

An Overview of Leadership

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March 2003

Revised February 2012

What is Leadership?

Leadership is like beauty: difficult to define, but most people will recognise it when they see it. One can interpret leadership broadly and state that “. . . a leader is someone who touches another’s future” (Champlin, 1993:24). With this interpretation, leaders are clearly recognizable as those who affect the direction a person or a group (e.g. parish) will take. Peter Senge, writing in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, concurs with this understanding and notes that it is easy to perceive both good leadership and the absence of good leadership. “You can always sense the presence or absence of leadership when you begin working in a new organization. In some cases, you get a sense that something is off-kilter, though everyone is saying the ‘right’ things. You also know that *they* know something’s off-kilter . . .” (1994:65)

In a chapter entitled “There Are No Leaders, There Is Only Leadership,” Richard Farson states that leadership is the less the property of a person than the property of a group. He notes the examples of leaders who successfully move from one organization to another even though they may not be experts in the second organization’s business. They are able to do this because they call forth the skills and creativity of those already within the organization. He concludes that in “. . . a well-functioning group, the behavior of the leader is not all that different from the behavior of other responsible group members.” (1996:144-145)

Eric Law reminds us that leadership is perceived differently in various cultures. He astutely notes that “. . . how a person is expected to manage a group is dependent on the group members’ perception of their own power. How do you lead a group of people who believe they are equal to you? How do you lead a group of people who defer to you for all the decision making because you are the authority figure? How do you lead a group of people whose perception of their power spreads from one end of the power perception continuum to the other?” (1993: 30) Leadership in a multicultural setting is considerably more complex than leadership in a culturally homogeneous group.

Characteristics of Good Leadership

It is useful to compare the thoughts of two experts – one writing from a secular viewpoint and the other writing from a religious perspective – as they list the characteristics that a good leader should have. Warren Bennis is a professor of business administration and a consultant to multinational companies and governments. He sees leaders as having five major characteristics.

1. A Guiding Vision. The leader has a clear idea of what he or she wants to do – professionally and personally – and the strength to persist in the face of setbacks, even failures.

2. Passion. The leader has an underlying passion for the promises of life, combined with a very particular passion for a vocation, a profession, a course of action. The leader loves what he or she does and loves doing it.
3. Integrity. The leader has true integrity, which is composed of self-knowledge, candor, and maturity.
4. Trust. Trust is not so much an ingredient of leadership as it is a product. It is the one quality that cannot be acquired, but must be earned.
5. Curiosity and Daring. The leader wonders about everything, wants to learn as much as he or she can, is willing to take risks, experiments, and tries new things. (1989:39-41)

Loughlan Sofield, a brother of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity, is an internationally recognized author and consultant of ministry and personal development. Donald Kuhn, a specialist in leadership development, serves as a retreat director, workshop leader and group facilitator. In *The Collaborative Leader* Sofield and Kuhn list two dominant characteristics that true leaders have:

- Intense integrity accompanied by the courage necessary to pursue integrity.
- Generativity motivated by a concern for others. (1995:27)

While coming from different experiences and perspectives there is some commonality in characteristics. Both sets of authors explicitly list integrity. Bennis adds vision, passion, trust and curiosity and daring while Sofield and Kuhn only add generativity. While not demanding that the two lists be congruent, one could perceive Bennis' additional characteristics as necessary qualities for Sofield and Kuhn's generativity to take place.

A Guiding Vision

Bennis explicitly lists a guiding vision, above, as one of the characteristics of a good leader. This quality is identified again and again by authors writing about leadership. The religious researcher and pollster George Barna begins his guide for leaders by quoting Proverbs 29:18 – “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” He notes that unless people have a clear understanding of where they are headed, the probability of a successful journey is severely limited. “Unless you attend to His call upon your life and ministry, you are likely to experience confusion, weariness, dissipation and impotence.” (1992:11) This topic is so important to Barna that he writes an entire book, *The Power of Vision*, on the importance of capturing and communicating a vision of leadership.

Sofield and Kuhn equate vision with an in-depth understanding of where a group is going. One might be tempted to think that vision would more important for the business world, where success is easily measured by financial profit, than for the Christian Church. But Sofield and Kuhn insist that “church organizations . . . are no different from any other – they languish when they fail to establish a vision which is shared, clear, realistic, and dynamic. (1995:56) They decry the focus by many Christian leaders on maintenance instead of mission and vision. These leaders may merely solve current problems instead of actively searching for future opportunities.

Joseph Champlin, an author nationally known for his pastoral leadership, writes from the perspective of a Catholic priest. Champlin would agree with Bennis, Barna, and Sofield and

Kuhn about the importance of a guiding vision. “Above all else, good leaders are visionaries. They see beyond what is to what might be, could be, ought to be. They imagine the possibilities, recognize the potential. But, more than that, they inspire others to dream along with them. Together, the leaders and their colleagues shape their individual hopes and aspirations into a single vision for tomorrow. Then, with the dream defined, the leader reinforces it again and again, urging and stimulating everyone to sustain the effort until the dream becomes a reality.” (1993:37)

Self-knowledge and Maturity

How does one go about creating a vision and then articulating it clearly so that others may appropriate it? While there are strategies that may be employed – several are mentioned below – the key task for a person who wishes to become a leader is to grow in self-knowledge and maturity. It is not clear whether vision precedes self-knowledge, follows it, or develops simultaneously with it. Most authors agree, however, that self-knowledge and maturity are essential. Without these qualities a person may serve in a leadership position but it will be readily apparent that he or she is not a true leader, and will not have the ability to move people’s hearts and minds.

After conducting in-depth interviews with 29 people that he considered “outstanding leaders,” Bennis summarizes two points of consensus among the leaders. First, leaders are made not born. This means that these people needed to work hard to develop their insights and leadership ability, and to understand their lives within a larger context. Secondly, no person who is a leader actually had a goal of becoming a leader. Their goals were to express themselves fully and freely. That is, they had no interest in proving themselves but a great interest in expressing themselves. Bennis notes “the difference is crucial, for it’s the difference between being driven, as too many people are today, and leading, as too few people do.” (1989:5) Self-knowledge and maturity are assumed to be present within each point of Bennis.

In *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* Peter Senge writes about the construct of a field, an unseen pattern of structure that is real enough to influence behavior. He writes that the primary task of leadership is to develop a field that encourages learning. This may be the only way a leader can influence or inspire others. The need for self-knowledge and maturity become apparent when one realizes that a leader does not look first to bring other people on board, i.e. to his or her vision. Instead the leader attends to appropriate details within one’s sphere and people eventually come on board by themselves. (1994:65)

John Engels writes that not only must the leader have self-knowledge and maturity but he or she must recognize that the very purpose of leadership is to promote the maturity and responsibility of everyone in the organization. Leaders do this by: 1) taking care of themselves emotionally and physically; 2) not being afraid to challenge others; and 3) resisting the role of over-functioner (doing for others what they could be doing for themselves). (1999:4-5)

The Pastor as Leader

Canon Law designates the pastor of the parish to be its prime leader. Though the pastoral care of a parish may be entrusted to others in cases of need (cc. 516.2, 517.2), the ordinary expectation is

that a parish will be led by an ordained priest, designated as pastor (c. 515.1). The pastor is to "... reside within the parish (c. 533), share the lives of the families entrusted to their care, get to know them personally and advise, support and assist them, especially the poor and afflicted among them (c. 529.1). This personal relationship and rapport with the people is at the heart of good pastoral care." (Coriden, 1997:75-76) Sofield and Kuhn strongly affirm this last point. They state that the credibility of pastoral leadership rests on people's sensing deep, personal faith and commitment within their leaders. (1995:37) Cieslak showed that the more a pastor participates in civic and ecumenical affairs, the more likely it is that his parishioners will become involved in the life of the parish. He theorised that the pastor serves as a model for involvement by his activities outside the parish, also creating the necessary structures and atmosphere within the parish to encourage parishioner involvement. (1983:112)

While the diocesan bishop may designate a priest to be the parish leader (i.e., pastor), leadership requires some skills and attributes that do not necessarily come with ordination. This is especially true since the Second Vatican Council, which necessitated a large change in the role of the pastor. Veteran pastor, Msgr. John Murphy, noted that the parish priest "... trained before Vatican II was schooled quite deliberately to be 'in charge' of the parish. He would spend some years as an assistant, following the dictates of another, and then he would realize his dream and become a *pastor*, responsible only to God and bishop (not always in that order). Everyone else would be responsible to him Vatican II and the innovations introduced after it produced a monumental change in the role of the priest as leader in the parish." (1995:50) The pastor was expected to develop the skills and structures that invited open dialogue, shared decision-making and effective action. The goal of leadership, then, was not simply to provide service for the people of the parish, but to enable them to minister to one another and to bring their Christian commitment to everything they do. (NCCB, 1980:16-17)

Though the role of the priest changed after the Council, the importance of pastoral leadership did not change. Reflecting on more than 25 years of experience in helping parishes address leadership issues, Sweetser and McKinney expected the impact of the pastor to lessen with the new emphasis on shared leadership and collaborative ministry. This did not happen. "The style and tone may have changed, but the influence is still just as great." (1998:2) This viewpoint was affirmed by Philip Murnion. At a symposium on the parish he related how "the NCCB Parish Project confirmed the view that nothing affects a parish more than its pastor." (Byers, 1986:58) And the National Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote that the foremost leader of the parish remains the pastor. The bishops called the pastor "... the point of unity between the worship of the parish and its activities, between the spiritual aspects of the parish and the organizational, between the specific character of the parish and the mission of the larger church." (1980:16)

How have priests adapted to changing leadership roles? Murphy notes that recently ordained priests may lack good preparation for leading a parish, including management training and leadership skills. "Letting go of a past tradition where the pastor ruled in the parish, some of today's priests may lack the confidence and the ability to take up the new, firm, visionary, skilled leadership demanded by our times and, remembering our focus, the new structures of parish life." (1995:52) This need for a new kind of skilled pastoral leadership was also raised by Philip Murnion. After noting that there has been "... serious changes in styles of leadership since

Vatican II,” he calls for a style of leadership that is collegial and consultative. He notes “. . . the dynamics of leadership deserve careful attention.” (Byers, 1986: 58)

It may be interesting to note that such a reinterpretation of “good pastoral leadership” has taken place not only in the Catholic Church but also in most Christian denominations. The driving force for a reinterpretation of leadership was not Vatican II, since the Council was not applicable to non-Catholic denominations; the driving force was a change in societal expectations. Loren Mead explains that these changing leadership roles and loss of role clarity among many Christian clergy often leads to high stress and burnout. “Most clergy come to their vocations from a deep faith and commitment. Trained in institutions that were generated by the mid-set of Christendom and ordained into denominations and congregations predominately shaped by Christendom, they discover that the rules have been changed in the middle of the game. Instead of being front-line leaders and spokespersons for mission, they now feel they are being asked to take a back seat to newly awakened laity. The role they sought out and trained themselves for no longer fits what they have to do. Many are unsure how to give leadership in the new time.” (1991:34) Writing from the Catholic perspective, Sofield and Kuhn note that many priests are relatively comfortable with the concept of lay ministry, but there is not generally a corresponding acceptance of the concept of lay leadership. They advocate using the expertise of the laity, conveying a sense of their being valued, not perceiving offers of assistance and participation as intrusion, and empowering the laity to the maximum extent possible. (1995:105)

The Importance of Pastors

One of the most traumatic occurrences in the life of a parish is the changing of parish leadership. The change may be expected, as when a pastor moves from a parish at the end of a defined term. Or the change may be sudden and unexpected, as when a pastor dies or is incapacitated. Sometimes the change may be seen as positive, when an unpopular priest moves, or negative, when the parish loses a very popular pastor. In all cases the change affects many people. Most affected is the staff, followed by lay parish leadership (e.g., pastoral council and finance council), followed by involved parishioners. Even people who worship occasionally at the parish are affected to some degree.

Many Protestant denominations understand the importance of a transition period between pastors. They spend a great deal of time and effort trying to help both the pastors and the parishes through the transition. (Sweetser and McKinney, 1998:15) Sweetser and Forster outline a transition process to help Catholic parishes prepare for a new pastor. This process centers on the role of transition committee that prepares a “state of the parish” report that is sent to the diocese. The report is meant to help prospective pastors understand basic parish facts as well as its character, customs, traditions and plans for the future. (1993:73)

A successful approach to the transition period is crucial to the development of good pastoral leadership. Sweetser and Forster report that Loren Mead said “. . . the six months before and after a change of pastor provided the most important opportunity for parish renewal. Once a pastor is appointed and settles in, not much substantial change will happen. Programs will come and go, liturgies shift focus, but the tone and overall direction will remain constant until there is another change in pastor.” (1993:70)

Helping Pastors Grow in Leadership

Due to maturity, experience, and personality some priests make better leaders than others. Yet all priests can be helped to grow in leadership. Several ideas are presented here.

Developing a Vision. The importance of a guiding vision was stressed by Bennis, Barna, Sofield and Kuhn, and Champlin. In order to develop a vision, conceive powerful goals, communicate them to others, and gain enthusiastic acceptance, Champlin advocated a three-pronged approach.

1. Gather grass-roots input. Unless people buy into the dream it will not significantly motivate them.
2. Keep repeating the dream. Keep the people focused on the vision by repeating it again and again.
3. Express the vision in some captivating way. Use symbols and appeal to the senses.

(1993:46-49)

Necessity of Strategic Thinking. Peter Senge advocates strategic thinking as a way to grow in leadership. He notes that it is crucial for a leader to articulate to himself or herself: what is truly essential and what is secondary? Good strategic thinking also addresses dilemmas that might otherwise go unnoticed. Such dilemmas arise from conflict among competing goals and norms:

- We want to distribute power and authority, but we also want to improve control and coordination.
- We want organizations to be more responsive to changes in their environment and yet more stable and coherent in their sense of identity, purpose, and vision.
- We want high productivity and high creativity. (1994:16-17)

Using the Parish Pastoral Council. A pastor who is not utilizing the pastoral council to help create a parish vision is probably carrying too much of a burden. Dennis O’Leary reminds us that “the primary responsibility of the parish pastoral council is to assist the pastor in directional and strategic planning. If planning in these two areas is done well, administrative and program planning by the pastor, staff and program leaders will naturally follow and the result will be a more focused and integrated approach to ministry.” (1995:32)

Eileen Tabert focuses on the need for good pastoral council training and notes how successful organizations put a premium on training. She writes of a practical parish leadership with five components:

- Recruitment. Good recruitment skills are the beginning of leadership. Good people are needed to be members of a leadership team, which develops a parish vision and ultimately implements it.
- Affirmation. It is especially important to affirm new council members, as it sets the tone for all subsequent parish volunteer work
- Training. Good training cannot be overemphasized. An investment in quality training guarantees a committed, effective and productive leadership group.
- Empowerment. One council goal should be to involve as many people as possible in parish life. People who are uninvolved usually have not been asked properly to become involved or have been asked at the wrong time.

- Dismissal. It is difficult for lay parish leaders to remain enthusiastic, committed and creative year after year. There should be a formal process to “dismiss with joy.” (1995:73-87)

The theories presented above about general leadership and pastoral leadership may seem valid to people involved in parish ministry. Yet the scientific method demands that theories be tested with objective research and data. Testing confirmed the validity of concepts of leadership and pastoral leadership as they presented themselves in three parish issues:

- the importance of pastors;
- pastoral leadership and parish vitality; and
- pastoral leadership style and parish preferences.

2012 Update. An excellent resource for clergy and laity to develop as effective leaders in a way that is consistent with both Jesus’ own teaching and example, as well as the best modern research regarding effective leadership, is *The Catholic Vision for Leading Like Jesus: Introducing S³ Leadership – Servant, Steward, Shepherd* by Owen Phelps, Ph.D. In a concise (144 page) format, Dr. Phelps outlines how to address issues of the heart, head, hands and habits to become an influential servant leader, and then how to round out one’s leadership aptitude by developing the perspectives of steward and shepherd. These concepts are also presented in one- and two-day Encounter seminars that have been presented in parishes throughout the U.S. and overseas. For more information, go to www.YeshuaLeader.com or write to Here4U@YeshuaLeader.com.

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