in the study.

*Procedure.* In the study, participants first read a brief description of a leader (Steve Jobs). The description contained a job title and some biographical history to provide participants with some information about the leader and to trigger participants' own perceptions of the leader. After reading the paragraph, participants rated how good they thought the leader would be at certain visionary tasks. Next, participants rated the extent to which they felt certain mystical descriptors accurately described the leader, and finally they rated the leader's strategic vision and articulation, one critical element of charismatic leadership.

*Dependent variables.* Prior to the main study, 100 pretest participants (43 men, 57 women; age  $M = 21.83$  years,  $SD = 4.22$ ) were presented with a list of phrases used to describe people. They were asked to rate "the extent to which you feel each of the qualities gives a magical aura or lends mystique" on a scale from 1 (*no magic/mystique*) to 7 (*a large amount of magic/mystique*). Two descriptors that we predicted would lend mystique were "gifted" and "has a way of making things happen" ( $r = .52, p < .001, M = 4.91, SD = 1.49$ ). These were rated as conveying more mystique than "tries hard" and "has skills" ( $r = .55, p < .001, M = 2.71, SD = 1.37$ ),  $F(1, 99) = 237.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .71$ .

Participants in the main study then rated the leader on the two mystique-conveying descriptors ( $r = .70$ ) on a scale from 1 (*not at all descriptive*) to 7 (*describes perfectly*).

Perceived vision was measured using the Conger-Kanungo Strategic Vision and Articulation subscale ( $\alpha = .76$ ), six items taken from the Charismatic Leadership Scale (Conger &

Kanungo, 1992, 1994, 1998; Conger, Kanungo, Menon, & Mathur, 1997). Sample items are “has vision—often brings up ideas about possibilities for the future” and “entrepreneurial—seizes new opportunities in order to achieve goals.” The scale utilized a 6-point response format from 1 (*very uncharacteristic*) to 6 (*very characteristic*).

Expectations of business foresight was assessed by rating the executive’s capacity for six business-related forecasts: predicting interest rates, predicting government spending, predicting real GNP growth, predicting inflation, forecasting stock market movements, and forecasting how much market share a new technology product will capture ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Respondents rated the leader on each of these tasks, using a scale where 1 indicated *worse than the average person*, 4 indicated *the same as the average person*, and 7 indicated *better than the average person*.

## Results

To understand the relationship between mystique and the perceived ability to make business forecasts, we regressed perceived ability at business forecasts on mystique and found that there is a significant, positive relationship (Hypothesis 1 supported); that is, the more the leader was seen as having mystique, the more he was also perceived to be able to make business forecasts,  $\beta = .52$ ,  $t(76) = 5.34$ ,  $p < .001$ . Mystique was also positively related to the summary score for strategic vision and articulation,  $\beta = .39$ ,  $t(76) = 3.68$ ,  $p < .001$ .

It is possible that the relationship between the CEO’s mystique and predicted performance at business forecasting tasks is due to the CEO’s perceived strategic visioning capabilities. To test whether vision mediated the relationship between mystique and perceived ability to make business forecasts, we simultaneously regressed perceived ability to make business forecasts and perceived vision on perceived mystique. In this last equation, vision had a significant effect on perceived ability to make business forecasts,  $\beta = .22$ ,  $t(76) = 2.09$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the relationship between mystique and perceived ability to make business forecasts was reduced,  $\beta = .44$ ,  $t(76) = 4.22$ ,  $p < .0$ ; Sobel  $z = 2.59$ ,  $p < .01$ . Thus, the conditions for partial mediation were met (Sobel, 1982).

## Discussion

Study 1 is an initial exploration of whether different aspects of managerial mystique are associated. Specifically, we find support for the notion that mystique may play a role in the development of charismatic attributions such as strategic vision. Participants were asked to evaluate a real business leader, Steve Jobs, and results showed that the more they ascribed mystique, the more they also saw him as being able to perform tasks requiring business foresight. This relationship was partially accounted for by the fact that more mystique was also associated with greater ratings of strategic vision.

## Study 2: Mechanical Versus Mystical Success

We have found that the more a leader is perceived to have mystique, the more he or she is predicted to perform well in visionary tasks. We also predict that mystical success, as opposed

to mechanical success, evokes more positive expectations for vision, not for other workplace activities. A key distinction in people's conception of leadership across many cultures is the distinction between the strategic visionary and the competent administrator (Hanges & Dickson, 2004). Individuals hold distinct concepts of leadership types, distinguishing between those who are able to strategize with the power of foresight (charismatic visionary leaders) and others who lead by demonstrable abilities (administratively competent leaders; Hanges & Dickson, 2004). Participants in Study 2 read a mechanical or mystical description of success. We predicted that the employee who achieves success mystically would be ascribed the intangible qualities of intuition and talent,<sup>1</sup> would be expected to perform better in strategic tasks (but not administrative tasks) compared with a counterpart who achieves success through more mundane means, and would evoke desire for close contact.

### Method

*Participants.* The sample consisted of 56 individuals recruited to participate in behavioral studies (20 men, 36 women). The mean age of participants was 34.09 years ( $SD = 11.65$ ). The average number of years of work experience was 12.72 ( $SD = 11.14$ ). Of the participants, 6 self-identified as African American, 11 as Asian American, 35 as Caucasian/White, 2 as Hispanic/Latin American, and 2 as "other." Participants, who signed up for the study online, received a separate email with instructions for completing the study via the web. Participants received an online gift certificate of \$5 for their time. Gender did not produce any main effects or interactions, and age was not a significant covariate, so these variables were left out of the reported analyses.

*Procedure.* In the study, participants read a marketing employee's performance evaluation. In both conditions, the supervisor described the employee as having had great success in his first year on the job. In the mechanical condition, the success was chalked up to mundane factors such as the employee "tries hard" and "has skills." In the mystical condition, the success was explained in terms of mystical descriptors such as the employee "has a way of making things happen" and "a knack for marketing." These were rated as conveying more mystique ( $r = .35, p < .001, M = 4.13, SD = 1.77$ ) than the descriptors in the mechanical condition ( $r = .55, p < .001, M = 2.71, SD = 1.37$ ),  $F(1, 99) = 119.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .55$ .

These four descriptors were also previously pretested for their level of specificity. The 36 pretest participants (11 men, 25 women; age  $M = 36.91$  years,  $SD = 11.03$ ) read, "There are many different phrases one can use to describe someone else at work. Some phrases point to more general qualities, and some phrases reference more specific qualities." The participants then were asked to rate each phrase on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicated *very general*, 4 indicated *neither general or specific*, and 7 indicated *very specific*. The mean specificity of the descriptors in the mechanical and mystical conditions was 2.57 ( $SD = 1.04$ ) and 2.62 ( $SD = 1.24$ ) respectively,  $F(1, 34) = 0.12, ns, d = 0.04$ . Thus, no difference in specificity was found.

*Dependent variables.* Participants rated the employee on personal traits: diligent traits (diligent, effortful, and dependable) and visionary traits (visionary, intuitive, and talented). In terms

**Table 1**  
**Trait Perceptions in Mechanical and Mystical Conditions (Study 2)**

Trait Perception	Mechanical Condition	Mystical Condition	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	
Diligent			
Diligent	5.85 (1.03)	6.00 (0.89)	0.15
Effortful	6.19 (1.00)	6.34 (0.90)	0.16
Dependable	5.78 (1.12)	6.17 (0.81)	0.40
Visionary			
Visionary	5.11 (1.36)	5.79 (1.11)*	0.56
Intuitive	5.04 (1.43)	5.76 (1.09)*	0.57
Talented	5.48 (1.08)	6.28 (0.88)*	0.81

\* $p < .05$ .

of task expectancies, participants forecasted the employee's performance on a variety of organizational tasks: administrative tasks (following through with a plan and following proper process;  $r = .51, p < .001$ ) and strategic tasks (helping to make decisions about the direction of the organization and brainstorming future projects;  $r = .85, p < .001$ ). Finally, participants rated how much they would like to have contact with the employee, such as receiving a congratulatory hug or the employee's lucky key chain. All of these responses were on a 9-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*).

## Results

*Trait perceptions.* A multivariate ANOVA to test for differences between the mechanical and mystical conditions revealed no differences in trait ratings for the following traits: diligent, effortful, and dependable (see Table 1 for a list of variables and means by condition).

Even though there were no differences in the diligent trait perceptions, mystical success evoked ascriptions of vision. When the employee succeeded through mysterious means (mystical condition), he was judged to be far more visionary, intuitive, and talented than the employee who succeeded through mundane means (mechanical condition).

*Performance forecasts.* A 2 Condition (mechanical, mystical)  $\times$  2 Task Type (strategic, administrative) ANOVA, where task type was a repeated measures variable, revealed a significant interaction,  $F(1, 54) = 6.71, p < .05, \eta^2 = .11$ . Simple effects tests within task type showed that participants predicted that the employee who succeeded through mundane means (mechanical condition  $M = 5.89, SD = 0.96$ ) would do as well at administrative tasks as the employee who succeeded through mystique (mystical condition  $M = 6.18, SD = 0.74$ ),  $t(54) = 1.32, ns, d = 0.34$ . However, when the employee was described as succeeding through mysterious means (mystical condition  $M = 6.27, SD = 0.63$ ), participants expected him to excel in strategic tasks, compared with the employee who succeeded through mundane means (mechanical condition  $M = 5.18, SD = 1.59$ ),  $t(54) = 3.41, p < .01, d = 0.90$ .



*Preference for contact.* Finally, we explored whether individuals would rather have incidental contact with an employee with mystical success or with an employee with mundanely achieved successes. Participants in the mystical condition ( $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) were more open to receiving a congratulatory hug from the employee than were participants in the mechanical condition ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ),  $t(54) = 2.31$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.62$ . Similarly, participants in the mystical condition ( $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) were more enthusiastic about being given the employee's lucky key chain than were participants in the mechanical condition ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ),  $t(54) = 2.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.55$ .

## Discussion

Study 2 provides evidence that mystique evokes vision and expectations of success at visionary—but not administrative—tasks (Hypothesis 2). Individuals in the study were drawn to working with the employee who had success through mystical—versus mundanely mechanical—means. This pattern provides evidence for the idea that employees who succeed in mystical ways evoke a desire for close personal contact (Hypothesis 3). Study 3 aims to replicate the contagion effect, showing that one kind of mystique, being described as visionary (as opposed to diligent), engenders magnetism but not a preference for other workplace interactions.

### Study 3: Mystique and Magnetism

In Study 3, participants read about one of two executives, one who was described as a diligent worker and one who was described as a visionary. Trait perception items tapped the extent to which participants made inferences about the executive, such as ascribing charisma and creativity after reading about the executive's success. Other items assessed the desire for personal contact and interaction with the executive. We predicted that a visionary executive would be seen as more charismatic and creative than a diligent executive with the same success. Also, a congratulatory hug from a visionary executive would be preferred to one from the diligent executive. Because charisma is associated with vision, we predicted that this pattern would be mediated by ascription of charisma.

## Method

*Participants.* The sample consisted of 71 American undergraduate students. Participants were recruited for a study on interactions in organizations via an email listserv that advertised opportunities to be involved in behavioral studies. Each participant received a cash payment of \$6 for participating.

*Procedure.* In the study, participants read an introductory paragraph that described the research as focusing on “the feelings employees have toward managers.” The introduction

continued, “Below we will present pictures and descriptions of two managers. Please try to form a vivid impression of both persons and think about what it would be like to interact with them. Then give your gut reaction answers to the questions we ask.” The scenario, called “A New CEO” stated, “You work at an animation and digital graphics company that is searching for a new CEO, because the current CEO has announced that he will retire at the end of the year. Two vice-presidents are considered to be the CEO’s most likely successors: Tim Walters and Martin Lane.”

In both conditions, Martin is the comparative baseline; he is organized and has contributed to the company’s survival in difficult market conditions. The description of Tim varies by condition. In the visionary condition, Tim experienced success through “keen insight and vision for the company’s direction” and has “a gift for anticipating upcoming fads.” In the diligent condition, in contrast, Tim was portrayed as achieving success through “loyalty and long hours.”

*Dependent variables.* Participants rated the extent to which a number of traits fit their “image” of the actor (where 1 = *not at all fits* and 7 = *very much fits*). In a manipulation check, they rated whether he possesses foresight. Additionally, they rated whether he is creative and charismatic. Although the focus of this study is on the implicit belief in the transfer of mystique, these items were included to gauge whether other personality traits follow from descriptions of the executive’s success. We used one item for the trait charisma instead of a multi-item measure of charismatic leadership, in order to measure lay notions of the trait rather than behavioral antecedents of charisma. Because of its close association with vision, we predicted that trait charisma would mediate the relationship between leader description (visionary vs. diligent) and magnetism, or preference for contact with the leader.

To explore whether the manipulation affected global impressions of the target, the materials also included trait ratings reflecting the Big 5 personality dimensions (*thorough and dependable* for Conscientiousness, *outgoing* for Extraversion, *agreeable* for Agreeableness, *calm* for Emotional Stability, and *curious* for Openness to Experience).

Some items tapped whether participants would prefer to interact with the person who succeeded through vision (diligence) to the comparative baseline: To whom would you prefer to directly report? Who would you prefer to write your performance appraisal? With whom would you like to be friends? The rating scale for these items was a 6-point scale from 1 (*a strong preference for Tim*, who was described as having succeeded through foresight in the visionary condition or through hard work in the diligent condition) to 6 (*a strong preference for Martin*).

Two items addressed the desire for personal contact. One item asked, “From whom would you prefer to receive a congratulatory hug?” (1 = *Tim* to 6 = *Martin*). Although some of the above social interactions involve close personal proximity, our hypothesis suggests that physical contact with the person and his or her possessions—not just proximity—may have special meaning. In the tradition of past research on contagion, one item tapped participants’ desire to have contact with something that the CEO owned and touched: “Would you rather be given Tim’s lucky key chain—the one he takes with him to meetings and negotiations—or Martin’s lucky pen—the one he uses to sign important documents?” Ratings ranged from 1 (*Tim’s key chain*) to 6 (*Martin’s pen*).

**Table 2**  
**Preferences for Interaction With Executives Who Succeed**  
**Through Diligence Versus Vision (Study 3)**

Interaction	Diligent Condition	Visionary Condition	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	
Preferred interactions			
Write performance appraisal	3.11 (1.64)	2.65 (1.68)	0.27
Report to	2.16 (1.32)	2.53 (1.41)	0.28
Friends with	4.51 (1.48)	4.44 (1.37)	0.05
Personal contact			
Lucky object	3.51 (1.57)	4.44 (1.21)*	0.66
Congratulatory hug	2.76 (1.65)	3.76 (1.67)*	0.60

\* $p < .05$ .

## Results

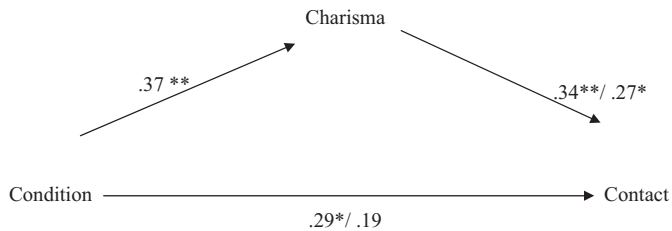
Recall that the description of Tim varied by condition (visionary and diligent) and that the description of Martin was the unvarying comparison in both conditions.

*Manipulation checks.* Tim was seen as having more foresight in the visionary condition ( $M = 6.32$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) than in the diligent condition ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ),  $t(69) = 6.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.44$ .

*Preferred interactions and charisma.* These items were reverse coded so that higher numbers reflect greater preference and perceptions of charisma. There were no differences between conditions in types of workplace interactions: writing performance appraisals reporting to the executive directly, as well as the desire to be friends with the executive (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations). In terms of personal contact, however, participants desired more physical contact with the executive in the visionary condition. Supporting Hypothesis 4, participants preferred contact with the executive with vision compared with the one who was diligent. Participants preferred a congratulatory hug from the executive with vision ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ) compared with a hug from the diligent executive ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ),  $t(69) = 2.55$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.60$ . Participants preferred having the lucky object that belonged to the executive in the visionary condition ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) compared to the one in the diligent condition ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ),  $t(69) = 2.77$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.66$ . As hypothesized, participants viewed the executive who was described as having vision as more charismatic ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) than the diligent executive ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ),  $t(69) = 3.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.78$ .

*Testing the inference process.* Recall the prediction that lay perceivers treat mystique as contagious, and thus individuals seek contact (with the lucky object and congratulatory hug) with an executive who has mystical powers like vision. To test this prediction, we adopted the multiple regression procedure of Baron and Kenny (1986). In the first step of the test for

**Figure 1**  
**Mediation Analyses Controlling for Ratings of Overall Positive Impression (Study 3)**



mediation, condition predicted the desire for contact,  $\beta = .29$ ,  $t(69) = 2.55$ ,  $p < .05$ . In the second step, charisma qualified as a potential mediator because it was significantly related to condition,  $\beta = .37$ ,  $t(69) = 3.27$ ,  $p < .01$ . In the third step of the test for mediation, charisma and contact were simultaneously regressed on condition, and charisma had a significant independent effect on the desire for contact,  $\beta = .27$ ,  $t(68) = 2.27$ ,  $p < .05$ . Also in this last equation, the relationship between condition and the desire for contact was reduced to nonsignificance,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $t(68) = 1.61$ ,  $p = .11$ . We also entered participants' ratings of the executive's agreeableness in each of the regression equations, to assess the propensity to want personal contact with the executive, while controlling for his perceived sociability. The results (Figure 1) do show that individuals preferred a congratulatory hug from the executive with vision to contact with a diligent executive, and this trend is because the former is considered more charismatic, even after controlling for ratings of the executive's sociability (Sobel  $z = 2.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

There was no evidence for the reverse pattern—that the manipulation affected propensity for a congratulatory hug from the executive, which in turn affected perceptions of his charisma. The independent variable (condition) predicted charisma,  $\beta = .37$ ,  $t(69) = 3.27$ ,  $p < .01$ , and the potential mediator (contact),  $\beta = .29$ ,  $t(69) = 2.55$ ,  $p < .05$ . When charisma and the potential mediator (contact) were both regressed on condition, the relationship between condition and charisma remained significant,  $\beta = .29$ ,  $t(68) = 2.55$ ,  $p = .01$ , thus not fulfilling conditions for mediation according to Baron and Kenny (1986).

*Trait ratings.* To test for potential differences between conditions in participants' assumptions about executive personality,  $t$  tests were run on trait perceptions. As Table 3 shows, the executive who succeeded through vision (visionary condition) was seen as slightly more extraverted ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) than the executive who succeeded through diligence ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ),  $t(69) = 2.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.50$ . The ratings of the executive's curiosity ( $M = 5.91$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) and creativity ( $M = 6.09$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) were higher in the visionary condition than the ratings in the diligent condition for curiosity ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ),  $t(69) = 6.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.54$ , and creativity ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ),  $t(69) = 9.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.26$ . Conversely, the diligent executive was seen as more calm ( $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) than the one

**Table 3**  
**Trait Ratings for Executives Who Succeed Through Diligence Versus Vision (Study 3)**

Trait	Diligent Condition	Visionary Condition	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	
Agreeable	5.24 (1.34)	4.82 (1.31)	0.31
Extraverted	4.03 (1.46)	4.74 (1.40)*	0.50
Calm	5.41 (1.04)	4.62 (1.18)**	0.71
Dependable	5.16 (1.26)	4.56 (1.23)*	0.48
Thorough	5.19 (1.24)	4.62 (0.99)*	0.50
Curious	3.78 (1.75)	5.91 (0.87)***	1.54
Creative	3.19 (1.50)	6.09 (1.02)***	2.26
Charismatic	4.00 (1.47)	5.06 (1.23)**	0.78

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

with vision ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ),  $t(69) = 2.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.71$ . The diligent executive was also similarly agreeable ( $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) to the one with vision ( $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ),  $t(69) = 1.33$ ,  $p = .19$ ,  $d = 0.31$ .

### Discussion

Study 3 described one executive as succeeding through vision and the other as succeeding through hard work. The results show that, compared to the hard-working executive, the visionary executive was judged as more creative, curious, and charismatic. In this way, this research contributes to our understanding of which attributes lead to or are perceived to exist in conjunction with charisma.

The results from the trait ratings may alleviate concerns that this preference for the visionary executive is driven by a more generalized positive impression of him rather than by magical inferences. Trait evaluations were not always more positive for the executive with vision than for the diligent executive. For example, the diligent executive was seen as equally agreeable and more emotionally stable than the executive with vision. Yet participants still preferred to have contact with the visionary executive.

Perhaps the most striking finding is the one predicted from the contagion principle; participants preferred a congratulatory hug from the visionary executive to a hug from the diligent executive. These findings provide evidence for positive contagion, without the lingering question of whether mere sociability is driving the effects; there were no differences between conditions in desire to be friends with the employee, yet there were differences in desire for contact. Another alternative account for these findings could be found in the phenomenon of "basking in reflected glory" (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976), in which individuals publicly announce one's association with successful others. However, the finding that individuals prefer even incidental contact with leaders who have mystique and

their possessions cannot be wholly explained by “basking in reflected glory” because the situation described in Study 2 (desiring the lucky object) was not explicitly taking place among others. If individuals were indeed seeking to publicly announce their association with the visionary executive, one would also expect individuals to desire friendship with the visionary executive more than with the diligent one, which was not born out in the data.

Although the prior literature on magical thinking about food and clothing preferences has documented strong effects of *negative* contagion, this result adds to research on sympathetic magic by demonstrating *positive* contagion—that properties of an individual are inferred to be transferable to others through contagious essences. In this case, the propensity to desire personal contact with the executive with mystique was mediated by an ascription of charisma. Thus, ascribing success to mystique leads to perceptions of charisma and increased desire for contact with this magnetic leader.

## General Discussion

In the current research, we have drawn on insights from organizational literatures as well as anthropological and psychological theories of magical thinking to understand some antecedents and consequences of managerial mystique. In Study 1, we demonstrated that managerial mystique is associated with judgments of the manager’s charismatic vision and ability to forecast future business trends. In Study 2, we found that individuals who succeed mysteriously evoke participants’ ascriptions of foresight, expectations of success at visionary tasks, and desire for close contact, compared with individuals who succeed mechanically. In Study 3, we found that managers who are described as visionary as opposed to diligent are judged to be charismatic and are thus magnetic.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The current research links what we know about leadership and magical thinking. One aspect of leadership across cultures is that of the charismatic visionary (Hanges & Dickson, 2004). Our research provides initial evidence that perceived mystique contributes to attributions of charisma. Magical thinking is likewise thought to be a part of every cultural tradition (Frazer, 1890/1981; Mauss, 1902/1972). We draw connections between these bodies of thought, and we present precise hypotheses that have been refined by other research on magical thinking. For example, the principles that underlie beliefs in contagion in the food domain (Rozin et al., 1986) can also be found in contagion in interpersonal interactions with leaders.

One question is whether magical thinking is by nature irrational. We must first consider two standards by which rationality is defined: substantive rationality and procedural rationality (Simon, 1976). A procedural standard equates irrationality with reaching conclusions via inconsistent process or decision rules. This standard does not separate magical intuitions from other intuitions. As we have discussed, magical inferences follow their own rules such as the

rule of contagion. Consider, for example, a formalized school of thought that is premised on magical beliefs, such as homeopathic medicine. Experts in homeopathic medicine can avoid contradicting themselves just as well as those in mainstream, mechanical specialties. So, magical thinking and homeopathy are rational according to the procedural standard of rationality.

In contrast, substantive rationality is defined by the utility of the result. By this standard, a decision is deemed rational based on its beneficial end result. In fact, Rozin and Nemeroff (1990) assert that our belief in magical contagion may have evolved from early, beneficial concepts of what causes illness. The intuition that invisible essences (germs) could be causing illness was, after all, helpful to stopping the spread of further illness long before we had scientific proof of germs. By this analysis the question is, Does magical thinking lead people to outcomes that benefit them or not? The patterns documented in the current findings suggest that magical inferences might propel us to overestimate a visionary type, only to be disappointed later. Or they may lead us to defer to a leader with mystique, only to be led into the fog. Yet, at the same time, managers and their organizations benefit from these same inferences that enable them to make leaps of faith in a peer or a leader. The best answer to this question seems to be neither an overall recommendation nor an overall condemnation of magical thinking.

The issue of whether employees benefit from magical thinking about themselves is one that is also worthy of research. It is part of the larger question of whether self-illusions have positive consequences that is much debated in social psychology (Colvin & Block, 1994; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Because this was a first attempt to capture the phenomenon, we created broader rather than more focused manipulations. The next step would be to try to isolate potential factors that are most important to the phenomenon. For example, one could investigate expectations when success is achieved through known means, but when the means are not specified. To what extent do the descriptions of inexplicable success hinge on the notion that the key to success is completely unknowable, as opposed to merely being unknown currently? Future studies are needed to parse out these possible driving factors.

Future research could also examine individual differences in a perceiver's propensity to impute vision. Who is more or less likely to use explanations that rely on vision rather than pointing to more mundane causes of success? Similarly, are some types of organizations more likely to tolerate—or perhaps even celebrate—implicitly magical labels, such as *visionary*, *creative*, and *charismatic*? As we have seen in the current studies, industries that rely on innovation and creativity may find these labels to be more acceptable than industries that rely on more administrative skills. One might imagine that advertising, technology, and music are potential industries that are ripe with magical inferences.

While our current focus has been on contagion magic, future research could also investigate the role of homeopathic magic in the workplace. Homeopathic magic hinges on the notion that surface similarities belie or can even cause deeper ones. One example of someone seeking surface similarities while desiring more meaningful ones is LeBron James's choice of wearing the number 23 on his jersey in hopes of being like his idol Michael Jordan (NBA.com, n.d.). James even chose Jordan's Olympic jersey number, 9, when he was selected to play in the Olympic Games (Answers.com, n.d.). At the office, one could imagine a person adopting a

coworker's PowerPoint background theme if that coworker was a really moving speaker or acquiring a tie that is similar to that of the office deal-closer.

### *Practical Implications*

Explaining one's own and others' successes and failures is an everyday part of organizations. Sometimes the process of explaining comes via informal discussions at the water cooler, and at other times it is part of a written performance evaluation or project summary report. The current findings outline ways in which mystique can affect impression management. In Study 2, for example, the experiment manipulated an account of the employee's success; the condition in which success was described mechanically resulted in lower ascriptions of foresight and expectations at visionary tasks, compared with when the success was accounted for mysteriously. These findings thus illuminate one way in which attempts to be accurate and precise in describing someone's capabilities can actually result in a less favorable impression than pointing to mystical qualities.

The current findings also provide new evidence about the psychological processes that drive perceptions of charismatic leaders, and they point to potential strategies in "image building" (Bass 1985, 1988, 1990a)—the extent to which people in various occupational roles manage perceptions of their own mystique. For example, stage magicians hide the mundane skills underlying their tricks so that audiences will ascribe them special powers. Is this also true of other performers? Certainly there seems something parallel in the behavior of many literary artists, such as the writer Jack Kerouac, who have presented finished works as the products of single marathon sessions of spontaneous writing (only to be embarrassed later by discoveries of heavily edited preliminary drafts). In order to contribute to their mystique, business leaders also may perpetuate legends of their accomplishments that obscure the mundane explanations for their success. Indeed, Lawrie (1970: 754) asserted that information about organizational insiders blemishes their potential for charismatic stardom: "Men 'in house' are too well known to be perceived as mythical." Echoing this, Khurana (2002) identified a "liability of insiderness," such that boards prefer outsiders in a search for a new CEO because they know too much about the insiders to consider them to be potential saviors.

This research also points to a dimension that affects whether managers have more or less appeal: the degree to which employees have moments of contact with a leader. These data indicate that followers may find value in even brief contact with a charismatic leader. For example, Bill Clinton is commonly purported to have shaken hands with 10% of voters in Arkansas before being elected governor of the state. Conversely, videotaped messages from CEOs might not be as effective as personal appearances in large auditoriums.

Exploring the consequences of mystique will enable organizational members to better understand how they evaluate the outcomes of others and how others, in turn, evaluate their own outcomes. For example, understanding the inferential consequences of magical thinking may challenge individuals to seek more specific, mechanical explanations when they are tempted to attribute outcomes to mystique. Or, an individual might knowingly shape others' expectations for his or her work by promoting more diffuse labels for his or her previous good outcomes. Thus, this work has far-reaching implications for impression management, organizational judgments of deservingness, and decisions about organizational advancement.



## Note

1. A critic of this approach might argue that intuition and talent are empirically studied by organizational researchers (for a review, see Dane & Pratt, 2007; Ericsson, Charness, Hoffman, & Feltovich, 2006; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993) and are thus explicable. However, the current research investigates lay perceptions of these attributions, which may or may not follow from academic models of the constructs.

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