

**Leading Without Power:
Charismatic and Adaptive Leadership in the
Office of the United Nations Secretary-General**

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Summary

As the United Nations is about to select its next Secretary-General (SG), the question of what kind of leadership the office requires becomes more than theoretical. The SG is often described in expansive terms - diplomat, advocate, civil servant, chief executive and moral voice of the international community - yet the powers attached to the office are far more limited than these expectations suggest. This thesis examines that gap between expectation and authority. It argues that the Secretary-General is power-poor but authority-rich: unable to command Member States, yet able to draw on symbolic, moral, legal and institutional authority. The central question is therefore not whether the SG has power in the conventional executive sense, but what kind of leadership can turn limited authority into real influence.

The thesis pursues that question through two complementary frameworks. The first, charismatic leadership, matters because it can help the SG generate attention, credibility and moral pressure where formal command is absent. It enables the office to frame crises, project moral authority and make inaction harder to justify. But charisma is not a cure: it is unstable, politically risky, and insufficient when the core interests of the permanent members (P5) are engaged.

The second, adaptive leadership, begins where charisma's limits are reached. Many of the hardest challenges before the SG are not technical questions solvable by expertise or procedure, but adaptive problems that require Member States themselves to learn, absorb losses and take responsibility. The task of the office is not to solve these challenges on others' behalf, but to diagnose the real work, hold attention on it, regulate political distress, and keep the work with the actors whose choices are necessary.

Together, the two frameworks explain how leadership can exist inside powerlessness: charisma can win a hearing, and adaptive leadership can turn that hearing into shared work. Neither removes the structural limits of the office. They do, however, suggest what should be looked for in a Secretary-General: moral presence, communicative discipline, diagnostic judgement, adaptive initiative, and the steadiness to lead from within constraint. The uncomfortable conclusion is that several of these qualities are least visible at appointment, and some are precisely what a process built around great-power acceptability tends to screen out. The way the Secretary-General is selected may therefore be structured to select against the leadership the office most needs.

1. The Most Impossible Job: Expectations v. Reality

The first UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie greeted his successor Dag Hammarskjöld „to the most impossible job on this earth“¹. Lie was right – it is one of the most difficult jobs in the world. And it is not only because the Organization the Secretary-General leads exists to *inter alia* “maintain international peace and security”² – no modest ambition - but that a paradox is embedded in the office itself: a position expected, by design, to exercise global leadership, yet structurally constrained in its capacity to act. The SG must represent the ideals of the UN and speak for the international community while operating within a framework that offers little formal authority and heavy dependence on Member States. As Kofi Annan put it – the SG “is sort of a referee, but without red and yellow cards”.³

1.1. The SG Office as Designed and Imagined

That paradox begins with expectations, which in the SG’s case are nothing short of extraordinary. Some authors say that it is impossible to write an exhaustive “job description”.⁴ Indeed - it is difficult to imagine another international office carrying demands this expansive. Some expectations are self-driven, some external, and some are purely legal.

The legal expectations find their clearest expression in the UN Charter. The SG is addressed in Chapter XV (Articles 97-101), just 5 articles. Appointed by the General Assembly “upon the recommendations of the Security Council”, the SG is designated the Organization’s Chief Administrative Officer. Article 98 gives the office a dual function: the SG acts in an administrative capacity in all meetings of the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Trusteeship Council⁵, while also performing “such other functions as are entrusted to him by these organs” – a strikingly broad formulation.

Article 99, often considered the most politically significant provision, grants the Secretary-General the power to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his⁶ opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security” - the only article endowing the office with independent political initiative. Hammarskjöld treated this Article as the one “more than any other” which the Charter’s drafters considered to have transformed the Secretary-General “from a purely administrative official to one with an explicit political responsibility” - a shift he attributed to legal scholars’ reading of the provision as conferring “a broad discretion to conduct inquiries and to engage in informal diplomatic activity” in matters of peace and security.⁷

Articles 100 and 101 add two further expectations.⁸ Article 100 protects the independence of the SG and Secretariat staff by barring external instructions and requiring Member States to respect their exclusively international role. Article 101 gives the SG authority over staff

¹ Simon Chesterman, “The Secretary-General We Deserve?” *Global Governance* 21, no. 4 (2015): 505

² Article 1 of the United Nations Charter 26 June 1945, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

³ “We are a bit envious of FIFA”, interview with Kofi Annan, *Der Spiegel*, July 18, 2006 <https://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-kofi-annan-we-are-a-bit-envious-of-fifa-a-427239.html>

⁴ Shashi Tharoor, “‘The Most Impossible Job’ Description.” in *Secretary or General?: The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, edited by Simon Chesterman, 33–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 34

⁵ The Trusteeship Council suspended operations in 1994, so today this part is mostly historical/formal, but it remains in the Charter text.

⁶ The masculine pronoun appears repeatedly in the Charter provisions concerning the Secretary-General. To date, all nine Secretaries-General of the UN have been men, from Trygve Lie to Antonio Guterres. The wording is retained here where directly quoting the Charter. However, when referring to the office in general, this paper uses gender-inclusive language.

⁷ Dag Hammarskjöld, *The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact*, lecture delivered at the University of Oxford, 30 May 1961 (Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2021 reprint), <https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/international-civil-servant-in-law-and-in-fact.pdf> 13

⁸ United Nations Charter, 26 June 1945, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

appointments, subject to General Assembly regulations and the principles of efficiency, competence, integrity and equitable geographical distribution.

Together, these provisions construct an office that is administrative, internationally independent, politically ambiguous and lightly defined. The Charter establishes the SG's legal skeleton; it does not provide a full doctrine of leadership. That interpretative space has been filled over time by institutional practice, personal qualities of individual SGs, public expectation and the UN's own understanding of the role.

The clearest illustration of how far expectations have travelled from the text is how the United Nations describes the office today. On its official website, the SG is "equal parts diplomat and advocate, civil servant and CEO," and a "symbol of the UN ideals and a spokesperson for the interest of the world's peoples, in particular the poor and vulnerable".⁹ At least five roles, each with distinct functions, making clear that the office cannot be seen merely as an administrative post.

As a **diplomat**, the SG navigates the tensions of the international system, mediating between states, and bridging geopolitical divides. As an advocate, leading what has been called the world's biggest diplomatic stage, the SG is expected not only to facilitate but to argue for something – to give voice to causes and frame crises on behalf of the international community. As a **spokesperson** for the "world's peoples, in particular the poor and vulnerable", the SG occupies a role that, as Tharoor observes¹⁰, functions simultaneously as a platform and a straitjacket. Those roles sit in tension: effective diplomacy demands neutrality and access to all parties, while advocacy requires taking a position – a tension that has defined some of the most contested moments in the Office's history.

The **civil servant** framing implies impartiality, independence from national interest, and exclusive loyalty to the Organization – a standard reinforced by Article 100. As Hammarskjöld argued in his Oxford lecture, this does not mean political celibacy or the absence of values; neutrality, means the absence of national or ideological bias, the standard being to remain "wholly uninfluenced by national or group interests or ideologies."¹¹

The **CEO** comparison pulls in a different direction. A chief executive is normally the highest authority within an organization, setting strategy, commanding resources, and accountable for outcomes.¹² Its appearance in the UN's own description of the Secretary-General is revealing: modern expectations of the office have expanded well beyond administration into organisational leadership.

Of all these, the **symbolic** dimension is arguably the most consequential. The SG holds very limited coercive power - the full extent of these limitations will be examined in the next section – so without the moral authority that comes from embodying the UN's ideals, the diplomacy loses its weight, the advocacy loses its credibility, and the administrative functions lose political significance. Precisely because coercive power is so limited, the symbolic dimension becomes decisive – the SG can only lead through legitimacy, mediate only through trust, advocate only through credibility.

This burden was anticipated early. The Preparatory Commission observed that the Secretary-General "more than anyone else" would stand for the United Nations and embody the principles and ideals of the Charter.¹³ The SG was expected not only to serve the Organization,

⁹United Nations, "The Role of the Secretary-General" <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/the-role-of-the-secretary-general> (accessed 15 April 2026)

¹⁰ Shashi Tharoor, "'The Most Impossible Job' Description," in Simon Chesterman (ed.), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 40

¹¹ Dag Hammarskjöld, *The International Civil Servant in Law and in Fact*, lecture delivered at the University of Oxford, 30 May 1961 (Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2021 reprint), 16, 29–30.

¹² Business Roundtable, *Principles of Corporate Governance* (Washington, D.C.: Business Roundtable, 2016), <https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2016/09/08/principles-of-corporate-governance/>.

¹³ Preparatory Commission of the United Nations, *Report of the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations*, PC/20 (London, 23 December 1945), 87, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/519440>.

but to personify it – and at the heart of that lies the concept of moral authority. As Annan explained, the SG is “sort of referee” without red and yellow cards: he cannot raise the cards, but can raise his/her moral voice.¹⁴ As Kille observes, the notion of the SG’s moral authority permeates discussions of the office - scholars invoke the SG’s moral capital, duty, standing, power, stature, and courage, the common theme being a moral actor at the head of the UN.¹⁵ Some call the SG the closest thing to the voice of the world’s conscience,¹⁶ others note that every Secretary-General has few other resources in his armoury than the office’s moral authority.¹⁷ In an office with few coercive instruments, moral authority is one of the main resources through which the SG converts visibility into influence

Yet moral authority is fragile. Because the SG personifies the UN, the failures of collective action are easily personalised as failures of the officeholder. As Trinh observes, it is a “cruel Catch-22” that living up to the ideals of the Charter may itself come at a price for the Secretary-General.¹⁸ Annan’s joke that the SG also stands for „scapegoat“, was not just self-deprecating humour; it reveals a structural dynamic.¹⁹ The Secretary-General is expected to embody the ideals of the United Nations, but is exposed when those ideals cannot be realised through the Organization’s political machinery.

These expectations would be demanding for any leader; they become extraordinary for the Secretary-General. Together, the Charter and the UN’s own description construct a wide range - administrator, diplomat, advocate, symbol, and political actor – but range should not be mistaken for power. The same design that gives the SG visibility and voice leaves the office deeply dependent on Member States. It is to that dependence, and the constraints it produces, that the next section turns.

1.2. Authority Without Power: Constraints by Design

The Charter defines the office just enough to establish independence and administrative authority, while leaving political leadership largely unanswered. What it does not provide is anything resembling the instruments of power those expectations require: no enforcement authority, no vote in any principal organ, no independent budget, and no binding authority over Member States.

Article 99, one of the Charter’s most politically significant provisions, has been invoked rarely²⁰ in 80 years of the UN history, with the most recent invocation in December 2023 in relation to the hostilities in Gaza and Israel²¹. It grants the SG the right to bring matters to the Security Council’s attention, but not to act on them. Once the initiative is raised, the matter passes immediately to the Council, so the SG can raise the alarm, but cannot compel or control the

¹⁴ “We are a bit envious of FIFA”, interview with Kofi Annan, *Der Spiegel*, July 18, 2006 <https://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-kofi-annan-we-are-a-bit-envious-of-fifa-a-427239.html>

¹⁵ Kent J. Kille, “Introduction: Moral Authority and the UN Secretary-General,” in Kent J. Kille (ed.), *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 10.

¹⁶ Kent J. Kille, “Introduction: Moral Authority and the UN Secretary-General,” in Kent J. Kille (ed.), *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 11

¹⁷ Adekeye Adebajo, “Pope, Pharaoh, or Prophet? The Secretary-General after the Cold War,” in Simon Chesterman (ed.), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142.

¹⁸ Quang Trinh, “The Bully Pulpit” in Simon Chesterman (ed.), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 120.

¹⁹ Simon Chesterman, “The Secretary-General We Deserve?” *Global Governance* 21, no. 4 (2015): 505

²⁰ Confirmed explicit invocations of Article 99 – 1. By Hammarskjöld in 1960 (for Congo); 2. By U Thant in 1971 (for East Pakistan/Bangladesh) (there are some dispute if it was full formal invocation); 3. By Waldheim in 1979 (for Iran hostage crisis); 4. By Pérez de Cuéllar in 1989 (for Lebanon); 5. By Guterres in 2023 (for Gaza). There are discussions on what is defined as “formal” invocation.

²¹ António Guterres, “The Secretary-General Letter to the Security Council Invoking Article 99 of the United Nations Charter,” United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Occupied Palestinian Territory, December 6, 2023, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/secretary-general-letter-security-council-invoking-article-99-united-nations-charter>

response. The 2023 instance illustrates the limit starkly. For the first time in his two terms, the SG António Guterres invoked the Article 99 over the situation in Gaza²², warning of catastrophic humanitarian consequences and urging an immediate ceasefire. Two days later, a draft Security Council resolution demanding one failed on a veto by the United States, despite thirteen votes in favour. Even one of the “most powerful tools” in the Charter’s political toolkit can force attention, but not action.

The Charter’s silence on enforcement is only part of the story. Beyond the text, the SG’s capacity to act has always depended on the political will of Member States, the financial contributions they choose to make or withhold, and above all the strategic interest of the five permanent members (P5) of the Security Council. These are not accidental pressures; they are built into the office by design, reflecting the founders’ choice to create an institution that would serve collective interest without threatening their individual ones - what Chesterman calls the “profound ambivalence of states towards entrusting their security, interests, or resources to an intergovernmental body” – an ambivalence that did not end with the founding moment but has shaped the office in every generation since.²³

The SG “controls no territory, commands no armies, makes and enforces no laws, and imposes no taxes. Contrary to the biblical injunction that no person can serve two masters, the Secretary-General is the “servant” of 193 member states with different interests and histories”.²⁴ This dependency manifests in practice at every level. The SG cannot deploy peacekeepers without troop contributions, investigate without access granted by governments, or speak on a crisis without weighing the diplomatic cost to relationships needed tomorrow.²⁵ Every initiative requires political permission from the very actors the SG may be called upon to challenge. Guterres’s handling of Gaza-related accountability led Israel to announce in 2026 that it would sever ties with his office, while his 2024 meeting with President Vladimir Putin at the BRICS summit drew sharp criticism from Ukraine.²⁶ Pressure from Member States operates in real time, on specific decisions, and must be navigated constantly.

The P5 occupy a category of their own. Each holds a veto extending not only to the Security Council resolutions but to the SG’s appointment itself. Consensus among them is structurally difficult, their interests diverse and often conflicting; when they disagree, the Council is paralysed and the Secretary-General’s operational space contracts; when they agree, it is usually around the lowest-common-denominator.²⁷ Tellingly, the SG who came closest to a

²²UN News, “Gaza: Guterres Invokes ‘Most Powerful Tool’ Article 99, in Bid for Humanitarian Ceasefire,” *UN News*, 6 December 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144447>

²³ Simon Chesterman, “Introduction: Secretary or General?,” in Simon Chesterman (ed.), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4

²⁴ Abiodun Williams, *Kofi Annan and Global Leadership at the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 2.

²⁵ On the legal framework underlying the peacekeeping dependency, see UN Charter Articles 43-47, which envisioned a collective security system of standing agreements between Member States and the Security Council that were never concluded. For a detailed analysis see Harvard Law School Program on International Law and Armed Conflict, *A Primer on Articles 43-47 of the UN Charter* (November 2024), <https://hls.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Arts-43%E2%80%9347-Primer.pdf>. On the non-intervention principle limiting the SG’s investigative capacity, see UN Charter Article 2(7).

²⁶ On Israel’s 2026 decision to cut ties with the Secretary-General’s office following the UN’s inclusion of Israel in its conflict-related sexual violence blacklist, see “UN Places Israel and Russia on Sexual Violence Blacklist,” *Reuters*, 29 May 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-place-israel-sexual-violence-in-conflict-blacklist-israeli-envoy-says-2026-05-29/>. On Ukraine’s criticism of Guterres’s attendance at the 2024 BRICS summit in Russia and meeting with Vladimir Putin, see “Ukraine Blasts U.N.’s Guterres over Invitation to BRICS Summit in Russia,” *Reuters*, 22 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-blasts-uns-guterres-over-invitation-brics-summit-russia-2024-10-22/>.

²⁷ Simon Chesterman, “Introduction: Secretary or General?,” in Simon Chesterman (ed.), *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6

third term²⁸ was Kurt Waldheim, who said that SG “should be ready to help in any situation *when the organs of the UN or the parties concerned wish him to do so*”.²⁹

This shapes what kind of SG the P5 are willing to accept. The Charter formally gives the General Assembly the power of appointment but in practice the Assembly has never rejected or even meaningfully contested the Council’s recommendation: the P5 choose, and the remaining 188 states are invited to ratify. The result is systematic pressure towards candidates who “will not exert any troubling degree of leadership, commitment, originality, or independence.”³⁰ The qualities that make the SG influential before world opinion are not the qualities the P5 seek, and the selection logic clashes with public expectations. A recent youth campaign called not for “the safest candidate”, but a courageous, imaginative changemaker – a convener of political will and moral voice unafraid to apply pressure.³¹ From a great-power perspective, those features look like future unpredictability, so the process favours candidates whose independence is not too visible in advance: administrators, diplomats, consensus figures. Hammarskjöld is the classic illustration – expected to be a quiet Swedish civil servant, he “turned out to be a dynamic and charismatic world leader”,³² later judged “the most remarkable of the Secretaries-General so far appointed”,³³ a “complex visionary”³⁴, or SG who “invented the job he held”³⁵. The preference persists: summarizing Washington’s wishes for Annan’s successor, US Ambassador John Bolton was blunt – the SG “is the Chief Administrative Officer... and we want somebody who will follow that job description. Chief. Administrative”.³⁶

Even though the body formally empowered to make this appointment – the General Assembly – operates in virtually every other context on the principle of one country, one vote, the SG selection is an exception. The selection process is therefore far from being a neutral procedure – it is itself a political constraint, filtering out independent, charismatic or disruptive candidates before they ever take the office, determining not only who leads the UN, but also what kind of leadership the great powers are willing to permit.

The Charter does not specify the SG’s term length,³⁷ leaving the office exposed to political discretion, especially during a renewable first term. Keating notes the five-year term renewable once practice remains “entirely discretionary,” with both the General Assembly and the Security Council free to modify the term of future Secretaries-General.³⁸ Any SG reappointment must keep, or at least not lose, P5 support throughout the first term. Boutros-Ghali was denied a second term by a United States veto despite broad Council’s support; Waldheim’s bid for a third term was blocked by China in 1981, and Lie resigned after the Soviet

²⁸ James Traub, “The Secretary-General’s Political Space,” in Simon Chesterman, ed., *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 189

²⁹ William D. Jackson, “The Political Role of the Secretary-General Under U Thant And Kurt Waldheim: Development Or Decline?” *World Affairs* 140, no. 3 (1978): 230–44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20671734>

³⁰ Brian Urquhart, *A Life in War and Peace* (Norton, 1991), quoted in Simon Chesterman, “The Secretary-General We Deserve?”, *Global Governance* 21 (2015), 508.

³¹ UN Foundation Next Generation Fellows, *The Job Description: For the 10th United Nations Secretary-General* (16 April 2026), 1–7. The document states that it draws on inputs from over 2,000 young people worldwide through a global survey, public dialogues and consultations, with support from the Unlock the Future coalition.

³² Brian E. Urquhart, “The Evolution of the Secretary-General,” in Simon Chesterman, ed., *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 19.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kent J. Kille, *From Manager to Visionary: The Secretary-General of the United Nations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 74.

³⁵ James Traub, “The Secretary-General’s Political Space,” in Simon Chesterman, ed., *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 185–86.

³⁶ John Bolton, quoted in Jonathan M. Katz, “The Secretary General in His Labyrinth,” *New Republic*, 3 March 2015, cited in Chesterman, “The Secretary-General We Deserve?”, 510.

³⁷ UN General Assembly Resolution 11(I), 24 January 1946, which established a five-year term renewable once, while preserving the right of the General Assembly and Security Council to modify the term for future Secretaries-General. Available at: [https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/11\(I\)](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/11(I))

³⁸ Colin Keating, “Selecting the World’s Diplomat,” in *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, ed. Simon Chesterman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 55.

Union withdrew cooperation over his support for the Korea intervention.³⁹ This reappointment dynamic therefore creates a structural incentive toward self-restraint.

Political constraints define what the SG is permitted to do; material constraints define what he or she can afford to do. The SG proposes the programme budget but cannot approve it: that power rests with the General Assembly.⁴⁰ In practice, the proposal is reviewed by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ), negotiated by Member States in the Fifth Committee⁴¹, and then adopted by the General Assembly. This is not a simple technical process during which the Secretariat drafts and Member States approve. Rather, the UN budgeting is marked by “an extremely high degree of micromanagement by Member States as principals,” with complex procedures, segmented budgets, and repeated bargaining between the Secretariat and intergovernmental bodies.⁴² The SG cannot fund new priorities or respond to emerging demands without navigating an intergovernmental budget process designed as much for control as for financing.

The rules governing contributions compound this dependency. Member States pay assessed contributions according to a scale based on capacity to pay, but payments are frequently delayed or withheld, and financial regulations require that unspent appropriations be credited back to Member States at the end of each budget period, leaving the UN unable to retain reserves against future shortfalls. The legal and institutional framework governing UN financing provides almost no effective incentive for compliance. Article 19 of the Charter suspends Member State's voting rights in the General Assembly once arrears exceed two years' worth of contributions - but beyond that threshold, there are no enforceable consequences for late or partial payment.⁴³

The problem is compounded by the structure of UN budgeting itself. The UN budget is not really a single budget, but a segmented set of budgetary procedures, including the regular budget, peacekeeping budgets, special political missions and funds and programmes. This segmentation makes budgetary control more fragmented and further limits the Secretary-General's ability to manage the Organization as a coherent executive whole.⁴⁴

This is where the CEO analogy from section 1.1. collapses. Annan captured the absurdity, saying he “would love to see a CEO manage his company with a board of directors of 192” and “to get things done as effectively and efficiently”.⁴⁵ A chief executive accountable to a board still aligns strategy, staffing and resources once priorities are set; the SG cannot, since the resources to pursue any priority must pass through an intergovernmental process in which Member States, including those whose behavior the SG is seeking to address, retain the final word. The gap extends beyond finances: a CEO controls senior appointments, whereas

³⁹ On Boutros-Ghali: Simon Chesterman, “The Secretary-General We Deserve?” *Global Governance* 21, no. 4 (2015): 509. On Waldheim: Colin Keating, “Selecting the World's Diplomat,” in *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, ed. Simon Chesterman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 52–53; see also “Kurt Waldheim, repeatedly blocked by China's vetoes, asked Thursday that his name be withdrawn,” *UPI*, 3 December 1981. On Lie: Ellen Jenny Ravndal, “‘A Force for Peace’: Expanding the Role of the UN Secretary-General under Trygve Lie, 1946–1953,” *Global Governance* 23, no. 3 (2017): 455–456.

⁴⁰ UN Charter Article 17

⁴¹ On the composition and limitations of the Fifth Committee, see also Mark Malloch-Brown, “The John W. Holmes Lecture: Can the UN Be Reformed?”, *Global Governance* 14, no. 1 (2008): 10, who describes the Committee as comprising “a group of almost 200 generally junior diplomats (one from each country) with little management experience” — a composition that is “not the best way to manage the affairs of the institution.”

⁴² Ronny Patz and Klaus H. Goetz, “The UN Core: Micromanaging Principals and Segmented Budgets,” in *Managing Money and Discord in the UN: Budgeting and Bureaucracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 132.

⁴³ NYU Center on International Cooperation, “The UN80 Solvency Imperative: Successful Reforms Need Clean Finances First,” 31 October 2025, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/the-un80-solvency-imperative-successful-reforms-need-clean-finances-first/>; UN Charter, Article 19,

⁴⁴ Ronny Patz and Klaus H. Goetz, “The UN Core: Micromanaging Principals and Segmented Budgets,” in *Managing Money and Discord in the UN: Budgeting and Bureaucracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 145

⁴⁵ “We are a bit envious of FIFA”, interview with Kofi Annan, *Der Spiegel*, July 18, 2006 <https://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-kofi-annan-we-are-a-bit-envious-of-fifa-a-427239.html>

powerful Member States retain informal influence over senior posts, limiting the SG's ability to build an aligned team.⁴⁶

These legal, political, material and institutional constraints are not temporary obstacles for particular officeholders but recurring structural features of the office, present in every tenure, even if the intensity varies with geopolitical circumstances and historical moments. Yet outcomes have not been uniform: some SGs have left a lasting imprint, while others have remained within the narrowest definition of the role. If the constraints recur but outcomes vary, leadership becomes analytically relevant.

1.3. From Constraint to Leadership: Why Some SGs Matter More Than Others

The constraints shape the office from outside, but the expectations within it are also structurally hard to reconcile, and different SGs have managed those contradictions very differently. This variation matters, and it is not a new puzzle. Cox argued already in 1969 that the quality of executive leadership may be “the most critical single determinant” of the growth in the scope and authority of international organizations.⁴⁷ His central question was whether international organizations are merely instruments of their Member States or whether they can become autonomous actors in their own right. The executive head, in Cox's account, may be the figure through whom an organization becomes more than a forum for multilateral diplomacy – something “more than the sum of its inputs”.⁴⁸ Cox's argument is useful because it avoids two extremes: a purely legal-institutional account, in which the office develops mechanically from Charter text and precedent, and a great-man theory, in which personality alone explains institutional change. Leadership operates within shifting configurations of world power and political opportunity. Kille and Scully's study of executive heads of intergovernmental organizations supports this, showing some officeholders are more willing than others to challenge or work around constraints in order to build a more substantial role for their organizations in international affairs.⁴⁹

One contradiction runs through the office's dual character as both diplomatic actor and moral authority. Diplomacy requires access to all parties, including those whose conduct is questionable; moral authority requires taking positions on what the UN Charter demands. These two are not always compatible - as Jones put it, “the occupant serves as a lightning rod for the storms and tensions of the international system”⁵⁰ The problems are rarely technical, rarely easy; although the choices are often hard: speaking out might damage access, while remaining silent may damage the authority and credibility of the office. The SG must navigate that tension in real time, on specific decisions, with few institutional mechanisms for resolution. This tension is not incidental but embedded in the founding design: as Tharoor notes, the five Charter articles governing the SG carry a “curious duality” between administrative and political work”, leaving it to each officeholder to demonstrate whether they perform more as “secretary” or “general”.⁵¹ The diplomatic-access versus moral-authority dilemma, is in part, a contemporary expression of that unresolved ambiguity – the Charter created the tension without providing a mechanism for resolving it.

The office of the SG is, in this sense, power-poor but authority rich. It lacks the instruments of command normally associated with executive leadership – coercion, independent resources,

⁴⁶ Richard Gowan, “Restoring (Some) Impartiality to UN Senior Appointments,” Brookings Institution, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/restoring-some-impartiality-to-un-senior-appointments/>

⁴⁷ Robert W. Cox, “The Executive Head: An Essay on Leadership in International Organization,” *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (1969): 205–209.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Kent J. Kille and Roger M. Scully, “Executive Heads and the Role of Intergovernmental Organizations: Expansionist Leadership in the United Nations and the European Union,” *Political Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2003): 175–198.

⁵⁰ Dorothy V. Jones, “Seeking Balance: The Secretary-General as Normative Negotiator,” in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership*, ed. Kent J. Kille (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 42.

⁵¹ Shashi Tharoor, “The Most Impossible Job’ Description” in Simon Chesterman, ed., *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33-34

hierarchical control - yet it carries symbolic, moral and institutional authority few other international offices match. In Nye's terms, what the SG lacks are the command resources of power: the ability to compel behaviour through coercion or material inducement.⁵² The office instead operates through softer forms of influence – legitimacy, attraction, agenda-setting, persuasion and the ability to frame collective problems in ways that others find difficult to ignore. But soft power alone does not fully capture it. Johnstone argues that the SG's influence is grounded in a specifically normative authority - "power of persuasion based on law" - the capacity to invoke, interpret and apply Charter principles in political uncertainty within an interpretive community of states, diplomats and international actors for whom legal arguments carry weight independent of material power.⁵³ The SG of the UN can rarely compel action, but can warn, convene, frame, persuade, interpret and give public meaning to crises.

The history of the office illustrates this variation. Hammarskjöld shaped the political doctrine of the SG's office, stretching the Charter's ambiguities into an active international role through moral authority, creative interpretation and personal courage.⁵⁴ Annan, in a different historical context, used the office as a platform for global moral leadership, helping frame and mobilise political support around the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the Millennium Development Goals.⁵⁵ Kurt Waldheim and Ban Ki-moon, by contrast, are remembered more for caution than for expanding the role.⁵⁶

The Charter each SG inherits is always the same, and always ambiguous. The ambiguity is a permanent structural feature, confronting every Secretary-General with the same choice: read the text expansively and stretch it into an active political role, or to retreat to the safer ground of chief administrative officer. Neither the text nor any subsequent revision of it resolves that choice. The person does. That choice is never made in the abstract. It is made under the constraints described above – the veto, the budget, the reappointment dynamic and dependence on Member States. All that means that reading the Charter expansively has always required not only interpretative imagination but the willingness to absorb the political costs that follow.

Circumstance is the simplest alternative explanation. Hammarskjöld operated during decolonisation; Annan after the failures of Rwanda and Srebrenica, when demand for moral leadership was acute. Context matters - no SG acts outside history. But context does not explain everything. Hammarskjöld faced Cold War paralysis and still expanded the office, while Ban Ki-moon operated in calmer conditions and still chose caution. The same Charter and similar constraints produced profoundly different outcomes. As the literature on role expansion suggests, the difference lies not only in the enabling environment but in whether the individual officeholder accommodates or challenges the constraints of the role.⁵⁷

What varies is leadership. Where formal power is weak, influence must be built through other means - framing crises, inspiring trust, absorbing pressure (even if it means being a

⁵² Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), esp. ch. 1

⁵³ Ian Johnstone, "The Role of the UN Secretary-General: The Power of Persuasion Based on Law," *Global Governance* 9, no. 4 (2003): 441–442.

⁵⁴ Tharoor, "The Most Impossible Job' Description," 35–36; Johnstone, "The Power of Persuasion Based on Law," 443, 447.

⁵⁵ Ian Johnstone, "The Secretary-General as Norm Entrepreneur," in *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* ed. Simon Chesterman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 123–124; also Abiodun Williams, *Kofi Annan and Global Leadership at the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 55.

⁵⁶ Kent J. Kille and Roger M. Scully, "Executive Heads and the Role of Intergovernmental Organizations: Expansionist Leadership in the United Nations and the European Union," *Political Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2003), 180, 182;

⁵⁷ Ellen Jenny Ravndal, "'A Force for Peace': Expanding the Role of the UN Secretary-General under Trygve Lie, 1946–1953," *Global Governance* 23, no. 3 (2017): 443–444; Kirsten Haack, "The UN Secretary-General, Role Expansion and Narratives of Representation in the 2016 Campaign," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20, no. 4 (2018): 898–900.

scapegoat) and acting with credibility when Member States are divided. The office does not diminish the importance of personality; it magnifies it.

The literature on charisma and adaptive leadership could help ask better questions about what we want to look for in a successful SG where command is limited – though neither offers a formula, since there is no simple way to make the SG post easier. Charismatic leadership, from Weber onward, points to legitimacy, recognition, communication, trust and the ability to make others want to follow. Adaptive leadership, associated with Heifetz, starts from complementary insight: authority and leadership are not the same thing, and the hardest problems require leaders mobilising actors around uncomfortable changes that cannot be imposed by formal authority.

The question, then, is not whether the SG has power in the conventional executive sense. The previous sections have shown that, largely he or she does not. The more interesting question is what kind of leadership can turn limited authority into real influence. What does charisma contribute, and where does it run out? Where does adaptive leadership matter most in a fragmented international system where Member States have to be persuaded rather than commanded? And if these qualities do matter, is that something we could look for in a candidate before they take office, rather than only recognise once they are already in it? The next chapter develops both frameworks in turn.

2. Is Charisma the Cure for SG's Powerlessness?

God answers all prayers, but sometimes his answer is "no"

Dan Brown

The previous chapter showed that the Secretary-General is asked to lead in very difficult circumstances: expectations are high, the world he or she must navigate is complicated, and the instruments to do so are few. If formal authority cannot explain the difference between officeholders, the next place to look is the person. This is where charisma enters the picture – one of the oldest and still one of the most mystified features of a leadership, and one that may help explain how a leader can generate influence when formal powers are limited. Research suggests that charismatic leaders can generate radical social changes and that charismatic leadership is associated with stronger follower motivation, satisfaction, commitment and performance.

But can it help lead the UN? Can charisma really be the answer to the Secretary-General's powerlessness? This chapter examines charisma not as charm, but as a form of recognised authority: a way in which leaders generate trust, meaning and followership where formal command is weak.

2.1. What Does Charisma Mean?

Charisma takes its name from the Greek *kharisma*, a gift of grace – something bestowed, not earned, and traditionally understood as something coming from beyond the ordinary world. Even today, there is no commonly agreed definition of charisma. Yet the concept matters because charismatic leaders have consistently been shown to affect followers' performance, motivation and satisfaction.⁵⁸ Thomas Frankl observes, charisma remains difficult to explain precisely because it is experienced before it is defined: it appears as attraction, presence, confidence, emotional intensity and the ability to persuade or inspire others.⁵⁹

Although the term had theological origins, it was Max Weber who secularised charisma and gave the term a sociological footing⁶⁰. In *Economy and Society*, Weber distinguished three types of ideal⁶¹ legitimate authority: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic.⁶² Charisma, in Weber's account, rested on supernatural, superhuman and exceptional powers, not accessible to an ordinary person but regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on this basis that the individual concerned was treated as a "leader."⁶³ Crucially, however, charisma does not operate simply because the leader claims to have such qualities. Legitimation is a social relation and these qualities matter only insofar as followers recognize and ascribe them to the leader through the imputation of special powers⁶⁴. This makes charisma relational and socially constructed rather than a fixed personal possession. A leader cannot simply possess charisma; it must be recognized and granted by the followers.

⁵⁸ Susan Reh, Niels Van Quaquebeke, and Steffen R. Giessner, "The Aura of Charisma: A Review on the Embodiment Perspective as Signaling," *The Leadership Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2017): 486.

⁵⁹ Thomas Frankl, *Subliminal Leadership: Why It Is as Important as Emotional Intelligence* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2024), Kindle ed., 142;

⁶⁰ Roger Eatwell, "The Concept and Theory of Charismatic Leadership," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 7, no. 2 (2006): 141–156.

⁶¹ Weber called these "genetic ideal types" - not descriptions of reality as it is, but constructs that capture how authority typically emerges, operates, and eventually declines.

⁶² Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), Kindle ed., 550 out of 2733, loc. 6703 out of 33642

⁶³ Ibid. page 595

⁶⁴ Paul Joosse, "Becoming a God: Max Weber and the Social Construction of Charisma," *Cultural Sociology* 8, no. 3 (2014): 266–283, also John Breuilly "Max Weber, charisma and nationalist leadership", *Nations and Nationalism* 17(3), 2011, pp. 477–499;

This raises the next question: why are followers drawn to grant such recognition in the first place? Castelnovo et al. review possible explanations for this attraction.⁶⁵ Psychoanalytically oriented scholars have traced it to unconscious processes – a longing for a parental figure offering security, or a narcissistic desire for an idealized self-image fulfilled through identification with a glorified leader.⁶⁶ Social psychologists, have explained the same attraction through concepts such as self-concept and self-esteem – identifying with a leader perceived as charismatic allows followers to feel an enhanced sense of their own self-worth.⁶⁷ Cognitive approaches add that charisma is often attribution: followers attribute charismatic qualities to leaders when they seek causality and order in a complex reality.⁶⁸

Weber's relational insight set the terms for much of the leadership scholarship that followed, but later researchers sought to demystify charisma and make it more systematically observable. Castelnovo et al, note that recent scholarship increasingly treats charisma as a phenomenon involving social, psychological and behavioural dimensions rather than simply innate trait of the leader.⁶⁹ Antonakis et al. define charisma as "value based, symbolic and emotion-laden leader signalling",⁷⁰ which is a useful formulation because it shifts attention to what leaders communicate, how they communicate it, and how audiences receive it.

Frankl adds an important perceptual dimension to this point: charisma is not received only through conscious reasoning, but also through pre-reflective impressions of tone, posture, confidence, warmth, facial expression and rhythm of speech. His distinction between Type A and B charisma helps clarify this. Type A refers to the rarer, more innate or visceral quality closer to Weber's original "gift of grace", and Type B as the more performed, communicative and learnable variant.⁷¹ This latter point is supported by Antonakis et al. who argue that charisma can be partially learned through identifiable "charismatic leadership tactics" (CLT), including metaphors, stories, contrasts, rhetorical questions, expressions of moral conviction, high goals, confidence, animated voice, facial expressions and gestures.⁷² Recent communication research similarly breaks charismatic leadership communication into vision, passion and care: leaders engage followers by articulating direction, transmitting energy and confidence, and showing individualized support.⁷³

Reh, Van Quaquebeke and Giessner strengthen this behavioural turn by showing that charisma is not only rhetorical but embodied.⁷⁴ The perception of charisma is shaped not only by what leader says, but also by how the leader's body, voice, posture, facial expression and immediate environment function as signals from which followers infer power, competence, warmth and morality. This complements Frankl's account of charisma's subliminal mechanism: where Frankl explains why charisma may land before it is consciously assessed, Reh, Van Quaquebeke and Giessner help specify what kind of cues produce that effect. At the same time these cues are not necessarily read identically everywhere: culture can shape whether

⁶⁵ Omri Castelnovo, Micha Popper, and Danny Koren, "The Innate Code of Charisma," *The Leadership Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2017):543

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 544

⁶⁹ Ibid. 544

⁷⁰ Antonakis, Bastardo, Jacquart, and Shamir, "Charisma: An Ill-Defined and Ill-Measured Gift," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 3 (2016): 304

⁷¹ Thomas Frankl, *Subliminal Leadership: Why It Is as Important as Emotional Intelligence* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2024), Kindle ed., 143

⁷² John Antonakis, Marika Fenley, and Sue Liechti, "Can Charisma Be Taught? Tests of two interventions", *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 10, no. 3 (2011): <https://api.unil.ch/iris/server/api/core/bitstreams/bc0be0af-64c6-42a6-b347-6c2f379a8e50/content>

⁷³ Linjuan Rita Men, Yufan Sunny Qin, and Renee Mitson, "Engaging Startup Employees via Charismatic Leadership Communication: The Importance of Communicating 'Vision, Passion, and Care,'" *International Journal of Business Communication* 62, no. 3 (2025): 562–582.

⁷⁴ Susan Reh, Niels Van Quaquebeke, and Steffen R. Giessner, "The Aura of Charisma: A Review on the Embodiment Perspective as Signaling," *The Leadership Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2017): 486–507, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.01.001>.

speech rate, vocal relaxation, color, warmth or even the spatial position of a leader are interpreted as charismatic.⁷⁵

This helps explain how charisma becomes effective. It operates through signals that allow followers to infer competence, benevolence and commitment. The competence alone is not enough – followers must also sense that this competence is directed toward something larger than the leader's own self-interest. Castelnovo et al. emphasize communication that offers clear direction, addresses the audience as though the message were meant for them personally, and make that message symbolically relevant to their own needs or identity.⁷⁶ Through speeches, symbolic acts and demonstrations of conviction, charismatic leaders can in this way shift followers from personal-instrumental motivation toward symbolic-collective values – from asking “what benefits me?” toward asking “what is right, or required by a shared purpose?”⁷⁷ Fiol, Harris and House describe charismatic leadership as a process of transforming social meaning, in which leaders use communication strategies to break existing frames, move followers toward a new interpretation, and realign them around a new shared norm or vision.⁷⁸ This is consistent with survey-based research showing that charismatic leadership is strongly communicative: de Vries et al. associate perceived charismatic leadership with a broader communication profile including assuredness, supportiveness, preciseness, argumentativeness and low verbal aggressiveness.⁷⁹

In Castelnovo et al. article reviewed a body of research showing that people become more open to influence under ambiguity; and that charismatic leadership tends to emerge more quickly in crisis⁸⁰. Jacquart and Antonakis refine this argument by focusing specifically on attributional ambiguity. They argue that charisma matters most when leaders' performance signals are ambiguous: when observers cannot clearly judge success or failure, they rely more heavily on whether the person appears leader-like, credible and charismatic; meanwhile when performance signals are clearly good or bad, charisma matters less because the performance signal itself becomes the main basis of judgement.⁸¹ Charisma seems to be needed, and to be most effective when ordinary sources of orientation are weak.

Taken together, these approaches suggest that charisma is more than a personal charm. It is a relational, communicative and embodied form of recognized authority: followers perceive a leader as meaningful because the leader appears to be offering competence, inspiration, care, direction and symbolic order, especially when ordinary sources of certainty are weak. This makes charisma potentially relevant to an office such as the UN Secretary-General, where command is limited and influence depends heavily on trust, perception, and persuasion. But it also raises the harder question – can charisma really help the SG operate in an office without command? Can it charm the P5?

2.2 Secretary-General the Charming in an Office Without Command

The previous section closed with a deliberately provocative question. Posed that way, the answer is almost certainly no, and the question itself misstates what charisma is and what it does in an office of this kind. To picture the Secretary-General “charming” the great powers is

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Omri Castelnovo, Micha Popper, and Danny Koren, “The Innate Code of Charisma,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2017):547.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Marlene Fiol, Drew Harris, and Robert House, “Charismatic Leadership: Strategies for Effecting Social Change,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1999): 450, 459–64.

⁷⁹ Reinout E. de Vries, Angélique Bakker-Pieper, and Wyneke Oostenveld, “Leadership = Communication? The Relations of Leaders' Communication Styles with Leadership Styles, Knowledge Sharing and Leadership Outcomes,” *Journal of Business and Psychology* 25, no. 3 (2010): 367–380; accessible: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40682659>

⁸⁰ Omri Castelnovo, Micha Popper, and Danny Koren, “The Innate Code of Charisma,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2017):547

⁸¹ Philippe Jacquart and John Antonakis, “When Does Charisma Matter for Top-Level Leaders? Effect of Attributional Ambiguity,” *Academy of Management Journal* 58, no. 4 (2015): 1054–55, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2012.0831>.

to imagine charisma as a kind of magic superpower, a notion difficult to sustain in any case, and even more so given that most previous Secretaries-General have been career diplomats/civil servants rather than prophets. In an office which is defined by a structural mismatch between the leadership expected of it and the actual power available to it, charisma may matter not as a means of overpowering those constraints, but a means of working within them.

It does so by changing the frame through which action, inaction or obstruction are understood. Fiol, Harris and House describe charismatic communication as a process of frame breaking, frame moving and frame re-aligning: leaders first loosen attachment to an existing frame, then move audiences toward a new interpretation, and finally re-freeze that interpretation around a new shared meaning.⁸² For the SG this means that charisma is not simply to “charm” the powerful, but to make a particular reading of a crisis appear morally credible, legally grounded and politically difficult to ignore. This frame-changing function becomes especially relevant in the SGs office. The SG cannot normally force Member States to act but may seek to alter the interpretive frame within which inaction, obstruction or minimalism are understood. It matters even more when the UN is so often called “irrelevant” and for example no longer occupies the center of peacemaking. Recent data reproduced by *The Economist* shows the UN’s role as a third-party mediator declining from its early post-Cold War peak.⁸³ Charisma cannot replace mediation capacity or political leverage, but it may help the SG make the UN’s interpretation of a crisis visible, credible and difficult to ignore.

This is not to argue that the UN’s reduced role in peacemaking is simply the result of a less charismatic SG. The point is narrower: if the UN is no longer automatically invited into global peacemaking process, the SG must make the office appear useful, credible and difficult to exclude. Wivel and Grøn’s point that charismatic leadership can expand a leader’s political action space is useful here: charisma can help create room for action where formal authority alone does not.⁸⁴ In other terms, this echoes Hall and Wood’s argument that executive heads of international organizations, though constrained, may still generate autonomy, broker support and avoid being sidelined.⁸⁵ In the specific context of the SG, Traub makes the same point: the office’s political latitude is “almost wholly a matter of entrepreneurship rather than rule”,⁸⁶ and the political space available to an SG varies with the officeholder’s ambitions and diplomatic gifts, as well as the willingness of the P5 to grant a role. The question is therefore not whether charisma can replace leverage, but whether it can help the SG become politically relevant enough to be included. As discussed in Chapter 1, the selection process pushes towards candidates whose independence is not too visible in advance – experienced administrators and acceptable consensus figures rather than assertive leaders. Hammarskjöld’s case exposed the weakness of that selection logic: he appeared safe at appointment but once in the office Hammarskjöld interpreted the Charter broadly rather than literally – he refused to be bound solely to the administrative side of the position and asserted his independent capabilities. He said that the SG “has a fairly well-defined right of initiative”, and that the right “goes far beyond what is described in the Charter”. His handling of the 1954-55 crisis over American airmen detained by China shows how much authority could become operational. Hammarskjöld could not compel China, the United States, or the Security Council, but he sensed that he could intervene. After General Assembly requested the SG to do what he could, he obtained language asking him to act “in the name of the UN”, and left to Beijing

⁸² Marlene Fiol, Drew Harris, and Robert House, “Charismatic Leadership: Strategies for Effecting Social Change,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1999): 450, 459–64.

⁸³ “Meet the World’s New Peacemakers,” *The Economist*, June 18, 2026, International section. Access online: <https://www.economist.com/international/2026/06/18/meet-the-worlds-new-peacemakers>

⁸⁴ Anders Wivel and Caroline Howard Grøn, “Charismatic Leadership in Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2021): 366, 370, 380.

⁸⁵ Nina Hall and Ngaire Woods, “Theorizing the Role of Executive Heads in International Organizations,” *European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 24, no. 4 (2018): 868, 873–74.

⁸⁶ James Traub, “The Secretary-General’s Political Space,” in Simon Chesterman, ed., *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 191-93.

in his own right as SG rather than as an emissary of the Council.⁸⁷ This later became known as “Peking Formula”: the idea that the SG had an affirmative obligation not merely a right to act when peace and security were threatened. The same pattern of role expansion appeared in the development of peacekeeping.⁸⁸ This is a paradox of SG charisma: it was not the quality for which Hammarskjöld was selected, but one revealed through his performance in office and recognised only in hindsight.

If Hammarskjöld shows charisma working through personal diplomacy and extension of political space, Kofi Annan shows the same capacity projected outward as public moral authority. Annan was described as an entrepreneur of political space *par excellence* who rebuilt the non-partisan standing of the office while himself becoming a celebrity and the visible emblem of the UN.⁸⁹ He changed the image of the UN to a more optimistic, morally driven one. The Millennium Development Goals show the same logic in development: Annan turned a diffuse agenda into set of shared goals, targets and deadlines that were easier to communicate and rally around.

His visibility allowed Annan to frame issues in terms states could not easily dismiss. His drive to move UN from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention is a clear example – he advanced this reframing through thematic essay of his Annual Report, what Williams called “the literary equivalent of a bully pulpit”, and which measurably shifted the prevention debate inside the UN and beyond.⁹⁰ By the same logic, arguing that sovereignty entailed responsibility and not only a right to be left alone, he helped shift the debate away from non-interference and toward what became the Responsibility to Protect.⁹¹ No, he did not compel any state to act, but he changed the frame in which inaction had to be defended.

The point is not that these formulations immediately solved the problems they named. It is that Annan gave the UN and its audiences a usable language - “culture of prevention”, “sovereignty as responsibility”, and the Millennium Development Goals themselves. These formulations mattered because they made diffuse moral concerns easier to repeat, defend and organise around.

Wivel and Grøn, in this context brings Karl Weick’s concept of organizational sense-making into the study of charismatic leadership.⁹² Weick’s begins from the fact that people always face more information that they can handle and process through rational decision-making process. Individuals and organizations often respond by working backwards: they justify their actions after the fact attaching meaning to events that have already happened. As Weick puts it, “sense-making is an attempt to produce micro stability amidst continuing change.”⁹³ Because social structures are always in flux, it is this act of justification – not the structures themselves, that creates a sense of stability: by explaining their actions with reference to particular norms, leaders reify those norms, deepening followers’ commitment to use them as tools for interpreting a disorderly world.

This means that a major part of a leader’s job not only to make good decisions, but to supply the narrative that allows followers feel that their actions were meaningful and not chaotic. People don’t need objectively correct explanations, they need usable ones – the ones that

⁸⁷ Brian E. Urquhart, “The Evolution of the Secretary-General,” in Simon Chesterman, ed., *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 20.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ James Traub, “The Secretary-General’s Political Space,” in Simon Chesterman, ed., *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 191-93.

⁹⁰ Abiodun Williams, *Kofi Annan and Global Leadership at the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 104–5;

⁹¹ Abiodun Williams, *Kofi Annan and Global Leadership at the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 104–5; also Ian Johnstone, “The Secretary-General as Norm Entrepreneur,” in Simon Chesterman, ed., *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 123–38.

⁹² Anders Wivel and Caroline Howard Grøn, “Charismatic Leadership in Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2021): 371.

⁹³ Ibid.

they can commit to, repeat and act on again the next time. Weick states that these commitments “reify”⁹⁴ norms – meaning that once the leader’s explanation is accepted, especially if communicated to a wider audience, it does not only describe the past, but it becomes the framework shaping how the next ambiguous situation is interpreted too. In a situation where traditional ways of “making sense of the world”, i.e. by a rational-legal logic, are under pressure, the demand for narratives which can be used for sense-making purposes increases accordingly.

For the SG this matters because the office is most visible precisely when events are most confusing, in the opening hours of a crisis, before anyone has agreed what it means. Charisma counts for most under exactly this ambiguity, when observers cannot yet judge success for themselves and lean instead on whoever seems credible and leader-like. Much of the office’s work compounds this: a prevented war or a quiet diplomatic opening is hard to attribute, so credibility and leader-like authority matter more precisely because success cannot be read from visible outcomes

A second feature of the office shapes how any of this reaches its audience: most people who experience the SG as a compelling figure never meet the office-holder at all. Here Breuilly’s distinction is quite useful – relational charisma is the lived bond between a leader and an actual following (a staff, movement or inner circle), while projected charisma is the image built and transmitted outward through speeches, broadcasts and institutional performance to an audience that is rarely there in person.⁹⁵ The SGs charisma is almost entirely of the second kind, closer to what Frankl calls Type B charisma (communicative, performed) than to the rarer innate “gift”.

The projected charisma reaches audiences through speeches, images, news coverage and, increasingly, social media, where the SG can speak publics directly.⁹⁶ Media is thus both a channel for the SGs moral voice and a source of leverage: used well, it gives the SG more influence over a P5 through public opinion than through any direct approach, since pressure shared by an international audience is harder to brush aside than a private request. However, a powerful state is unlikely to welcome a too-vocal SG, and a challenge as sharp as Annan’s against the pharmaceutical industry might today draw hostile pushback online. Social media sharpens the relational-projected distinction: platforms let a leader simulate the close bond – replying to comments, speaking straight to camera, appearing “unfiltered”- while the relationship stays one-to-many and mediated. The bond an audience feels with the SG can therefore be real on the “followers” side and entirely projected on the SG’s, which is exactly the distinction this section began with.

This is also why the staging matters: charismatic signals come not only from leader’s words but from voice, posture and the setting placed around them. Yet here the SG differs sharply from a head of state. A president has an army, money, and a country behind; so looking powerful is not that difficult. The SG does not and cannot rely on looking powerful, so the office has to lead instead with warmth and, above all, with moral authority.

This is why sometimes the office has been described in moral terms: the SG as a “secular Pope”, a figure who, like the pontiff, commands no hard material power and whose influence rests on moral authority instead – a register, that Troy notes, in which charisma itself is what drives that authority.⁹⁷ This also means that charisma is not entirely beyond assessment. Antonakis, Fenley and Liechti show that charismatic leadership tactics can be taught and that

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ John Breuilly, “Introduction: Weber’s Concept of Charismatic Domination,” in *Political Leadership, Nations and Charisma*, ed. Vivian Ibrahim and Margit Wunsch (London: Routledge, 2012), 3–4.

⁹⁶ The disparity in reach is striking. As of mid-2026, the current UN Secretary- General Antonio Guterres had roughly 0.67 million followers on Instagram as compared to some 44 million for the US President, Donald J. Trump, and around 300 million for the singer Beyoncé. The office that speaks for the “international community” commands a small fraction of the audience of a single head of state, and a vanishing one beside that of a global entertainer.

⁹⁷ Jodok Troy, “Two ‘Popes’ to Speak for the World: The Pope and the United Nations Secretary-General in World Politics,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 15, no. 4 (2017): 68.

such training increases ratings of leader charisma and leader-like emergence. For the SG, this matters because charisma can be looked for not only in vague personal magnetism, but in concrete communicative abilities: clarity, moral conviction, framing, stories, contrasts, voice and presence. This returns the argument to Chapter 1: moral authority is not an ornament of the SG's charisma but one of its most credible foundations, the one form of standing the office can project without the instruments it lacks.

If charisma here cannot take the form of command, it is also unlikely to work as theatrical display. The evidence points to a calmer register: perceived charismatic leadership is tied less to sheer expressiveness than to assuredness, preciseness, supportiveness and notably low verbal aggressiveness - disciplined communication rather than performance.⁹⁸ Such communication is motivational. It can make actors who are under no obligation to comply see a proposed course of action as connected to their own values, identity and sense of responsibility.⁹⁹

For an office that cannot demand agreement, this is the crux: the SG's charisma works in two registers at once: meaning and feeling. It gives disordered events a usable interpretation, and it sustains the trust and common purpose on which any response depends. Annan's pressure on the pharmaceutical firms shows both at work. He held no authority over drug pricing, yet by publicly shaming the major companies in public he helped force down the cost of antiretroviral drugs for poor countries - "shame proved more powerful than profit," as his own UNDP administrator put it.¹⁰⁰ This is charisma as the office actually uses it: not power over others, but the power to raise the cost of obstruction where no power to command exists.

This is why a charismatic Secretary-General can be valuable. Not because charisma defeats power, but because it helps convert limited formal authority into attention, trust and agenda-setting. It can make the office more visible, its interpretation of crises more persuasive, and its moral claims harder to ignore. In a period when the UN is less automatically central, that ability to generate attention and belief may be part of how the SG keeps the office politically relevant.

The irony is that the qualities that can make an SG effective may be difficult to recognise before appointment and politically dangerous once revealed. Charisma in this office is therefore not a credential neatly visible on a CV, but an authority performed and recognised in office - and often recognised most clearly when it begins to disturb the limits around the role.

Charisma, in other words, is useful but not a cure - which is why its darker side must be examined next.

2.3 Charisma: Grace of God, but Not a Saving-Grace

Charisma may inspire and move publics, civil society and smaller powers, and raise the reputational cost of obstruction but it might not move the P5 when core interests are engaged. This also refines the selection problem discussed in Chapter 1: the P5 may not screen for charisma itself, but for visible signs of future independence. The danger threshold is not the amount of charisma, but its direction: broad global causes may be tolerated, while pressure on a P5's own obstruction becomes far more threatening. Hammarskjöld's trajectory shows this clearly - the same authority that enabled the Peking Formula later provoked Soviet hostility during the Congo crisis and the Troika proposal to abolish the single Secretary-General.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Reinout E. de Vries, Angélique Bakker-Pieper, and Wyneke Oostenveld, "Leadership = Communication? The Relations of Leaders' Communication Styles with Leadership Styles, Knowledge Sharing and Leadership Outcomes," *Journal of Business and Psychology* 25, no. 3 (2010): 367–380; accessible: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40682659>

⁹⁹ Boas Shamir, Robert J. House, and Michael B. Arthur, "The Motivational Effects of Charismatic Leadership: A Self-Concept Based Theory," *Organization Science* 4, no. 4 (1993): 577–94.

¹⁰⁰ Abiodun Williams, Kofi Annan and Global Leadership at the United Nations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 63–64.

¹⁰¹ Robert W. Cox, "The Executive Head: An Essay on Leadership in International Organization," *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (1969): 211.

Boutros-Ghali's blocked second term shows the ceiling in a blunter form: an SG seen as too independent and assertive (too much "General") was simply vetoed out of office¹⁰².

If charisma is useful, it is also unstable. Weber himself treated charismatic authority as inherently short-lived: the rule of an extraordinary individual must, over time, give away to other forms of legitimacy or be combined with traditional or legal-rational authority to endure.¹⁰³ It is also conditional and reversible because "if leadership fails to benefit followers, it is likely that charismatic authority will disappear".¹⁰⁴

The very condition that makes charisma effective also makes it risky. It matters most in moments of confusion and ambiguity- but those are exactly when audiences can least judge what they are being moved toward. With no agreed account of a crisis, the SG's framing carries furthest and is tested least, as people lean on the office's credibility rather than the message itself.¹⁰⁵ This cuts two ways: a compelling frame that later proves wrong "sticks", and consent can run ahead of scrutiny. The discipline must therefore come from the SG's own judgement.

Beyond a point, charisma can tip into self-regard and the suppression of dissent, while "too much" of it can even make a leader seem less effective: strong on vision, weaker on getting things done.¹⁰⁶ For the SG one risk is sharpest: charisma works by drawing lines, and moral clarity that draws them too firmly can create polarization (insiders and outsiders).¹⁰⁷ An SG heard as taking sides runs into the Chapter 1 dilemma - moral authority traded against diplomatic access. The charisma that lets the SG speak for the international community can, overdone, cost the standing to speak to all of it.

Charisma, then, is necessary but not sufficient. It can make the office visible, credible and hard to ignore, and it can convert limited formal authority into attention and trust - but it cannot, by itself, mobilise divided actors toward difficult and contested change, and it carries risks that must be disciplined by judgement, purpose and restraint. What charisma secures is attention and a hearing; what is done with that hearing is a different problem.

To make Member States listen is one thing; to move them to do the uncomfortable is another. That is the task addressed by the literature on adaptive leadership, which begins precisely where charisma's limits are reached - from the premise that authority and leadership are not the same thing, and that the deepest problems cannot simply be framed or inspired away, but must be worked through by those who own them. It is to that framework that the next chapter turns.

3. Adaptive Leadership: What to Do With the Hearing

The previous chapter concluded that charisma can win the SG attention and a hearing. But a hearing is not yet a result. The harder question is what the office can do with that hearing once it is gained. Chapter 1 showed the mismatch at the heart of the role and there is no simple cure for that powerlessness, just as there are no simple solutions to the conflicts and collective global failures the SG is expected to confront. The principles of adaptive leadership, developed

¹⁰² Simon Chesterman, "The Secretary-General We Deserve?," *Global Governance* 21, no. 4 (2015): 509.

¹⁰³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). See also Breuilly, "Introduction: Weber's Concept of Charismatic Domination," on charisma's instability outside institutionalised settings.

¹⁰⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 242, quoted in Paul Joosse, "Becoming a God: Max Weber and the Social Construction of Charisma," *Cultural Sociology* 8, no. 3 (2014), 272.

¹⁰⁵ Omri Castelnuovo, Micha Popper, and Danny Koren, "The Innate Code of Charisma," *The Leadership Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2017): 547-548.

¹⁰⁶ Dan Ciampa, "When Charismatic Leadership Goes Too Far," *Harvard Business Review*, 2016; Jasmine Vergauwe et al., "Too Much Charisma Can Make Leaders Look Less Effective," *Harvard Business Review*, 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Anders Wivel and Caroline Howard Grøn, "Charismatic Leadership in Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2021), 372

by Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky, are useful because they begin from the absence of easy answers.

3.1. Diagnosing Adaptive Problems, Not Offering Technical Fixes

One of the central insights of adaptive leadership is that leadership and authority are not the same thing.¹⁰⁸ Authority confers status, mandate and access; leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to face difficult realities and make progress on challenges for which no ready answer exists. Crucially, that practice can be exercised *with* authority, *without* it, or as in the formulation used in Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership course - *beyond* authority. Therefore, the main point is that leadership is an activity, not a position. The SG's case is perhaps best understood as the third. The office is not without authority, it rests on the legal-rational authority of the Charter – the mandate, status and access the office is granted – and, in a capable officeholder, on the charismatic authority layered upon it. But that authority is thin relative to the problems the office confronts, so genuine leadership means working *beyond* what the mandate formally licenses: mobilizing actors the SG cannot instruct, toward changes no rule can compel.

The adaptive leadership framework distinguishes technical problems, which can be solved through existing expertise and procedures, from adaptive challenges, which require people themselves to learn, change priorities, revise assumptions and absorb losses.¹⁰⁹ This distinction is particularly relevant to the SG: some parts of the office are technical or managerial: administering the Secretariat, preparing reports, coordinating agencies, or implementing mandates already agreed by Member States. But the most consequential challenges before the SG - armed conflicts, climate action, sustainable development financing, Security Council deadlock and declining trust in multilateral institutions - are not technical in that sense. They are adaptive, because the problem, the solution and the allocation of responsibility are all contested.

This answers the diagnosis Chapter 1 left open. There the office's powerlessness appeared as its central defect, in Annan's words – a referee without cards. Although, if seen through adaptive lens, that powerlessness changes its character. If the problems were mainly technical, the absence of command power would be fatal: the leader would simply lack the instruments needed to impose the solution. But if many of the problems are adaptive, then command would not be enough even if it existed. Member States cannot be forced into trust, learning, shared responsibility or political courage by instruction from the SG. They have to be moved into a process in which they recognise the gap between aspiration and reality and begin to do some of the work themselves.

This is why diagnosis is a central leadership function. Adaptive leadership requires in its terminology "getting on the balcony": stepping back from the immediate pressures of the dance floor in order to see the wider system, the patterns of avoidance, the hidden losses and the actors missing from the conversation.¹¹⁰ For the SG, the balcony is not detachment from politics, but the ability to step back from competing accounts, listen across the Secretariat, UN agencies, the field, Member States and affected communities, and judge where the office's limited authority can still create movement. As in Chapter 2, this is close to Weick's idea of sense-making: under conditions of ambiguity, leadership partly consists in offering a plausible interpretation that allows actors to orient themselves and act.¹¹¹

The SG's adaptive task therefore begins before any proposal is made. It begins by asking what kind of problem the UN is really facing. For example, when Member States press the Secretariat for efficiency in response to the UN's liquidity crisis, is the problem that the UN is

¹⁰⁸ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), Kindle ed., 23.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Anders Wivel and Caroline Howard Grøn, "Charismatic Leadership in Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2021), 370.

overbuilt - a technical question of management - or that members are not paying what they owe on time, while a budget structure that leaves no room for reform allows them to keep doing so? In terms of adaptive leadership – part of this diagnosis is reading resistance as evidence rather than simple obstruction: veto threats, procedural delay and appeals to sovereignty are not only bad faith but signals of where the real losses lie, and what states fear they would have to give up. Also, this distinction matters because misdiagnosis produces false expectations. For example, a budget cut treats the crisis as technical, but it changes nothing fundamental: the same states can still pay late, only now against a smaller sum, and the shortfall returns the following year. This is what Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky mean when they observe a social system “is the way it is because the people in that system – at least those with the most leverage – want it that way”; what looks dysfunctional is, on the whole, working as designed for those who hold the leverage to keep it so.¹¹² Treating an adaptive challenge as a technical problem in this way encourages another report, another mandate or another reform plan, while leaving untouched the loyalties, fears and incentives that made the problem persistent in the first place.

Diagnosis is not just something that comes before leadership; it is the first act of leadership. Diagnosing wrong is not a neutral error: it spends the office's scarce authority to reports and reforms that cannot reach the problem, while the political work no one wants to own is quietly deferred. What follows from a correct diagnosis is the harder question of how the office acts on it - how a Secretary-General mobilises others toward work it cannot command.

3.2. Mobilizing and Holding the Work

Once the problem is identified as adaptive, the SG's lack of command gives us a clue of what kind of leadership the office can exercise. As discussed previously - the office is authority-rich but power-poor: as Barnett and Finnemore argue, international organisations draw real authority from their rational-legal standing and their control of information, even where they hold little coercive power over states.¹¹³ The SG leads among Member States, not above them, and cannot fall back on the chain of command that an executive inside an organisation can - which is precisely why influence has to run through convening, framing and persuasion instead.

The important practice is giving the work back. Heifetz and Laurie put it simply: responsibility for an adaptive problem must shift to the people who own it, and the leader's task is not to supply answers but to “ask tough questions.”¹¹⁴ For the SG this means that while the office can frame the problem, convene the parties and propose language, the political work itself cannot be completely outsourced to the Secretariat. Giving the work back is not a way of doing less; it is more demanding than issuing another strongly worded report. It requires resisting two standing temptations: Member States' wish to hand their problem to the SG, and the office's own wish to be seen to solve it, when the decisions, concessions and losses can only be owned by Member States themselves.

Nor should giving the work back be mistaken for passivity. Adaptive leadership does not ask the SG to stand aside and wait for Member States to act. It asks the SG to take initiative without taking over the work that only Member States can ultimately do. In adaptive leadership terms, the leader must move between the balcony and the dance floor: diagnosing the system, but also entering it through timely interventions, experiments and acts of convening. Hammarskjöld's journey to Beijing and his expansion of the office – are great examples. The Peking Formula did not allow him command to China, the United States or the Security Council. But he did not wait for perfect authority either, and created a legitimate role for the SG to act in the name of the UN, opening political space where formal power was thin. His

¹¹² Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 17.

¹¹³ Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 20–29.

¹¹⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie, “The Work of Leadership,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 2001, <https://hbr.org/2001/12/the-work-of-leadership>

authority became operational because he identified an ambiguity in the institutional system and used it to mobilize movement. Annan's leadership shows the same patterns: the Millennium Development Goals did not compel states but turned a diffuse agenda into shared goals, targets and deadlines around which coordination became possible. In neither case did the SG solve the challenge by command; he made it more legible, more public and much harder to avoid. Schroeder's analysis of executive leadership in international organizations helps clarify the logic of such action. In highly constrained settings, he argues, executive heads may need an "opposition-oriented" mobilization strategy: not simply rallying supporters, but advancing change incrementally while preventing opponents from forming a blocking coalition.¹¹⁵

The difficult part – mobilizing adaptive work provokes resistance, because it asks actors to give something up – some discretion, comfort, freedom from accountability. The same leadership that sets work in motion must therefore also hold the system steady while that work is done. In adaptive leadership this is described as regulating distress: keeping just enough pressure that the actors feel the need to change, but not so much that they are overwhelmed and disengage – "turning up the heat while also allowing some steam to escape".¹¹⁶ For the SG the distress is geopolitical: a P5 state may experience moral pressure as an attack on prestige or sovereignty, a regional bloc may read reform as lost influence, a bureaucracy may feel change as a threat to routine. The instrument for managing it is what adaptive leadership calls a holding environment:¹¹⁷ a space with enough trust and structure that adversaries can keep working through conflict rather than abandon it. For the SG that space is most likely rarely formal – it is built from relationships, the patient accumulation of trust on both sides of a dispute, the credibility of an envoy, the legitimacy of the office itself. This is the art of what was called in Heifetz's course on Adaptive Leadership as "disappointing people at a rate they can tolerate": pacing the losses so that resistance does not collapse the process. Too little pressure permits avoidance; too much invites the walkout, the veto or the withheld payment.

An important disclaimer is necessary, however. The Secretary-General is not an executive in the ordinary organisational sense often assumed in adaptive-leadership examples. Many leaders discussed by Heifetz and Laurie hold authority within a single organisation: they can reassign staff, decentralise decision-making, rewrite internal rules, or use hierarchy to force an issue. The SG can do these things only in limited and highly constrained ways within the Secretariat, and has no hierarchical authority at all over the sovereign actors whose conduct the hardest problems require to change. Giving the work back and regulating distress must therefore be done across actors whom the office cannot instruct. This makes both tasks far more fragile, and far more political, than in most organisational cases.

Hammar skjöld's own trajectory shows the cost. The same independence that made the Peking Formula possible became politically explosive when carried into the Congo. In response to what it saw as Hammar skjöld's pro-Western handling of the crisis, the Soviet Union proposed replacing the single Secretary-General with a "Troika" of three officials representing the Western, socialist and non-aligned blocs.¹¹⁸ The proposal failed, but its meaning was clear: an independent Secretary-General who pushed too far could provoke not cooperation, but an attempt to dismantle the office itself. Holding the system is therefore not safe, and it is not the same as controlling it.

¹¹⁵ Michael Bluman Schroeder, "Executive Leadership in the Study of International Organization: A Framework for Analysis," *International Studies Review* 16, no. 3 (2014): 339–361.

¹¹⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie, "The Work of Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, December 2001, <https://hbr.org/2001/12/the-work-of-leadership>; see also Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), Kindle ed., 105

¹¹⁷ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), Kindle ed., 103,

¹¹⁸ Quang Trinh, "The Bully Pulpit," in Simon Chesterman, ed., *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115; Robert W. Cox, "The Executive Head: An Essay on Leadership in International Organization," *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (1969): 211.

Seen this way, success in the office rarely looks like a settlement. More often it is the prevention of collapse: a channel kept open, a formulation accepted, a confrontation made slightly less irreversible. Adaptive work proceeds through experimentation and partial progress rather than the execution of a fixed plan. An SG initiative may fail in a narrow sense while still leaving behind language, precedents or coalitions that later become usable. Peacekeeping itself emerged through improvisation; the Responsibility to Protect through contested language, the development goals through simplification before implementation.

Charisma may make people listen; adaptive leadership asks them to take responsibility. This is also the answer to the dependency risk raised in Chapter 2. The purpose is not for Member States to admire the SG, or to wait for the office to solve problems it has no power to solve. The purpose is to turn attention, trust and moral authority into shared work: initiative by the Secretary-General, but responsibility by the actors whose choices must change. The successful Secretary-General is therefore not the one who becomes the centre of the story, but the one who helps the system do work it would otherwise avoid.

3.3. With Little Power Comes Great Responsibility: Choosing the Next Secretary-General

Drawing together the concepts this thesis analysed – the charismatic and the adaptive – we can now ask what the office actually requires of the person who holds it, and how much of that can be (should be) seen before appointment. Charisma and adaptive leadership are not rival accounts but complementary ones, and together they yield a profile of competences, these stand out, each following from the argument developed above:

1. **Moral and communicative framing** - the SG must be able not only to describe a crisis, but to give it moral and political meaning. This is where the charisma chapter feeds back into the argument. The SG's authority is partly that of a secular moral voice: not a Pope in any religious sense, but a figure whose influence rests on the ability to speak for principles larger than any one state - the Charter, human dignity, peace, prevention and the interests of those least able to command attention themselves. Charisma gives that voice reach; diagnosis gives it direction. Without diagnosis, the office may speak powerfully while pointing attention toward the wrong problem. Without inspiration, even the right diagnosis may fail to move anyone.
2. **Diagnostic judgement** – the capacity to “get on the balcony”, to read the wider system while still inside it, to tell a technical problem from an adaptive one. Misdiagnosis is one of the recurring failures of the office: treating an adaptive challenge as technical merely rearranges the furniture in a burning room: it creates the appearance of action while leaving the deeper loyalties, fears and incentives untouched.
3. **Adaptive initiative, exercised with judgement.** The SG should not wait passively for perfect authority - the office advances by offering good offices, creating channels and testing openings before permission is granted. But initiative is not fearlessness, and its cost is real. Hammarskjöld's independence over the Congo provoked a Soviet attempt to abolish the office itself; Boutros-Ghali's assertiveness cost him his post, the only Secretary-General denied a second term. The competence is therefore knowing how far the office can move before initiative becomes overreach - the judgement to read which openings can be used and which would only harden resistance.
4. **Holding steady under distress** – keeping actors in the room and under enough pressure to act without being overwhelmed. This calls for the steadiness to raise hard questions without losing composure, and it matches the disciplined, low-key register identified in Chapter 2, not theatrical display.
5. **Giving the work back.** The deepest problems cannot be absorbed into the Secretariat; Member States must own the decisions, compromises and losses. The SG's task is to resist the standing temptation - Member States' and the office's own - to convert a political problem into a technical one the office can be asked to solve. This is also the antidote to the dependency risk noted in Chapter 2: leadership that does the work for others ultimately disables them.

These five describe what would make “the most impossible job on this earth” perhaps a slightly more possible. Whether the selection process can find them is another question. Some competences are visible before appointment: framing, communication, moral presence and diagnostic reasoning can be observed in how a candidate speaks, argues, responds to questions and formulates a vision statement. The charisma literature also suggests that some communicative capacities can be developed. Others are far harder to assess in advance: judgement under pressure, the courage to take initiative, the steadiness to hold the system through distress, and the willingness to give the work back rather than seize it.

The conclusion is uncomfortable and twofold: the most important qualities are the least visible at appointment, and several are precisely what a process built around great-power acceptability is designed to screen out. The way the Secretary-General is selected may therefore be structured to select *against* the leadership the office most needs.

Conclusion

This thesis began with a paradox: an office expected to exercise global leadership yet structurally denied the power to do so – a referee who, as Annan put it, cannot raise the cards but can raise his or her moral voice. It has argued that the gap between expectation and power cannot be closed, but that it can be led from within, and that two bodies of leadership theory help explain how. Charisma allows the Secretary-General to win attention, credibility and moral pressure, where formal command is absent; adaptive leadership concerns what the office does next - mobilising actors it cannot instruct toward choices it cannot make for them. Neither is a cure for powerlessness, but together they describe the form leadership can take inside it.

But there is a deeper limit, and it returns us to where this thesis began. So long as the P5 and the wider membership want fundamentally different things from the United Nations - so long as that gap is not a problem to be solved but a condition the office must work within - no degree of charisma, and no measure of adaptive skill, will turn the Secretary-General into something the office was never designed to be.

This matters now, not only in theory. The United Nations is once again preparing to choose a new Secretary-General under the same logic that has always governed the selection: the qualities this thesis identifies as valuable are the least visible at appointment, and several are precisely what a process built around great-power acceptability tends to screen out. The office may continue to select against the leadership it most needs - but the analysis offered here suggests at least what should be looked for, and why so much of it will only ever be recognised in office.

Charisma can win a hearing; adaptive leadership can turn that hearing into shared work. Neither can close the gap that makes the role impossible in the first place. What the right Secretary-General can do is lead from inside that impossibility: with little power, but with the responsibility to use what the office does have - voice, judgement, and the patience to keep the work where it belongs: with the Member States whose choices determine what the United Nations can ultimately do.

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