



# What is Ignatian leadership?

Sarah Broscombe

Defining the qualities of an Ignatian leader is an all but impossible task, says Sarah Broscombe, and so it should be, because Ignatian leadership cannot be reduced to, 'a tidy theory with accompanying tools and practices. It is a disposition of mind, heart and will.' There are, however, certain traits that can usefully act as 'compass bearings' for those who want to understand what leadership means in the Ignatian tradition.

What is your gut reaction when you hear the word '[leadership](#)'? For some, it evokes a tug of responsibility. Others switch off immediately – 'I'm not a leader of anything' – or feel cynical: 'Here we go again, corporate speak!' For others still there is a personal connection: 'Ah yes, I remember that inspiring person who I would have followed into a burning building'.

What makes Ignatian leadership special has something to do with the burning building reaction. And so it should. [Ignatius of Loyola](#) had something of the counter-intuitive attractiveness of Jesus about him, and so should leaders within his sphere of influence. If there is a growing interest in the concept of leadership in general, and Ignatian leadership in particular, it is because our contemporary world (political, environmental and social) has been a smorgasbord of good, bad and absent leadership over the last few decades. Manifold crises face us, all of which cry out for brave, authentic leaders. This is urgent.

Leadership is so much more than being the boss. This is especially true for the Ignatian form of it, where leadership is not simply a subset of positional power, and the hierarchy is structured as a two-way, not a one-way street (each provincial steps back 'down' after six years in office). It taps straight into vocation – every Jesuit leads, well or badly. And the domain of Ignatian leadership does not stretch only as far as directors of Jesuit workplaces. As the Jesuits in



Britain's recent '[31 days of Ignatius](#)' so strikingly illustrated, everyone shaped by an Ignatian education is formed to lead, whether they are in charge or not. If you are Ignatian, you are called to be aware of how you are leading in your life, and the impact of that on others.

I often hear Ignatian leaders characterised as empathetic, open to change, collaborative and purposeful. But these are true of the best secular models, too. On a personal level, all excellent leaders need self-understanding, integrity, authenticity and courage. Interpersonally, they must deploy good communication, motivation, inspiration and empathy. Organisationally, they need to be strategic, visionary, purposeful and mission-driven. But Ignatian leadership isn't simply generic good leadership seasoned with [Jesuit jargon](#). The distinctiveness is more fundamental than that.

What distinguishes an *Ignatian* leader, then? Simple formulations will fall badly short, because 'Ignatian Leadership' is not a coherent theory, or a body of scholarship. It's a lived experience that immerses itself in the world, a disposition deeply rooted in the Spiritual Exercises and Jesuit history. I have heard Jesuits say 'You pick it up by osmosis', or 'Just live it'. And I agree that it is irreducible to a neat formula. But for those new to Jesuit environments, or attracted by what they have encountered and wanting to understand more deeply, some starting point is needed.

A recent 18-month Ignatian Leadership Programme offered by the [Conference of European Provincials](#) was faced with some of these questions. We as a training team were mixed lay and Jesuit, and the participants came from 22 countries spanning a pretty broad conception of 'Europe' (from Moscow to Lebanon, Portugal to Kyrgyzstan). This provided a rich melting pot of expectations and experiences. For me, it also helped to crystallise thoughts that have been gradually forming for the last decade or so. At this stage, I want to suggest five qualities typical of Ignatian leaders – typical either because they are linked to features distinctive to [Ignatian spirituality](#), or because Ignatian teaching can nuance or enrich what we already know about leadership from other sources or our first-hand experience. These five are offered to provoke thought, definitely not in an attempt at comprehensiveness. But without any of them, I'd struggle to see leadership as Ignatian.

## Humility

Ignatian humility is not about anxiously balancing your flaws and strengths, or comparing yourself to others, or self-abnegation (keeping your head down and your mouth shut). It is seeing your real self, truly and in proportion, in a world that is different because of Jesus's work; 'If the gospel is true, then Christ has revealed potentials in the human condition for bringing good out of evil... Moreover, only out of this sin and degradation can the full greatness of the redeemer be displayed'.<sup>1</sup> Humility dares to look because it knows it is loved. It also dares to be humbled without believing the core of the self to be diminished by humiliation. False humility attacks a person's sense of dignity and worth. True humility frees us from the pressure of trying to earn worth. When Ignatius describes the third degree of humility in the Spiritual Exercises, he speaks of choosing poverty with Christ poor, and insults rather than honours.<sup>2</sup> We choose differently not because we are addicted to self-sacrifice or self-abasement, and not because we are allergic to power, but because we love Jesus too much and want the journey with him too much to prefer ease, strength and success.

A leader operating with this humility, this sense of themselves as an utterly loved sinner, will have different relationships. They will see themselves in proportion with their team, their organisation and the purpose that it serves. Ignatian leaders will view power differently; they will handle it carefully but not avoid it (Pope Francis exemplifies this beautifully<sup>3</sup>).

Humility supports authenticity, because it removes the pressure to be larger than life. It can help us carry the responsibility of leadership more lightly than leaders of the heroic, charismatic and maverick stamp. Ignatian leaders are not threatened by others' brilliance, because they do not draw their legitimacy from being best at everything. They can surround themselves with teams of people who exceed their own skill. When this happens, humility is mutually reinforcing among those they lead.

## Freedom

The second distinctive characteristic emerges from Ignatius's subtle teaching about freedom from inordinate attachments, a teaching which involves both a letting go and a letting come. There is an 'indifference' (what Joe Munitiz SJ describes as 'be[ing] prepared to wish to relinquish something out of love of God'<sup>4</sup> – 'prepared to wish to' seems to me a very helpful formulation) balanced by an 'interior freedom' – a disposition that is open, unencumbered and therefore able to welcome whatever comes. This sounds attractive, but it is not easy. Many leaders have disordered attachments to aspects of their work or mission that are in themselves good. For example, have you encountered well-intentioned leaders whose drive towards a wonderful and worthy vision rides roughshod over warnings, or drives their team to exhaustion? Ignatian leaders need to grow in discernment of their own attachments, their own 'unfreedoms', and operate with a dynamism that is less train-like and more akin to flying. Their job is not to hurtle their organisation along a predetermined track to a clear destination, but instead something more like following a flight path, constantly tuned in to radar, making micro-adjustments, ready for and unthreatened by change.

I would see the curiosity of the early Jesuits as a fruit of this freedom. ‘Living with one foot raised’ is not just availability for mission – it shows a free *mindset* also. Ignatius and the early Jesuits are widely cited as masters of adaptation (perhaps partly to meet our own needs for role models of change management). Sometimes this adaptation was simply because they had got it crashingly wrong the first time. But certainly Xavier’s approach and attitude in India shifted in Japan.<sup>5</sup> Matteo Ricci’s distinctive approach to inculturation in China also evolved through his experience there.<sup>6</sup>

### Consolation

The third distinctively Ignatian quality I want to highlight is consolation. Secular leadership models ask leaders to inspire and motivate their teams. It would be inappropriate to request joy of them. One prevailing narrative is that we live in a ‘VUCA’ world – volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – and the leader needs authenticity, agility and resilience. All true. But the Christian narrative is one of resurrection. Moreover, in the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius gives us ways to recognise the grace of consolation. In our life with God, in the joy of the Fourth Week of the Exercises, we earnestly seek and pray for this gift. Ignatian leaders imagine, even expect, that joy might somehow be present, to the point of becoming a decisive influence. They seek the kingdom of heaven in this VUCA world because the resurrection means that sin doesn’t win. Pope Francis chose this emphasis in his address to the 36<sup>th</sup> General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (GC36) last year:

In the *Exercises*, Ignatius asks his companions to contemplate ‘the task of consolation’ as something specific to the Resurrected Christ... Let us never be robbed of that joy, neither through discouragement when faced with the great measure of evil in the world and misunderstandings among those who intend to do good, nor by letting it be replaced with vain joys... Joy is not a decorative ‘add-on’ but a clear indicator of grace: it indicates that love is active, operative, present.

Ignatian leaders must hold hope, strategise with hope, and attend to ‘the task of consolation’.

### Sense of direction

Vision and a clear sense of direction are vital for leading well. Many businesses struggle to articulate *why* they exist, because they usually look through the lens of *what* they do.<sup>7</sup> But a leader formed in the Ignatian tradition comes straight out of the ‘why’, stated in the ‘Principle and Foundation’ of the Exercises: ‘The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by so doing, save his or her soul’. This, and the ubiquitous letters AMDG (*Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam* – ‘for the greater glory of God’), are attention-shifters, not straplines. Why are you leading? Because God is magnificent, and so focusing everything we do towards God’s greater glory is sensible. Because the human person exists to praise, reverence and serve God, and so can live joyfully, trustingly, because they know they are being saved. Ignatian leaders have their priorities right, and return to them frequently. Their gaze is on God, and the Principle and Foundation helps to keep it there.

### Discernment

Discernment – noticing ‘the movements felt in the heart and weighed by the mind’<sup>8</sup> – is at the heart of the Ignatian way of proceeding. I would see this as the crowning Ignatian quality; the one that integrates them all.

Leaders generally want to be wise; they don’t all seek wisdom in the same places. Some strive to become a ‘thought leader’. Others hone their intelligence and critical skills. Others constantly research and keep abreast of cutting-edge leadership theory. Ignatian leaders seek to be discerning. James Hanvey’s article on Pope Francis’ leadership puts it like this:

discernment is a graced seeking – almost an aesthetic sense – for the movements of God’s salvific action present in all our relational dynamics: formal and informal, personal or institutional, wherever our passive, receptive and active agency is in play. Freedom is our obedience to the ‘gravitational force’ and pattern of God’s grace at work... It is an operational wisdom that comes from knowing to whom we belong, where our heart really lies. It asks us to be attentive to the movement of the Spirit, both in the world and in ourselves, especially to be alert to whatever makes us deaf or distorts.<sup>9</sup>

An Ignatian approach to good decision-making in leadership involves more than calculating the benefits and losses entailed by different ways forward (itself one of the things that Ignatian jargon sometimes calls discernment). It involves a commitment to listen carefully to the different motivations at work in the organisation, to the point that some decisions are ultimately based not on projected outcomes, but rather on a sense that a certain way forward coheres with our sense of who we are under God, while the alternative does not.

Ignatian leaders pray, reflect and discern in their personal lives in a way that naturally influences the culture of their workplace. A discerning organisation will listen to its own experience differently. Quality of listening will rise; a kind of Godly tuning in of the radio together. Relationships between teams will enrich decision-making processes.

Discernment in common is a priority for the global Society of Jesus coming out of GC36, so the next few years are going to be a rich ground of experimentation in growing discerning environments in Ignatian workplaces as well as Jesuit communities.

These five manifest not in a defined common leadership style, but rather, in some unusual and shared aspirations. The personal, interpersonal and organisational skills needed by every good leader are nuanced and enriched by these Ignatian qualities. Consolation, freedom, a clear sense of direction, humility and discernment even make some of the skills easier to sustain. They act as compass bearings. And if the work is ultimately God's, the leader's sense of responsibility can make a deep, freeing and joyous shift.

All of this raises interesting questions for the future, too. As a layperson, I am intrigued by the ways in which leadership is different for a Jesuit and a layperson leading a Jesuit work. The latter are not called to be proto-Jesuits: the responsibilities are different, and I suspect the charisma is distinct, too. Questions like these face those who design future Ignatian leadership courses, and call for a deep and fruitful collaboration between Jesuits and laypeople leading in real and difficult situations. The challenge will be not to reduce Ignatian leadership to a tidy theory with accompanying tools and practices. It is a disposition of mind, heart and will. And I believe it's a distinctive way of incarnating the gospel in service of the world's need for true leadership.

*Sarah Broscombe is a freelance trainer, coach and retreat guide. She lives in Yorkshire, and works throughout the UK and overseas. Her connection with the Jesuits began in 2002, when she worked at the Jesuit Volunteer Community, and then diversified into community development in Guyana and spirituality work with Loyola Hall and St Beuno's. She is currently coordinating a team developing a new Ignatian Leadership Programme aiming to launch in July 2018.*

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Endean, 'On Poverty with Christ Poor', *The Way* 47/1–2 (Jan/April 2008), 47–66.

<http://www.theway.org.uk/back/4712Endean.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 167 of the Spiritual Exercises. Philip Endean SJ's article on the third degree of humility (*ibid.*) is most helpful here.

<sup>3</sup> James Hanvey SJ's article on Pope Francis noted this humility in action from the first day of his papacy. (See James Hanvey, 'Because you give me hope', *Thinking Faith*, 30 April 2013:

[https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130430\\_1.htm](https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130430_1.htm))

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Munitiz SJ (trans), *St Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings* (Penguin, 1996), glossary.

<sup>5</sup> St. Francis Xavier, 'Letter from Japan, to the Society of Jesus in Europe' (1552)

<http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1552xavier4.asp>

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Standaert, 'Matteo Ricci: Shaped by the Chinese', *Thinking Faith*, 21 May 2010:

[https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20100521\\_1.htm](https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20100521_1.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Simon Sinek's 'Starting with WHY' TED talk is one of the most successful (and arguably influential) of all time, with about 34 million views:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action)

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Munitiz SJ, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> James Hanvey SJ, *op. cit.*