

Actually Charismatic?



Robert Downey Jr. at the UK Iron Man 3 Premiere. The Evening Standard.

Does Robert Downey Jr. control his characters, or do his characters control him?

Robert Downey Jr.- a name well-known to many. Though best known for portraying the titular character of 'Iron Man' in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, he's had a long career and through it has been responsible for many an iconic performance. Countless are drawn to his strong personality and the way in which he exudes confidence in everything he does. Indeed, it would be hard to describe Downey without using the word 'charismatic' and yet, what exactly is it that makes him appear in such a way?

Is the man himself really that charismatic? Or is it simply a by-product of the many personable characters that he portrays?

What is Charisma?

To answer this question, it may be best to start by outlining what exactly is meant when saying someone is 'charismatic'. It is a word notoriously difficult to define and yet is commonly used- often without thinking- to define people and their behaviours. It is a topic of much discussion and the lack of clear consensus of what charisma even is makes discussions about it notoriously difficult. However, as posited by Grabo *et al*, in the 2017 article

'Charisma as signal: An evolutionary perspective on charismatic leadership' charisma is often "understood as a personality trait related to charm, magnetism, or likeability". When thinking along those lines, it is then easy to understand why Robert Downey Jr. is often described as having charisma in spades.

But is it his charisma that people are being drawn in to, or is it simply transference? How unique is Downey really?

Undoubtably, one of the main aspects that draw people to him are his iconic characters that many find hard to separate from his public identity. But why does this happen? Is it simply a matter of being unable to separate actor from character, or is it just the simple fact that his better-known roles are those more similar to that of his own personality?

Stark or Downey?

As noted by Andrew Brethauer in his 2020 article *"Fans Think Robert Downey Jr. Is Just Like Tony Stark, Without The Iron Suit"* it has often been said that Robert Downey Jr. and Tony Stark are one in the same. This is not an unusual statement either, and as a matter of fact, Tony Stark is without a doubt the character which he is compared to most.

In fact, this is such a common comparison that would be remiss to not the examine the reasons why more closely.

Both are undeniably charismatic, and as observed by many- including those who know him personally- he shares many traits with his character. As stated by Jon Favreau in a 2014 interview, "the character seemed to line up with Robert in all the good and bad ways". Observable characteristics that he shares with his character include clear confidence, leadership skills, large levels of success. Plus, on a more intimate level, as observed by Downey himself during an interview on

The Late Show With Stephen Colbert, he relates to Stark's journey from playboy to hero personally. He understood playing a "guy who really needed to be handed a dose of ouch" in reference to Stark's less-than-humble beginnings and Downey's past struggles with drug abuse and both having a resulting event which placed them on a different path.

So, is the charisma that he exudes something that he personally developed and then contributed to his role? It certainly seems that way, as though the average person would only be allowed to peak at his public persona, Favreau knows him personally and still seems to agree with the general consensus- Downey is one charismatic man. Both onscreen and off.

Aside from his characters, then, what is it exactly that makes him such an alluring figure?

The Man Beyond the Hero

As detailed by Castelnovo *et al* within *The Leadership Quarterly* (2017), a prime indication of charisma is whether or not they can command the attention of others without struggle- ostensive communication, can he signal he wants to speak by signals rather than asking? This is undeniably something that Robert Downey Jr. can achieve easily. When he walks into a room, all eyes turn toward him and he basks in the attention. When partaking in an interview, either by himself or as a group, the second he opens his mouth to speak, (and at times, even prior to that), the focus swiftly turns to him. Downey never allows himself to appear uncomfortable, and if someone oversteps, he has no issue in removing himself from the situation- as demonstrated clearly by his walkout from a 2015 interview.

Robert Downey Jr. sets clear boundaries and does not allow others to push him around- the markings of a strong leader

which is undeniably a major factor in why he seems so magnetic. Strong leadership qualities are a key feature to any charismatic individual and Downey doesn't fall short. He promotes what he wants, when he wants, and is clearly the one in charge in any situation he walks into. Furthermore, a leader is nothing without his followers, and as a popular actor, he is definitely not lacking in those either. In fact, in 2008 Robert Downey Jr. was named amongst the 100 most influential people by *Time Magazine*. He has the power to influence people and the follower count to do so on a wide scale. As explained by Bass in the 1985 work 'Leadership and performance beyond expectations' in which he reworked the definition of charisma to make it measurable, transformational leadership is "used to describe leaders who by the power of their person have profound and extraordinary effects on their followers". And without a doubt, this is something that can be applied to Robert Downey Jr.

He does what he wants when he wants and knows that he can get away with it. Robert Downey Jr. moves at his own pace and doesn't allow others to dictate his views or actions. This clear demonstration of self-confidence furthers his leadership qualities and ensures that everyone knows that he is in charge. He does what he wants because he can, and that creates a magnetic pull for his followers to pursue.

Downey also ensures that his confident and forward nature is soothed with enough humility to make sure that he is still likable. People who only have the confidence and none of the clever delivery are unable to be perceived as charismatic. It makes them appear rude and full of themselves, and Robert Downey Jr. is clever enough to realise that he can be confident in himself and talk about his accomplishments, as long as he also balances it out so that the confidence isn't overwhelming. Downey is aware that he

isn't perfect and doesn't try to hide the fact- this is a very humanising quality that just endears people to him further and increases his followership and therefore his levels of overall charisma.

Charisma: yes, or no?

So, is Robert Downey Jr. really responsible for his own charismatic tendencies?

It would be a mistake to assume that his public persona is the person that his real-life acquaintances get to meet- after all, one 2019 Times of India interview with director Joe Russo should dissuade anyone from that notion: "He has a public persona that he slips into, which is like Tony". However, it would also be a mistake to discount it completely.

Charisma is a skill, and the question is not whether Downey has it or not- as it's obvious that he does, a persona doesn't take away from that- but rather if it's something he uses independently, away from emulating and promoting his current project.

In answer to this, arguably- yes, he does. Regarding all the public appearances he has made and all the discussion stemming from people who know him, it appears it isn't so much a result of transference- rather a result of his chosen public persona. Who is portrays himself as in public is still part of him and still stems from his overall person- after all, there are plenty of non-charismatic actors portraying charismatic characters who prove that fame and followers do not mean automatic charisma. They may have the skills to fake it on-screen but it doesn't always translate to it seeming natural for themselves. Downey's private persona of course is different and unless you know him personally, it would be impossible to determine how charismatic he is. However, it is clear that he has perfected the skill and therefore no matter who he is with or what the situation is, if he chooses

to, he would be able to turn on the charm and dazzle those around him.

After all, it doesn't matter what character he portrays, in the end he will always be a charismatic enigma. It's now just a question of whether he will ever get out from under the shadow of the Marvel Universe and be seen as his own person away from Tony Stark.