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Church can learn a lot from 'servant leadership'

Tom Gallagher | Aug. 21, 2010

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Mission Management

Jesuit Fr. William J. Byron is a university professor of business and society at St. Joseph?s University, Philadelphia. He was president of The Catholic University of America from 1982-92. His book Next-Generation Leadership will be published in the fall. NCR *contributor Tom Gallagher spoke with Byron about ?servant leadership? as the optimal model of leadership for the church.*

***NCR*: The concept of ?servant leadership? seems to arise periodically in church settings, but one of its major proponents was a businessman.**

Fr. William Byron: The notion of servant leadership was popularized by Robert Greenleaf [1904-90], whose book bearing that title is a classic. Greenleaf was a vice president of AT&T and a student of organizations, and a consultant to businesses large and small.

How did Greenleaf define servant leadership?

Let me quote from Greenleaf?s book: ?A fresh critical look is being taken at the issues of power and authority, and people are beginning to learn, however haltingly, to relate to one another in less coercive and more creatively supporting ways. A new moral principle is emerging, which holds that the only authority deserving one?s allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. Rather they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants. To the extent that this principle prevails in the future, the only truly viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant led.?

How is Greenleaf?s servant leadership model juxtaposed against the isolated CEO model?

Since 1950, I?ve been a member of the Society of Jesus, and in 1961 was ordained a priest. I mention this before quoting the following paragraphs from Servant Leadership because they may appear to the Catholic eye as critical of the way authority is structured in the church, although I don?t think Greenleaf had the church in mind when he wrote them:

?To be a lone chief atop a pyramid is abnormal and corrupting. None of us is perfect by ourselves, and all of us need the help and correcting influence of close colleagues. When someone is moved atop a pyramid, that person no longer has colleagues, only subordinates. Even the frankest and bravest of subordinates do not talk with their boss in the same way that they talk with colleagues who are equals, and normal communications patterns become warped. ... The pyramidal structure weakens informal links, dries up channels of honest reaction and feedback. ... This in time defeats any leader by causing a distortion of judgment, for judgment is often best sharpened through interaction with others who are free to challenge and criticize.?

Greenleaf?s analysis is quite sharp, even harsh. As a Catholic priest, how do you interpret his message?

?Abnormal and corrupting?? Greenleaf is not saying that this has to be the way; he is simply suggesting that there is a high probability that the lone chief at the top will be out of touch and thus less effective as a leader. Given my Catholic background, I naturally thought of the pope when I first read those words and winced at the scenario Greenleaf lays out. It prompted me to reflect on the organizational structure of my church. I accept that structure, of course, but recognize that it is staffed by human beings and they are subject to the weaknesses, foibles and failings that Greenleaf observed in his study of organizations.

I have long felt that misunderstanding and possible offense in response to papal pronouncements might be prevented by closer collaboration on the part of the pope with a good editor, or pre-pronouncement consultation with advisers who are invited and encouraged to say what they think. There is nothing in the hierarchical structure of the church to prevent this, but it will not happen unless the pope wants it to happen.

A superior general of a religious order runs a similar risk.

It is interesting to note that Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, incorporated into the constitutions of his order a requirement that the superior general have an official admonitor -- ?some person who ... after he has had recourse to God in prayer ... [will] admonish the general about anything in him which he thinks will be more conducive to greater service and glory to God. The general in turn ought to be content with what is provided.?

The admonitor is selected by the same delegates that elected the general. Note that the admonitor has no authority, but enjoys the confidence of the general. He has access to the general at any time. And note further that the general ?ought to be content? to have an admonitor.

The lesson here for the rest of us is that every leader should have someone who is willing and able to tell him or her in confidence and with absolute freedom the unvarnished truth.

Can you imagine a pope or bishop inviting an ?admonitor? into his office?

Those called to serve the people of God as bishops have to remember that they walk on feet of clay and rely on the power of prayer and sacraments to protect them from the dangers of earthly ambition and corrosive pride. Regrettably, some bishops fail to understand the shepherding nature of their episcopal role; they attempt to rule rather than lead the ?flock? that has been entrusted to their care. That simply doesn?t work, and it is regrettable that the bishop is often the last to notice.

The New Testament has plenty to say about being a ?servant leader.?

That?s right. I don?t want to give the impression that I?m out to beat up on the Catholic hierarchy; I just want to acknowledge that those of us who love and live in a hierarchical church should welcome the self-imposed discipline of servant leadership. It protects against the temptation to forget an important principle articulated by

Jesus, our leader, who described himself as coming among us ?not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many? [Matthew 20:28].

Any leader is at risk of this disconnect, no matter the organization type.

Exactly. Extensive research on leadership has produced this sobering conclusion: The higher up the ladder a leader climbs, the less accurate his self-assessment is likely to be. The problem is an acute lack of feedback. There is a clear and constant danger of the leader being out of touch. That means being cut off from needed information and honest criticism. Every leader needs expert advice, and he or she has to be humble enough to accept it.

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*?s Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Additional resources

Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership
www.greenleaf.org

Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness* (Paulist Press, 1977)

Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* (Harvard Business School Press, 2004)

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