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Lessons from Pope Francis in Managing a University

John Petillo, President of Sacred Heart University

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Pope Francis is trending as the model for transforming corporate cultures through humble leadership. His actions and words are "liked" on Facebook and hashtagged on Twitter as guideposts for a new business model. The pope is making moral leadership cool.

In less than two years, his style has inspired a book, articles in *Forbes*, *The Economist* and the *Wall Street Journal* and landed him at the top of *Fortune* magazine's list of "The World's 50 Greatest Leaders." [<http://fortune.com/2014/03/20/worlds-50-greatest-leaders/>]

It's too early to tell if the pope's example will revolutionize a corporate world he has criticized for marginalizing the powerless. As a Roman Catholic University, Sacred Heart is perhaps more attuned than most colleges to what might be called "The Management Secrets of Pope Francis," but they can be applied to institutions of higher learning anywhere. His leadership happens to dovetail with our commitment to guide students through "The Human Journey" [<http://www.sacredheart.edu/academics/corecurriculum/commoncorethehumanjourney/>] encouraging them to find their place in the world by addressing matters that will define their identities. Here are six lesson plans colleges can distill from Pope Francis' model:

1. Lead by quiet example: Pope Francis adheres to the Jesuit principle of working shoulder to shoulder with those you lead. Educators can't groom rich relationships with students from behind a computer. We need to get out there. Francis inspires because of his common touch. He puts himself at risk with traditionalists when he poses for selfies or tweets, but he is inviting others into his circle while putting action behind his words that "God is not afraid of new things." Through his travels, Francis underscores the message that the Church is not a building. Similarly, a school is not a campus. We must be present for this part of "The Human Journey." Silence is powerful. Speak softly and listen with the volume up.

2. Change, but don't break, the model: Inertia is a threat to any institution. Pope Francis is gently rebranding the Church without losing a sense of what has worked for 2,000 years. The Church has survived challenges because its followers -- its clients -- believe in it. Francis is simply getting back to basics. Even his decision to choose the name of St. Francis of Assisi was a profound reminder that we must never neglect the poor. With simple acts of being honest and true, he has proven transformation does not have to be a sluggish process. Academic environments should thrive on imagination and change and embrace fresh voices. Pope Francis boldly acknowledged the "pathology of power" at the Vatican and appointed managers with no ties to Rome. The reality in academic settings is that we sometimes need to shake up our lineup lest stagnant leadership become entrenched in a bureaucracy of its own design.

3. Don't be opaque, and act swiftly and decisively when faced with tough decisions: Any message, especially the difficult ones, must be clear. Waiting to address a crisis is a routine misjudgment of uncertain leaders. Pope Francis has proven there is power in not shying away from confronting controversy. Good management is not the same as nice management. The Church was threatened by a troubled reputation regarding its handling of sexual abuse accusations and financial mismanagement. Francis met with victims of abuse and appointed a papal advisory commission headed by Boston Cardinal O'Malley. His creation of the Secretariat of the Economy was designed to bring transparency to Church finances. The so-called "Bishop of Bling" (the Bishop of Limburg in Germany) was hardly the poster child for Francis' message given his \$20,000 bathtub. Francis removed him from his diocese. This is a pope who means business. Leaders in the academic world sometimes face the reality of high-profile incidents that threaten to tarnish the reputation of a school. Have any benefitted from attempting a cover-up?

4. Know your limits: No leader or institution is infallible. Francis has made it clear the Vatican is aware it has made mistakes. He also famously declared "I am a sinner" [<http://americamagazine.org/issue/%E2%80%98i-am-sinner%E2%80%99>] and made the unprecedented move of publicly kneeling to have his own confession heard. Pope Francis has avoided the trappings of vanity by choosing to take a bus after his election, carrying his own luggage and admitting that "I don't know how to work a computer." We should not fear humility in our dealings with students. Francis told a group of Jesuit students: "Don't be afraid of failures. Don't be afraid of falling."

5. Deal with the messy stuff: The pope has been proactive in his decisions to invite discourse on same-sex civil unions, discuss contraception and reportedly meet with a transgender man, concluding "who am I to judge?" He could have remained quiet, but demonstrated the power of addressing a variety of issues with grace and mercy. "May no one use religion as a pretext for actions against human dignity" [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/09/21/pope_no_to_the_use_of_religion_as_a_pretext_for_violence_/1106996] and against the fundamental rights of every man and woman," he said. Academic institutions should be an arena for open dialogue on provocative social issues.

6. The mission: Leaders stumble when they succumb to self-interests and stray from their core vocation. The pontiff, following the path of St. Francis, has been forthright in discouraging clergy from traveling in "fancy" cars, reminding them to "just think about how many children are dying of hunger in the world." He led by example by favoring modest vehicles over a Mercedes, black shoes over red ones and a Vatican guesthouse over the papal apartments. It's tempting to be pulled into the vortex of trappings offered in academia, but our mission -- the greater purpose at any college -- must always be the student.

To be able to guide students to be the best version of themselves, we must strive to be the best version of ourselves. At Sacred Heart, we strive to keep the needs of the students foremost in our thoughts at all times. Whether administrators, faculty or staff, we are here because of them. It is imperative that we consider their interests in everything we do. Like Pope Francis, we must shed the trappings of our titles and serve. That's not just trending or cool; it's a timeless and noble quest.

