CHARACTER · STYLE

The Charisma of Leadership

Jim Petersen, PhD · October 18, 2026

Still Got Charisma, Petersen?

What Admiral Rickover helped me understand about presence, influence, and making others feel they matter

At my first interview with Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, I was a midshipman at the United States Naval Academy hoping for a place in the Navy's nuclear power program. I was not on solid ground. My major, Analytical Management, was not one of his favorites, and several exchanges had already left me wondering whether my future in submarines was disappearing before my eyes.

Then the Admiral asked me to describe the qualities of a leader. I answered that a leader must have charisma.

Rickover came up out of his chair. His reaction amused others in the room and terrified me. I walked out convinced I had talked myself out of the nuclear Navy. To my surprise, I was accepted.

Years later, I encountered Rickover again during the sea trials of USS Indianapolis (SSN 697). He ordered a reactor scram, a deliberate emergency shutdown; my team and I recovered the plant successfully. By then, I was learning that leading in a nuclear submarine required far more than a memorable interview answer. It required competence, disciplined judgment, trust, and execution under pressure.

My third encounter came after the Engineer's Exam. I was pulled away from the other officers awaiting results and taken to Rickover's office. Convinced I had somehow failed, I feared the worst. Instead, the Admiral told me I had aced the exam. As I was leaving, he called me back and asked whether I still had charisma. I told him I did.

I later learned that the quiet observer in his office was former President Richard Nixon. At the time, I was far too focused on Rickover to notice.

Whatever the Admiral intended by returning to that question, it stayed with me. Submarines were the foundation of my leadership; the decades that followed, in executive roles in financial services and through many hours of coaching, tested and reshaped what I thought I knew. My understanding of charisma changed along the way. The young midshipman was right that charisma matters. His answer was simply incomplete.

What charisma is, and what it is not

Charisma is often mistaken for extroversion, eloquence, charm, or the ability to dominate a room. Some charismatic people are animated and expressive; others are quiet, thoughtful, and measured. Some leaders command attention through force of personality. Others create equally strong influence through calm and genuine interest.

Rickover was hardly a model of easygoing warmth. His reputation rested on demanding standards, personal intensity, and an uncompromising commitment to nuclear safety. His presence made people pay attention. That does not mean every aspect of his approach should be imitated. It means that command presence and authentic connection are different qualities, even when both contribute to influence.

I have come to see three ideas as related but distinct:

Charisma attracts attention. Executive presence earns credibility. Character sustains trust.

A leader may have one without the others. Lasting leadership requires bringing all three together.

The most meaningful form of charisma is not making yourself the most interesting person in the room. It is helping other people feel that they matter, while giving them confidence in where you are leading.

Seven practices of authentic leadership charisma

1. **Offer genuine warmth.** A natural smile, a welcoming introduction, and a willingness to engage put others at ease. Warmth does not mean forced cheerfulness or pretending every situation is pleasant; it means communicating respect from the first moment of an interaction.
2. **Make people feel valued.** Recognize something specific: an idea, a contribution, a thoughtful question, or work that often goes unnoticed. Generic praise is quickly forgotten. Sincere acknowledgment tells people you see the individual, not merely the position or title.
3. **Listen with curiosity.** Resist the temptation to rehearse your response while someone else is speaking. Ask a question that moves the conversation forward, and do not interrupt to finish another person’s thought. When I taught financial advisors, I reminded them of an old saying: people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. Listening is one way we demonstrate that care. I encouraged advisors to spend more time listening than speaking; as another old saying observes, we have two ears and one mouth for a reason. The goal is understanding, not a prescribed ratio.
4. **Remember names and meaningful details.** Names matter, but relationships depend on more than the mechanics of remembering them. Recall a previous conversation, a professional goal, or something the person has shared. Follow up because you care, not because you are practicing a technique.

5.

Communicate presence through your behavior. Face the person, adopt an open and comfortable posture, and use eye contact appropriate to the individual and the setting. Calm, relaxed gestures reinforce that you are engaged. Body language is most persuasive when it agrees with your words and intentions.

6. **Pause before speaking.** A thoughtful pause communicates composure, particularly when a question is difficult or emotions are running high. Leaders do not need to fill every silence. A deliberate pause gives you time to think and gives others room to contribute.
7. **Use humor with judgment.** A little appropriate humor lowers tension and makes a leader more approachable. The safest humor grows out of a shared experience or a willingness to laugh at oneself. Humor that embarrasses or diminishes others weakens the very trust charisma should create.

Three standards that make the practices meaningful

These practices can be learned, but technique alone is not enough. Three standards separate authentic charisma from a polished performance.

Be fully present. Do not scan the room for someone more influential while another person is talking. Put down the phone. Offer the kind of attention that says, without announcing it, “You matter right now.”

Be authentic. People eventually sense whether warmth is genuine or merely useful. Charisma disconnected from character can become manipulation. A leader’s conduct must match the concern and respect expressed in conversation.

Leave people stronger. An interaction should give someone more clarity, confidence, encouragement, or willingness to act. The goal is not for others to depend on the leader’s personality; it is for them to become more capable themselves.

Where charisma fits in the Petersen Leadership Model

The Petersen Leadership Model has seven elements: Character (who you are), Style (how you lead), Judgment (how you decide), Culture (what you create), Execution (how results are achieved), Life (how you live), and Legacy (what you leave behind). Charisma is not an eighth element. It is a quality of human interaction that strengthens the connections among all seven.

Character determines whether a leader’s interest in others is sincere. **Style** shapes how that interest is expressed; a leader adapts to different people and circumstances without compromising standards. **Judgment** determines when to listen, when to speak, when to challenge, and when to act. **Culture** develops when respect, recognition, and thoughtful communication become expectations shared throughout a team.

Execution keeps charisma anchored in performance. People need more than a leader who makes them feel good; they need one who helps them accomplish meaningful work. **Life** and

Legacy remind us that the way we treat people matters well beyond our formal authority. Titles fade; the impact of our interactions can last.

This is why I resist the notion that charisma belongs only to the naturally outgoing. The behaviors that build connection can be practiced by introverts and extroverts alike. What matters is not theatrical personality but the consistent effect of one person's presence on another.

A question for leaders

Here is a useful exercise for leaders, coaches, and students of leadership. In your next conversation, concentrate less on how you are being perceived and more on the other person's experience. Ask a meaningful question. Listen without rushing. Recognize something specific. Then ask yourself: Did that person leave feeling heard, respected, and more capable?

I still think about that young midshipman sitting across from Admiral Rickover. I had offered one word, charisma, as a quality of leadership. I could not have explained its full meaning then, and I am not certain any of us ever finishes learning it.

Years later, Rickover remembered the word and wanted to know whether I still had it. I answered yes. Today, I would add a more demanding test: not simply whether people notice me, but whether my presence helps them grow.

When you leave a room, do people remember how impressive you were, or how important you made them feel?