



Dimensions of Leadership

Capacities, Skills and Competencies for Effective Leadership

A report from a
Think Tank on
Leadership Development
Sponsored by the
Leadership Conference
Of Women Religious

Introduction

A group of current and former leaders of religious institutes gathered in Washington, DC, January 10-12, 1997, at LCWR's invitation for a Think Tank on Leadership Development. Their task was to identify capacities, skills and competencies required for effective leadership in the present environment and into the future.

Shared assumptions were:

- Leadership is an organic developmental process.
- Designated leaders bring to their ministry certain well-developed skills. They have demonstrated a capacity for growth in others.
- Spirited leadership draws on more than skills and competencies. As with religious life itself there is always at work the "more" which is mystery, grace, and the power of God's spirit.

Furthermore, participants recognized that at the core of leadership is the ability to reflect on, digest and learn from one's experience and do so in solitude and in community.

While this think tank focused on the needs of current leadership, the group was conscious of the need to develop future leaders and to whet an appetite for the challenge that leadership provides. It is LCWR's hope that this effort will stimulate generative conversations among the general membership as well as within leadership teams.

Exploring the Environment: Present and Future

In a time of unprecedented change, it is essential that religious leaders have acute awareness of the impact of global forces on the social, economic, cultural and spiritual environment. Such a milieu demands expanding consciousness of the world and a recognition of the reality of limited and diminishing resources.

Widening gaps between rich and poor, world-wide evidence of poverty and violence, increasing vulnerability of the frailest members of society, rampant materialism and pervasive spiritual hunger cry for persistent attention to social justice. Institutional overload, technological explosion, alienation and individualism characterize this era as an "age of anxiety." Concurrently, the church is engaged in struggle and internal division. These realities mandate prophetic Gospel response.

In the context of such an environment religious leaders encounter critical choices. They must play a larger role in arenas that are shaping the environment. Rather than being debilitated by world crises and the experience of constant chaotic change, effective religious leaders will learn to befriend change rather than resist or merely tolerate it. They will be lifelong learners and the institutions to which they dedicate their energies will be learning organizations marked by high levels of participation and inclusion.

Technology will be viewed by these leaders as both a resource and an opportunity for building relationships, bridging gaps and making information accessible at all economic levels. The spirituality of effective leaders prompts them to view technology as a tool to be used for the enhancement of all peoples, rather than for domination.

Effective leaders grasp the significance of the human quest for meaning, purpose and order. They bring to the outer world the strengths of their inner worlds and unleash spontaneity, diversity and creative imagination in others. Their sensitivity to the challenges of their times and to humanity's deep spiritual longing compels them to sharpen the relevance of their congregations' charisms and commitment to contemplation and harmony with the earth. Leaders now and in the future will be particularly attentive to the urgent needs of women and children and to learning from indigenous cultures. Belief in the meaning and purpose of religious life will move them to mentor future leaders, promote theological education and cultivate openness to pluralism and multiculturalism.

Dimensions of Leadership

Symbolic/Meaning-Making Dimension

A core dimension of spiritual leadership is an ability to connect the richness of the inner world with the significant challenges and movements of a given time. The symbolic/meaning - making dimension attends to urgent human longings for God, wholeness, meaning and harmony.

Leaders who develop this symbolic/meaning - making dimension of leadership can:

- Articulate deep rootedness in God, their charism and the Gospel
- Connect the soul of the congregation with the soul of the global church and the soul of the world
- Articulate a dynamic sense of the charism in a compelling way in shifting and complex times
- Draw on the faith of the members
- Look reality in the face and also communicate hope
- Draw wisdom out of information/data and articulate to relevance
- See below facts to the significance of patterns, trends and events

- Recognize and draw upon the potential of multiple perspectives of reality.

Such leaders have a capacity for theological reflection and social analysis. They develop skills for their public role: writing, speaking, presenting self and community in a credible way. They are able to achieve results in service of deeply held convictions. They are women of courage with the ability to act in spite of obstacles.

Relational Dimension

Spiritual leaders place a high priority on developing and animating relational skills in themselves and others.

Leaders who develop the relational dimension of leadership have a capacity:

- To know and to be at home with one's self
- To project a non-anxious presence
- To develop and maintain healthy relationships
- To listen, influence, inspire trust, acknowledge and reward service
- To grow and develop as a team
- To communicate that people matter and to express and demonstrate affection
- To form a "we" that includes and vivifies the members
- To draw members into dialogue around issues that matter, conflictual topics, decisions to be made, what membership means
- To facilitate groups and ongoing learning
- To relate with multiple publics as a spokesperson
- To animate and mobilize the collective energies and direction of the group.

Such leaders develop skills for being a change agent, for planned change, process and networking. They have an ability to deal with differences, to live with diversity and to distinguish life-promoting, life-denying and neutral realities. They have a capacity for cross-cultural consciousness and global awareness.

Organizational/Structural Dimension

Spiritual leaders have an ability to perceive the culture and climate of the group and to shape learning organizations.

Leaders who develop the organizational/structural dimension of leadership have an ability:

- To understand the life of organizations including legal and financial aspects

- To bring the agenda of the congregation to life
- To coordinate disparate pieces as a cohesive whole and to focus strategies
- To administer effectively
- To negotiate, mediate, listen, delegate, collaborate, facilitate, prioritize, integrate, make decisions, call the questions, and think strategically
- To resolve conflict and work with diminishment
- To integrate and effectively allocate resources
- To work with the institutional church (i.e. to understand our relationship with it, how to critique it and to claim our place in it.)

Discussion Questions

- How do the shared assumptions reflect my experience of leadership?
How do these assumptions describe my observation of my mentors in religious leadership?
- What aspects of the environment resonate with the challenges I face as a leader?
- What qualities will I need to develop as I continue my leadership in order to meet the expectations described here?
- How does my practice of leadership make use of the symbolic/meaning-making qualities described here?
- How do I/my leadership team reveal the relational dimension qualities described here?
- How will I/my leadership team continue to perceive the culture and the climate of my/our group in order to shape a learning organization?

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