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Wornie L. Reed
University of Massachusetts Boston

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Commentary

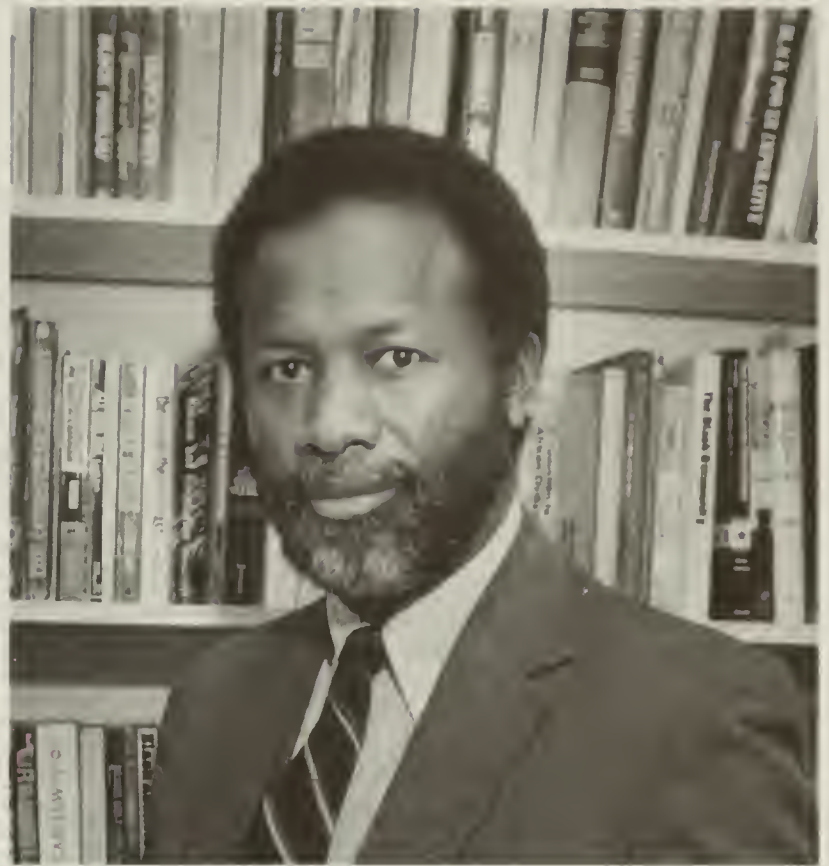
Characteristics of African-American Leadership

by
Wornie L. Reed

Discussions about the progress of African-Americans frequently involve discussions about the nature and strength of black leadership and leadership roles. Increasingly such discussions contend that with the growth and diversification of the African-American community there can be no one leader for a black America—if there ever was such a thing. Rather various individuals at different places and at different times are the leaders among African-Americans. As these arguments develop it may be useful to examine the nature of leadership in general and the historical patterns of African-American leadership in particular.

Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of sociology, described three ideal types of authority held by leaders of organizations: charismatic (religious and political heroes); traditional (kings and queens); and rational-legal, or legal-bureaucratic (officeholders—i.e., presidents and governors). According to Weber, the authority of a charismatic leader emanates from personal qualities like oratorical skills and physical attractiveness.¹ This type of leader mesmerizes his or her followers. Inevitably, however, charismatic authority becomes unstable and fritters away. Traditional authority is more permanent and is based on custom. This type of leader exercises authority through inherited status. By justifying their status in terms of traditional authority, such leaders may inject arbitrariness into their decisions. Rational-legal, or legal-bureaucratic, authority is based on impersonal rules that are rationally established by a formal organization. Authority rests in the office, not in the person. Persons with rational-legal authority are obeyed because of a general faith in the rationality of the system that gives these people the power to command.

In African-American community organizations,



leadership has always tended to be charismatic. In other words, any power exercised by a leader is the result of his or her personality. The result of this type of leadership is that the leadership seldom flows from the organization itself. Charismatic leadership may be very effective in the early stages of a movement, but for sustained efforts more institutionalized mechanisms are required.

In African-American community organizations there is occasionally a transition from charismatic leadership to traditional leadership. However, it usually does not get beyond that stage. Seldom is leadership based on legal-bureaucratic authority. According to Richard Hope, writing in *Black Organizations: Issues on Survival Techniques*, if black organizations are to successfully perform their duties in this technical world, they must relinquish both the charismatic and traditional types of authority and adopt more participatory styles of operation such as are found in legal-bureaucratic leadership.²

Endnotes

¹Gerth, H. H., & Mills, C. W. (1958). *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

²Hope, R. O. (1980). Patterns of Black Leadership. In L. S. Yearwood (Ed.), *Black Organizations: Issues on Survival Techniques*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Wornie L. Reed, Ph.D., is director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute and chair of the Black Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.