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Three Popes: Lessons in Leadership

Overview

An Experiential Exercise

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Abstract

In *Three Popes: Lessons in Leadership* participants use selected leadership theories as a basis to comment on the leadership style and effectiveness of two former Bishops of Rome—John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The purpose is to hypothetically assist the incumbent pontiff, Francis, whose legacy—while looking promising—still is in its infancy. In the exercise, participants investigate the personal traits and life stories of three recent popes in an attempt to understand their professional style and effectiveness as leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. Using Pope Francis' immediate predecessors as examples of good/bad leadership, teams recommend to Pope Francis ways to maintain and increase his own legacy and the vitality of the Church. In so doing, the exercise should suggest ways participants might enhance their own leadership skills and effectiveness within the professional organization to which they belong.

Keywords: trait-based leadership, behavioral theory of leadership, contingency theory, situational theory of leadership, emotional intelligence, effective communication, transactional vs. transformational leadership, followership, managing change, Level 5 leaders, organizational culture, stakeholder analysis, succession planning

Introduction

The challenge of helping to develop leaders today that are equipped to deal with tomorrow's unknown and daunting challenges is something educators grapple with regardless of their field of endeavor. And it is becoming increasingly clear that leaders cannot lead without having willing followers. Leaders need not only strategic vision and power, but also the rarer skill of being able to connect with and motivate people in order to get them to enthusiastically follow their lead.

The study of three recent popes' (John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis) leadership styles, accomplishments, and disappointments should be illustrative of many points made in the literature pertaining to effective leadership. Clearly popes operate on the world stage and have responsibility for overseeing an enormous, complex, and international organization. Yet their organization also has a broader need to remain relevant to other various stakeholder constituencies. In its own way, the Church is an interesting study of a multinational enterprise (MNE) that has survived rather well for two thousand years notwithstanding the occasional schism or ups and down of Church attendance. In the business realm, by contrast, even "built to last" enterprises seldom last for more a hundred years.

Through an engaging personal coaching assignment hypothetically commissioned by Pope Francis, the hope is to compare and contrast these three men's effectiveness as leaders of the Roman Catholic Church and to better understand how their life stories/their "roots," the historical context within which they operated, their communication and leadership styles, and even how the selection of their names presaged what each of them seemed to view as their strategic mission.

In contrast to leaders in many other fields of endeavor, popes are unique in two ways. First of all, they are elected for life, not unlike U. S. Supreme Court judges. As such, how they are perceived and whatever mission they decide to spearhead can have a profound and lasting effect on the Church as a whole. Secondly, to a certain degree, popes start out with built-in "followers," having been elected by their peers, the College of Cardinals. This doesn't mean that other internal stakeholder groups (e.g. the laity, priests, nuns) necessarily are willing "followers," nor does it imply that each cardinal is an ardent supporter of a newly-elected pope. But popes do seem to start off their leadership responsibilities with considerable goodwill, which isn't always the case when "new management" is brought in a business context.

The *Three Popes: Lessons in Leadership* exercise deals with the leadership challenges that these popes have faced or are facing in overseeing the vast organization that is the Roman Catholic Church—an organization that continues to try to maintain its relevance in a fast-changing world that is characterized by globalization, 24/7 news coverage, controversial social viewpoints, and the enormous array of new communication avenues spawned by the Internet and social networking.

In many ways, the Church—like other religions—has managed to stay relevant to large swaths of the world population. Yet, the Church's growth and mission can be undermined if its lifetime-elected leader doesn't have the right mix of leadership abilities for the time of his tenure.

Participants in the exercise explore the following areas often used in describing effective business leaders or the characteristics of enduring organizations: trait-based leadership, behavioral theory of leadership, contingency theory, situational theory of leadership, emotional intelligence, effective communication, transactional vs. transformational leadership, followership, managing change, Level 5 leaders, organizational culture, stakeholder analysis, and succession planning.

The exercise's overriding purpose is to reveal the challenges of being a leader and the importance of getting it right. Specifically, four points are emphasized:

- **Leaders can get better at leading.**
- **The old rules are fast changing.**
- **Leadership excellence often begets enterprise success.**
- **And sometimes, it depends on fate and circumstances and the right crisis.**

As Shakespeare once wrote of leaders, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Popes, more often than not, seem to fall into the third category, having greatness (or potential greatness) thrust upon them.

Overview of the Exercise Process

In the *Three Popes: Lessons in Leadership* exercise participants assume the role of distinguished global leaders. In the spirit of Vatican II, they are lay leaders from the worlds of business, medicine, or public service. They are charged (see Appendix A) with helping Pope Francis to better understand how to navigate, connect with, and advance his mission with the Church bureaucracy, the laity, non-Catholics and, in so doing, make headway in addressing those major initiatives he feels need attention today.

Each **People to Pope** team is first assigned a pope pair to study in some depth—either Francis and Benedict XVI or Francis and John Paul II. Wikipedia is permitted as the biographical research starting point, but only as a starting point.

Learning Goals

The overall goal of this exercise is to involve participants in an engaging experiential activity that dramatically reveals to them the importance and challenge of being an effective leader, by having them identify the leadership strengths/weaknesses of three recent popes.

Participants are expected to: a) demonstrate how leadership styles would vary based on each pope's personality traits, background, early life experiences, and the times within which they lived; b) recognize the challenge of communicating effectively; and c) support their opinion about which leadership strategies are likely to be of importance to Francis given his personality, the times, and the issues now facing the Roman Catholic Church and the world. In effect, participants are expected to recommend what Pope Francis might learn from his predecessors to

not only enhance his own legacy and accomplishments, but also to advance the mission of the Church in helping to make it relevant and enduring institution for good.

The activity and its subsequent debriefing discussions should enable participants to:

- become familiar with the life stories of the three most recent popes whose combined tenures as Bishop of Rome
 - began in 1978 with the historic naming of the first Polish pope and the first non-Italian pope in more than 400 years, Pope John Paul II,
 - continued in 2005 with Pope Benedict XVI, the first pope to resign (in 2013) since Pope Gregory XII in 1415 and the first to do so on his own initiative since Pope Celestine V in 1294, and
 - continues now with Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope and the first South American pope;
- become more cognizant of selected areas of leadership that deserve attention, including: trait-based leadership, emotional intelligence, authenticity, effective communicating, cultivating followers, transformative leadership, managing change, and preparing the path for the next leader (succession planning);
- describe, comment, and critique the leadership style and effectiveness of Francis and one of his recent predecessors based on biographical research and leadership research;
- suggest, via vivid examples, what Francis might learn from his predecessors' accomplishments and disappointments while still retaining his own authenticity; and
- demonstrate how the leadership style and effectiveness of a leader is often related to strategic fit, having the right type of leader for the time, the place, the situation.

Target Audience

This experiential exercise is designed for any course that deals with leadership, organizational culture, or executive/strategic leadership and would be suitable for undergraduate and graduate students. It will be piloted in an MBA capstone course this fall since one of the course's major learning aims is to enhance each student's managerial and leadership skillset to increase the likelihood they will become more effective and adept leaders in the business world.

Participant Outcomes and Experiences

As just discussed, the exercise will be used and assessed in a capstone course this fall where MBA students concentrate on developing their management and leadership skills and competencies. What we are somewhat concerned with, as always, is whether the students will put in the required time and research to extract the level of learning that the exercise is structured to provide. Clearly, the exercise has the side benefit of getting students to speak and give advice to others—a crucial skill for business professionals trying to advance in their careers.

It is felt that students in the aforementioned course will find the exercise to be of value, especially if it is preceded by a lecture and class discussion wherein which the instructor finds impactful ways to emphasize the importance of leadership in advancing an organization's mission and the importance of crafting one's own authentic leadership style.

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Appendix A: Instructions for Teams Giving Advice to Francis

Recently you were selected by Pope Francis to join a lay group of men and women called **People to Pope**. This recognition is richly deserved. The program calls upon distinguished leaders from all faiths and all walks of life to assist the pontiff in his mission to revitalize the Church for the future. While Francis admires all of his predecessors immensely, he would like you to focus your attention on the two most recent pontiffs, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, whose relevance in terms of leadership effectiveness/ineffectiveness may be beneficial to him.

Over the past several decades, the Church has been pummeled by world events, scandal, and general disaffection. Its influence has grown in Latin America and Africa and declined in Europe and the United States.

Therefore, Francis is soliciting advice from the **People to Pope** program to complement the advice he's being given from the Curia, which may or may not have its own agenda.

You are being placed in one of several teams to present your ideas to Pope Francis. You should view this as a distinct honor to study the accomplishments/frustrations of three men who rose to the very heights of the Church hierarchy. Moreover, it should provide insights in terms of how you can enhance your own leadership effectiveness.

Your job is to provide advice to Francis as described in the tasks below:

Task #1. Each team researches their assigned pope pair (Francis and Benedict XVI or Francis and John Paul II). Wikipedia can be used as a starting off place. Each team member is expected to bring to his/her team's attention five other authoritative sources for each pope and to produce an annotated bibliography of the sources used for each pope's personal background. Team members share this information with one another and decide upon a subset of articles that will be included in the final report/presentation.

Task #2. Each team researches two assigned leadership areas or leadership experts from the following choices: *trait-based leadership, behavioral theory of leadership, contingency theory, situational theory of leadership, emotional intelligence, effective communication, transactional vs. transformational leadership, followership, managing change, Level 5 leaders, organizational culture, stakeholder analysis, succession planning.*

Task #3. Describe what your assigned Pope Francis predecessor (Benedict XVI or John Paul II) was like and how he fared according to the two leadership areas or leadership experts the team was assigned to research.

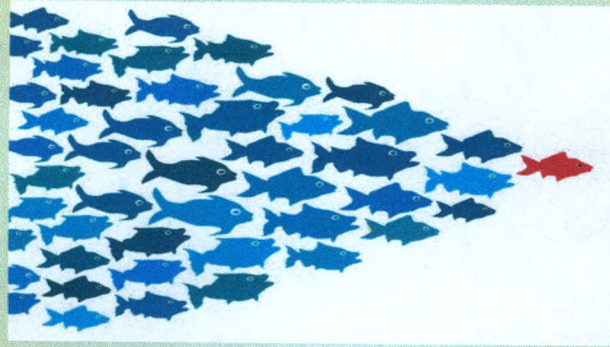
Task #4. Identify for your assigned Pope Francis predecessor two examples of where his leadership style resonated with most of the stakeholder groups and two examples of where his leadership style caused disaffection from at least one stakeholder group.

Task #5. Then, make your presentation and research findings engaging and compelling regarding the leadership lessons you have learned from this exercise.

Appendix B: Suggested Topics and Format to Highlight Background of Each Pope

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES	PROFESSIONAL STYLE & EFFECTIVENESS
Personality, Education, Talents	Symbols/Images
Background, Culture	Message and Goals
Issues Faced in Life (Personal Struggles)	Leadership Style
Times He Lived In	Common Nouns Used to Describe Him:
	Common Adjectives Used to Describe Him:
<p>In Their Own Words regarding their Role as Pope</p> <p>Example: <i>Depicting the Pope as a sort of superman, a star, is offensive to me. The pope is a man who laughs, cries, sleeps calmly, and has friends like everyone else.</i></p> <p>Source: Pope Francis' Interview with Corriere della Sera, March 5, 2014</p>	

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CIT Presidential Seminar, Fairfield, CT—September 16, 2015

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Gist of the Exercise

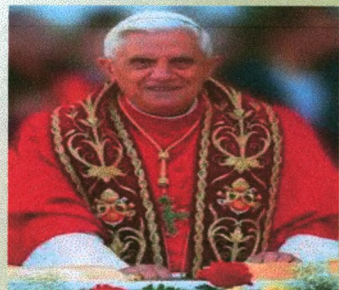
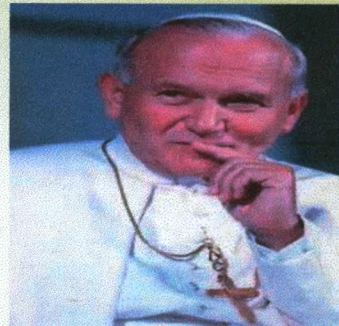
- Participants study a variety of leadership theories as a basis to comment on the leadership style and effectiveness of two former Bishops of Rome—John Paul II and Benedict XVI
- Purpose is to hypothetically assist the incumbent pontiff, Francis, whose legacy—while looking promising—still is in its infancy
- In the exercise, participants investigate the personal traits and life stories of three recent popes in an attempt to better understand their professional style and effectiveness as leaders of the Roman Catholic Church
- Using Pope Francis' immediate predecessors as examples of good/bad leadership, teams recommend to Pope Francis ways to maintain and increase his own legacy and the vitality of the Church
- In so doing, the exercise should suggest ways participants might enhance their own leadership skills and effectiveness within the professional organization to which they belong

Learning Objectives of the Exercise

- Overriding purpose is to reveal the challenges of being a leader and the importance of getting it right. Specifically, four points are emphasized:
 - Leaders can get better at leading
 - The old rules are fast changing
 - Leadership excellence often begets enterprise success
 - And sometimes, it depends on fate and circumstances and the right crisis
- As Shakespeare once wrote of leaders, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Popes, more often than not, seem to fall into the third category, having greatness (or potential greatness) thrust upon them.

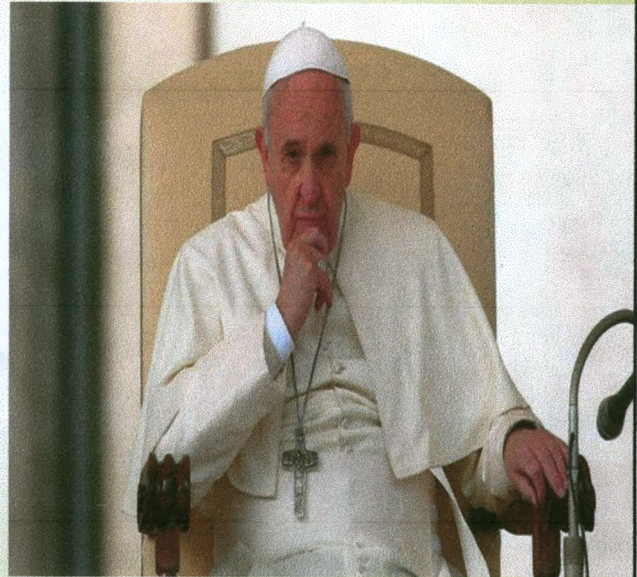
Learning from His Predecessors

- Personality Traits
- Talents
- Background and National Culture
- Early Life Experiences
- Times They Lived In
- Symbols/Images
- Strategic Mission
- Behaviors Used by Them
- Leadership Style & Effectiveness
- Legacy & Accomplishments



Exercise Steps Used in the Classroom

- Lecture on major leadership theories and leadership experts provided beforehand
- Tasks for the **People to Pope** teams:
 - **Task #1:** Team researches assigned pope pair (Francis and Benedict XVI or Francis and John Paul II), developing leadership profiles
 - **Tasks #2 and #3:** Team studies two assigned leadership areas/experts and describe how Benedict XVI or John Paul II fared according to them
 - **Task #4:** Describe with evidence and examples the leadership effectiveness of Benedict XVI or John Paul II in terms of his resonance with stakeholder groups
- Team Presentations—emphasis on Task #4, giving Francis leadership tips he may want to consider
- Whole Class Debriefing



What are Your Suggestions to Enhance the Value of this Leadership Exercise?