Amplify Your *Influence*

How government leaders can use the power of words to inspire commitment, not just compliance.

BY ULRICH JENSEN AND ROBERT O'NEILL

Every city and county manager knows the room. A rate increase is on the agenda. The council is split. The gallery showed up angry. In that moment, how you speak matters a great deal. Facts matter. Process matters. Trust matters. But the words you choose can determine whether people merely comply or actually commit.

It's often possible to get compliance, but creating commitment is harder. A code violation gets cited. A budget gets adopted. Staff show up when they're supposed to. But the work that actually improves a community—the water main getting replaced before it bursts, the staff member who stays another five years, the council that takes a hard vote—runs on something no policy can require. It has to be earned.

Since the ancient Greeks (at least), the power to create commitment through inspiration has often been treated as the province of great orators—those in the high seats of politics, law, and civic life. That history has left us with an unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecy: To be truly inspiring, you must possess some kind of magic, and that magic is reserved for the lucky few.

After more than a decade studying the DNA of leader charisma, we are ready to debunk that outdated view and report much better news: Inspiration is a skill, and it is one that every leader can learn.

Why This Matters in Local Government

For years, the skill used to inspire others seemed impossible to measure. Then, 2020 gave researchers an unusual test.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, public leaders had to persuade a divided public to do something inconvenient, largely on the strength of their words. Together with colleagues, we looked to others' speeches for charismatic language and tracked whether people stayed at home or not. The result was consistent: When a speech carried a stronger charismatic signal, more people stayed home the next day.[1] It held regardless of the state's political leanings and regardless of the speaker's political party.

A council chamber is not the same as a public health emergency. But what we learned is when public leaders ask people to do something inconvenient, costly, or uncertain, the language they use can affect whether people follow.

Consider the tools a city or county manager actually has. They can't compel a resident to support a rate increase. They can't order a council member to be courageous. They can't promise their public works crew an easier winter. And in most communities, they can't pay the best people what the private sector would pay them.

Commitment is one of the most valuable currencies you have. Here is how your words can help strengthen it.

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The Tactics That Frame Your Message

Researchers have identified a set of charismatic leadership tactics that make speech measurably more inspiring and can strengthen communication across many kinds of messages. The tactics fall in three broad buckets: Tactics related to articulating what you stand for and believe in; tactics framing your message, so it really sticks; and tactics focused on effective non-verbal delivery. (See Exhibit 1.)

Nine of the tactics are verbal—they live in the words themselves, which means you can put them into a draft before you ever stand up. You don't need to use all nine. In fact, you probably should not. But knowing the repertoire gives you choices. The first five shape how your message lands.

Use a metaphor. Abstractions don't move people; images do. The budget can be described as a series of tradeoffs or as a delicate maneuver where the council must navigate a narrow channel to successfully balance community needs. Perhaps aging pipes is one of those needs. "Our pipes are past their useful life" would be fact. "We are driving a car with 300,000 miles on it, and we have stopped changing the oil" is an image people will remember and understand the urgency of. Metaphor is among the most powerful and reliable tactics in the set, yet paradoxically also the most consistently neglected.

Tell one person's story. Don't anchor your message only in aggregate or abstract information. Tell it through the story of a specific person. A slide showing 1,400 emergency calls last summer will be forgotten before your audience reaches the parking lot. A ninety second story about an 81-year-old resident whose air conditioning failed on the third day of a heat wave, and who called her nephew instead of 911 because she didn't want to be a bother, will be remembered for much longer. Statistics establish scale. Stories create identification and commitment.

Draw a contrast. Set what you are against what you are for. "We can keep patching this road every spring and pay for it twice, or we can rebuild it once and pay for it once." Contrast turns a request into a choice, and it hands your audience the shape of your argument in a single breath.

Ask a rhetorical question. A question makes people answer in their own heads, and an answer someone reaches on their own is an answer they will remember and defend. "What do we tell a family that has waited 11 years for a sidewalk?" does more work than three paragraphs of justification because the room supplies the ending.

Use a three-part list. The ear expects three and remembers three. "We fixed the intersection, we fixed the drainage, and we did it without a rate increase." It sounds finished. That isn't a trick of style; the rhythm is doing real work to determine what people retain.

Charisma is believed precisely because it is difficult to produce and hard to fake. Doing it well takes preparation, judgment, **and a genuine willingness to say what you truly believe in.**

EXHIBIT 1 | Charismatic Leadership Tactics



Adapted from Antonakis et al. (2011)



The Tactics That Give Your Message Substance

The next four are not about the shape of the message. They are about what you are willing to stand for inside it.

Express moral conviction. Say what's right and what you believe in, not only what's efficient. Government speech is saturated with the language of prudence—cost per capita, best practice, defensible process—and often drained of the language of conviction. Both can be true at once, but only one of them moves listeners. "This is the fiscally responsible option" is an argument. "No child in this city should have to walk to school in the street" is a principle.

Speak in the voice of collectives. Use "we," and mean it literally. Not the executive "we" that means "I have decided," but the plural that actually includes the room. "We took a hard vote last year, and we have not regretted it" is a different sentence from "the council approved my recommendation." One creates a shared past. The other files a report.

Set ambitious goals. People don't commit to the status quo; they respond to something about the future that excites them, so give them a summit to conquer. "Every neighborhood in this city will have a park within a ten-minute walk" is a destination. "Improving parks and recreation access" is a line item. The second can only be funded; the first creates a shared vision.

Instill confidence that the goals can be reached. Ambition without confidence creates anxiety. Name the goal, then say plainly—including evidence—why you believe this organization will get there. "We will get there because this is the same team that took the permitting backlog from nine weeks to 12 days." Belief becomes credible when it is earned by something your audience already knows to be true.

What the Research Doesn't Say

Charisma was never magic and still isn't. At the same time, metaphors and ambitious goals won't automatically make someone a great leader. The point isn't to dress up weak arguments or for you to pretend to be someone you aren't. The point is to help strong, necessary arguments become easier to understand, remember, and act on. To help, ensure that your voice matches the mission behind them.

The charismatic communication tactics are a menu, not a checklist or a scoreboard to complete. A budget presentation and a firefighter's memorial should not sound the same, and a manager who crams all nine tactics into a staff email will come across as theatrical rather than inspiring. Choose what the moment, your message, and your audience need.

Scale matters too. In a town of 3,000 people, where you know your public works crew by name and see half the council at the grocery store, a single well-chosen story in a staff meeting may travel the whole organization by lunch. In a county of 800,000, the same tactics have to survive being repeated by department heads you didn't brief and quoted in a story you didn't see coming, so they must be simpler, and you must say them more often than feels necessary. The tactics don't change with size. The need for repetition does.

One more finding surprised us. Charisma works as what economists call a costly signal: It is believed precisely because it is difficult to produce and hard to fake.[2] Doing it well takes preparation, judgment, and a genuine willingness to say what you truly believe in. This also means there is no shortcut. Performed or staged charisma fails because people can tell your words aren't authentic. These tactics are not a costume; they're a craft.

Local government is one of the last places in American public life where democracy is still something a person can touch: a room you can walk into, a budget you can read, and a public servant you can look in the eye. **That makes the language of local leadership matter.**

How to Actually Practice Your Charisma

Here is where most leadership training goes wrong. People learn something new, they leave the room genuinely excited, and then Monday arrives with a broken water main and a budget deadline. The new skill never gets used. It stays in the classroom, an aspiration nobody had time for.

In one field experiment, a colleague and I trained a group of managers and then measured whether the training changed what they actually did back on the job. Training by itself moved the needle far less than we had hoped. What worked was training the managers and also providing them with a small, well-timed prompt—a reminder of those behaviors and how to do them that arrived at the moment the skill was needed.

Consider what that looks like for one person. Tony Mena, a deputy public works director in the City of Goodyear, Arizona, needed for his council to fund a major capital project.[3] Instead of leaning on catch phrases or elaborate slides, he rebuilt the pitch around the questions council members were actually asking: "how does this support our objectives? How does it make our city better?". He translated the proposal into council-level concerns—what residents would notice, what risks the city would avoid, and what future costs the project would prevent. They approved it. Same project, same facts, same person. What changed was the framing.

So don't try to master all nine tactics at once. Do this instead: Pick one. Metaphor provides the greatest return for the least amount of effort, and it's the tactic leaders most often leave on the table. Before your next council presentation or staff meeting, open the draft you've already written and find the one abstraction sitting at the center of it—the deferred maintenance, the fund balance, the vacancy rate. Now replace it with a well-chosen picture and watch the reaction from your audience.

At the next presentation, add a second tactic—one at a time, until you are not just using them but weaving them together into something that moves a room. Mastering inspirational communication is a lot like training for a marathon. The gratification is delayed, but it arrives for those willing to do the miles.

Conclusion

The council will vote either way. The budget will pass, or it won't. Staff will come to work on Monday regardless of what you said on Friday. The question was never only whether people will comply. It is whether anyone will care.

Local government is one of the last places in American public life where democracy is still something a person can touch: a room you can walk into, a budget you can read, and a public servant you can look in the eye. That makes the language of local leadership matter. When people stop believing that what's said in that room matters, something else moves into the space they leave behind, and it is rarely something better.

Here, then, is a goal worth carrying: a profession in which every manager can stand in front of a divided room and leave it a little less divided. A profession that does that will never have to argue for its own relevance. It will be written into the communities it serves.

We now know more than ever about what inspirational communication is made of. We can observe it, practice it, and measure whether people are getting better at it. We have done exactly that with local government leaders across the country, and the conclusion is clear.

Inspiration isn't magic. It is a skill, and it is a skill local government leaders can cultivate.

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[1] Ulrich Jensen, et al, "Combating COVID-19 with Charisma: Evidence on Governor Speeches in the United States," *The Leadership Quarterly*, December 2023.

[2] Vita Akstinaite, Ulrich Thy Jensen, Michalis Vlachos, Alexis Erne, and John Antonakis, "Charisma Is a Costly Signal," *The Leadership Quarterly*, December 2024.

[3] Jørgen Skovhus Haunstrup and Ulrich Thy Jensen, "Leadership Training and Just-in-Time Nudges: A Field Experiment on the Transfer of Learning into Action," *International Public Management Journal*, March 12, 2024.