

# The Many Symbolic Faces of Fred Smith

## Charismatic Leadership in the Bureaucracy

Claire Perkins

According to Max Weber, charisma refers to a certain quality of an individual personality whereby he is set apart from the ordinary and treated as endowed with "supernatural, superhuman or at least exceptional qualities or powers;" further, such charisma is not accessible to the ordinary person, "being regarded as of divine origin."<sup>1</sup> Weber further asserts that on the basis of these remarkable powers, "the individual concerned is treated as a leader."<sup>2</sup> Others have noted that this relation of supreme trust in the individual has become a rare occurrence in a society that has turned to reliance on bureaucracy and technology, and that charismatic leadership finds appeal in societies with a primitive level of social consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Weber further underscores this view with his claim that charisma finds its antithesis in institutions—the antithesis being found in routine stability and in "regular, integrated, institutional procedures."<sup>4</sup> On the basis of these observations, Weber probably would contend that charisma cannot exist within institutional settings.

This essay, however, rejects this claim, and argues instead that primitive qualities of charismatic leadership can indeed exist within a bureaucracy. Moreover, such charisma can function as an essential element in the promotion of group identity within the organization. The impact of charismatic leadership upon the corporate culture of Federal Express Corporation, the Memphis-based national leader of the overnight package delivery business, will be examined as a case study in support of this argument. We shall look especially at the symbolism and imagery used by founder Fred Smith to reassure the group of its identity and its values. Implied symbolic roles and value expressions of each metaphorical image will also be addressed.

Several key observations which have been made regarding charisma in primitive societies may in turn be examined in light of their role within the bureaucracy in promoting group identity and reaffirming values. It has been suggested that the charismatic leader is strongest in appealing to basic needs, with the appeal of simplicity and primary virtues preferred over the contemporary dependence on complex technology.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the rhetoric of charisma employs an "earthy" vocabulary of imagery to reassure the group of itself and its boundaries.<sup>6</sup> Smith's vocabulary of imagery consists of archetypal metaphors which promote a sense of group identity and shared humanity.<sup>7</sup> The metaphors he uses most frequently focus on war, animals, and family imagery. It has further been stated that socially significant charisma requires a span of relationships within a radical division of functions between men, such as "commander and commanded."<sup>8</sup> These relationships seem to be clearly established through a series of metaphorical images whereby certain symbolic roles emerge. Archetypal metaphors implemented by Smith perform one of their major functions in that they strengthen his position as a leader, putting him in an advantageous symbolic role.<sup>9</sup>

After examining publicized interviews, both printed and televised, it appears that the most pervasive imagery in Smith's discourse centers on the archetypal war metaphor. An ex-Marine fighter pilot who had flown over two hundred combat missions earning numerous medals,<sup>10</sup> Smith has imbued his company with an "iconoclastic, military personality."<sup>11</sup> The Darwinian "survival of the fittest" combined with a "kill or be killed" philosophy seems deeply entrenched in the Federal Express culture.<sup>12</sup> Competitiveness dominates the corporate mentality, corresponding to Osborn's observation that war imagery gives expression to aggressive tendencies and the desire to make others submissive.<sup>13</sup> This militant competitiveness seems to be exemplified through Smith's declaration during a *Sixty Minutes* interview, "I am always ready to wage war on the competition, both in the air and on the ground. . . we're not just a fly-by-night business like the hamburger wars."<sup>14</sup>

It has been noted that part of the militarism of the Federal Express culture stems from the perfected "field intelligence" devised by Smith to monitor the competitors' marketing, financing, and operating activities.<sup>15</sup> In 1973, Smith acknowledged the attempt on the part of Emery Air to launch its own rapid delivery small package service, "At that stage we could have gotten our brains blown out."<sup>16</sup> The intense price and advertising wars with the competition have seemingly spurred Smith on to innovation in the industry. Smith described an "innocent-looking envelope" which marked the first time a courier could deliver letters overnight in direct competition with the United States Postal Service, as "having the potential to completely destroy our competitors."<sup>17</sup>

Federal Express has been described as a "glorified Marine Corp."<sup>18</sup> The archetypal war metaphor has permeated the corporate ranks, being utilized by Smith's immediate subordinates. At a 1982 Family Briefing meeting, senior officer Frank Maguire spoke:

The competition is out there and they are going to try to eat our lunch. The competition is tough and the outcome is not yet decided. It is a year of challenge, a year of risk. We face the most challenging competitive year in the history of this great company. I say bring the enemy on. Let's hit him between the running lights.<sup>19</sup>

Again, the spirit of "kill or be killed" emerged to strengthen its role in the corporate culture.

It is through the metaphorical war imagery that one sees Smith emerge as commander-in-chief, the persona of a general in full control keeping close watch over the enemy.<sup>20</sup> The enemy is embodied in the competition—those engaged in an intense advertising and price war with Federal Express. Some have speculated that Smith equates the enemy with the Viet Cong, in remembrance of his Vietnam days.<sup>21</sup> Employees of Federal Express emerge in force as a mighty army—they are the troops, the rank and file, whose mission is to "destroy the competition." One may infer from the frequent use of the archetypal war metaphor that company values might include obedience and competitiveness to win this war waged on the competition.

Heightening the extensive use of war imagery is the implementation of archetypal animal imagery. As Osborn has suggested, the use of animal imagery is useful in dehumanizing the enemy and perhaps in legitimizing the necessity to kill the opposition while uniting the group in anger and fear.<sup>22</sup> According to Smith, "We are bigger than anyone else; it would take a corporate behemoth to muscle its way into our business."<sup>23</sup> The image of the behemoth, a large hippopotamus-like beast mentioned in the Book of Job in the Old Testament, definitely dehumanizes the hypothetical competition as it is described as "having sinews of thighs like cables, bones like tubes of bronze, a frame like an iron rod. . . he is the taskmaster of his fellows and of all wild animals he makes sport."<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the image of the "corporate behemoth," a well-known allegory told by a former company president further exemplifies the use of animal imagery to promote militarism.<sup>25</sup> The allegory of the bear and the alligator, having been recognized and repeated by Smith, has been noted by some as being an integral aspect of the corporate culture at Federal Express.<sup>26</sup> The original allegory, according to past company president Art Bass:

If there is going to be a fight between a bear and an alligator. . . the outcome is going to be determined more by the terrain than by the individual skill of the combatants. Now they are going to have to jump into the swamp to fight us and it's not going to be any contest. Much of the competition has jumped into the water with us alligators, and they are totally reacting to what we are doing. In marketing there is nothing I would rather see than a predictable competitor. You can make him do things you wouldn't do yourself. <sup>27</sup>

Some have noted that fighting the enemy at Federal Express is a heroic exercise.<sup>28</sup> The use of animal imagery, working in a unique confluence with the archetypal war metaphor, aids in enhancing the competitive spirit while legitimizing the killing of the bear in the murky swamp.

To counteract the violent war imagery that is abundantly found in the company culture, Fred Smith, while taking on a god-like role, seems to have the potential to exploit the family image. It has been observed that the families of Federal Express employees have been made to feel that they have been given an official role in the organizational decision process.<sup>29</sup> In 1975, when the Teamsters attempted to unionize his company, Smith invited not only employees, but their spouses to a local site to express his reasons for opposing unionization.<sup>30</sup> A veteran employee claimed, "Smith doesn't have to do much of a PR job on the families—he's like a god to many of them."<sup>31</sup> Smith has asserted, "I recognize my power as the Great Motivator."<sup>32</sup> In the midst of all of his "saving grace," Smith seems to be in a position to present a "sugar-coated scenario" that could go unquestioned, the exploitation of the family image discovered at a much later time.<sup>33</sup>

Possibly the most extensive use of the family image occurs at the annually televised Family Briefing meeting. Some have described the Family Briefing as having the atmosphere of a "faith healer's festival" where Smith is presented as a "demigod of package delivery."<sup>34</sup> In past meetings, Smith has been introduced as "our chairman, our founder, our friend."<sup>35</sup> Smith claims that he has always been able to "urge my people on to greater profits and efforts, while maintaining their loyalty."<sup>36</sup>

As in the case of the metaphorical war imagery, the implementation of the family image has also filtered down to Smith's higher level subordinates. At a 1981 national sales meeting, senior officer Frank Maguire greeted the audience:

Welcome brothers and sisters from across the country! We have the ability to be open with one another! You aren't ordinary people! There is love and respect among you and for you!<sup>37</sup>

It has been suggested that the family image serves to promote loving identification among people, directly opposed to the previously mentioned animal imagery, serving as a counterbalance to the hatred of "nonhuman" images.<sup>38</sup> Smith seems to amplify his implied persona of father to that of God the Father.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Federal Express employees have been content to accept their roles as members of a corporate family, forsaking individuality.<sup>40</sup> The employees take on the implied roles of children—brothers and sisters. Employees seem to accept passively the "parent-child" imagery, which is considered to belong to an authoritarian nature.<sup>41</sup> In terms of Federal Express "religion," employees seem to take on the roles of followers and believers. Implied value expressions may include devotion, loyalty, faith, belief, and trust.

Why does this combination of family and religious imagery seem to operate with inordinate success at Federal Express? Some have speculated that perhaps the Protestant work ethic which dominates the Bible Belt may coincide with the work philosophy of Fred Smith, whereby one blends into the corporation with all traces of individuality obliterated.<sup>42</sup> It has also been observed that there may be less cynicism and more idealism in the Tennessee-Arkansas-Mississippi region as opposed to other parts of the nation.<sup>43</sup> Possibly a century ago, Henry W.

Grady may have been describing the present-day Federal Express employee when he depicted the South as "being of simple faith and of homogeneous people,"<sup>44</sup> and Southerners as "people who have fallen in love with work."<sup>45</sup> Ironically, Smith has been attacked as the "massah of the great Federal Express plantation," possibly by one who has recognized the value placed on submissiveness in his Southern corporation.<sup>46</sup>

If one acknowledges that charismatic leadership exists in the bureaucracy,<sup>47</sup> that it can exist through appeals to primitive needs and through an earthy vocabulary of imagery in a rhetoric replete with symbolism and imagery, then one must also recognize that the publicity and concern over projecting the "right" charismatic image must also exist. It has been suggested that the charismatic organizational leader is surrounded by a group of trained officials whose primary roles include guiding the charismatic movement to the appropriate corporate image.<sup>48</sup> Although Smith is the central persona of Federal Express, one cannot ignore the fact that there must exist a group of talented "image makers" who carefully nurture the corporate image projected through Smith.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps this is part of the phenomenon which Weber describes as a "paradox:" charismatic leadership, with its seemingly spontaneous nature, is actually harnessed to a concealed bureaucratic power which is its antithesis in the corporate setting.<sup>50</sup>

While many corporate employees never actually meet the founder of the company, they tell stories and myths about the founder which accumulate to the point whereby the leader begins to take on a role of mythic proportion that a real person would find impossible to fulfill.<sup>51</sup> It certainly appears that much of today's popular literature seems to focus on the accomplishments of Fred Smith; in actuality, these stories have become an integral aspect of the Federal Express corporate culture. Several stories seem to center on Smith's achievements, relating his always miraculous emergence to victory by overcoming the harshest of circumstances. One often-repeated story focuses on the difficult economic conditions encountered by Smith in the early years of the company's history. In order to pay his employees' wages on time, Smith supposedly flew to Las Vegas where he won twenty-seven thousand dollars at the black jack table to meet the payroll.<sup>52</sup> This story, which portrays Smith as the perpetual winner in the face of adversity, is representative of the many reiterated by employees. Moreover, in a 1982 study of Federal Express employees, a majority of 37% responded that their favorite Federal Express story centered around Fred Smith.<sup>53</sup>

Fred Smith, through symbolism and imagery, has enhanced his charismatic appeal. He has fulfilled his employees' needs by promoting a sense of unity and group identification. Employees seem to accept gladly the symbolic roles of "rank and file," "troops," "believers," and "followers." Smith has also heightened his symbolically advantageous position as "father" and "commander-in-chief." Value expressions, examined to the degree that they were implied through the various metaphors, included obedience, competitiveness, devotion, and faith.

In the examination of rhetorical devices in the corporate setting, future study along two pathways that actually merge could be of particular interest. One path may focus on the concept of Micheal McGee's ideograph<sup>54</sup> and its existence in corporate cultures. This concept could be viewed in conjunction with another path, Suzanne Osborn's concept of the third persona,<sup>55</sup> altering her concept from the depiction of the country to the depiction of a corporation as a whole. Both of these ideas in turn could be examined in light of how they function in the promotion of group identification and unity from a rhetorical standpoint.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (Edinburgh: Hodge, 1947), p. 329.

<sup>2</sup>Weber, *Theory*, p. 329.

<sup>3</sup>Bryan R. Wilson, *The Noble Savages: The Primitive Origins of Charisma* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975) p. 106.

<sup>4</sup>Weber, *Theory*, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup>Wilson, *The Noble Savages*, p. 104.

<sup>6</sup>Wilson, *Savages*, p. 105.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Osborn, *Orientations to Rhetorical Style* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1976) p. 16.

<sup>8</sup>Wilson, *Savages*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup>Osborn, *Orientations*, P. 16.

<sup>10</sup>Kenneth Neill, "Federal Express: The Million Dollar Dream Machine," *Memphis Magazine*, August 1978, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>Robert A. Sigafoos, *Absolutely Positively Overnight!* (Memphis: St. Luke's Press, 1983) p. 118.

<sup>12</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup>Osborn, *Orientations*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup>"Fred Smith: Federal Express," narr. by Morley Safer, *Sixty Minutes*.

<sup>15</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 120.

<sup>16</sup>Neill, "Federal Express," P. 27.

<sup>17</sup>Geoffrey Colvin, "Federal Express Dives Into Air Mail," *Fortune*, Reprint of June 15, 1981.

<sup>18</sup>Personal interview with Robert Sigafoos, January 1985.

<sup>19</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 122.

<sup>20</sup>Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 56 (1970) 109-119.

<sup>21</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 120.

<sup>22</sup>Osborn, *Orientations*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup>Blaine Harden, "Overnight Success," *The Washington Post Magazine*, February 1981, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup>Book of Job, Old Testament, King James Version

<sup>25</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 118.

<sup>26</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 118.

<sup>27</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 118.

<sup>28</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 185.

<sup>30</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 148.

<sup>31</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 185.

<sup>32</sup>*Sixty Minutes*, Interview.

<sup>33</sup>Michael Osborn, *Speaking in Public* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), p. 179.

<sup>34</sup>Harden, "Overnight Success," P. 19.

<sup>35</sup>Harden, "Overnight Success," p. 19.

<sup>36</sup>*Sixty Minutes*, Interview.

<sup>37</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 145.

<sup>38</sup>Osborn, *Orientations*, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup>Black, "The Second persona," pp. 109-119.

- <sup>40</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 153.
- <sup>41</sup>Osborn, *Speaking in Public*, p. 179.
- <sup>42</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 153.
- <sup>43</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 154.
- <sup>44</sup>William W. Grady, *The New South and Other Addresses* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1969), p. 128.
- <sup>45</sup>Grady, *New South*, p. 33.
- <sup>46</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 147.
- <sup>47</sup>Amitai Etzioni, *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1961) pp. 303-364.
- <sup>48</sup>Wilson, *Noble Savages*, p. 112.
- <sup>49</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 153.
- <sup>50</sup>Wilson, *Savages*, p. 112.
- <sup>51</sup>Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr., *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Warner Books, 1982), p. 75.
- <sup>52</sup>Sigafoos, *Overnight*, p. 68.
- <sup>53</sup>Walter Kirkpatrick, "Final Report, Family Briefing Analysis," unpublished manuscript, September 1982, p. 56.
- <sup>54</sup>Micheal C. McGee, "The Ideograph: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 56 (1980), 1-16.
- <sup>55</sup>Suzanne Osborn, "Innaugural Imagery: The Icon of a Nation," paper presented at annual convention of Speech Communication Association, Chicago, IL, November 3, 1984.