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Saint Vincent de Paul as a Leader of Change: The Key Roles of A Higher Purpose and Empowerment¹

BY
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Courtesy of The Hay-Vincentian Leadership Project

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Abstract

An examination of noteworthy change efforts enacted by Saint Vincent de Paul underscores the importance of believing in the higher purpose of one's goals. Empowered "followers" need to believe and find meaning in the "leader's" vision, in order to buy into and support the change efforts. The empowerment of Saint Louise de Marillac as a Vincentian leader was critical to the accomplishment of many great works. Organizations undergoing change or renewal can look to Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac for examples of servant leadership, and the change roles they enacted are integrated with a well-regarded organizational change model for the 21st century.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Saint Vincent de Paul's change efforts during the 17th century integrate with the steps of a change model produced by one of the leading thinkers on change today, John Kotter. In this integration we may learn some key points from Saint Vincent de Paul about the successful enactment of change and renewal. One major reason for his success was the effective empowerment and enablement of Saint Louise de Marillac into a servant leader. Together they demonstrated that believing in a higher purpose was critical to the envisioning and enacting of change. The paper also suggests that Kotter's model of change could be utilized as a process for renewing an organization and its culture, and thus could be helpful to the current Vincentian leadership and its organization(s).²

What follows, firstly, is an underlying theme for the paper; that is, the criticality of the "heart of change."³ Next, the stages of John Kotter's process of renewing and transforming organizations will be noted.⁴ Following that, literature and examples will be integrated within the stages of the change process. Examples will be provided from "for-profit" organizations, as well as from Saint Vincent de Paul's

² J.P. Kotter, "Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail," *Harvard Business Review* 73:2 (1995): 59-67.

³ J.P. Kotter & D.S. Cohen, *The Heart of Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

⁴ As detailed in Kotter, "Leading change."

and Saint Louise de Marillac's change efforts during the 17th century. Finally, my summation will describe the test of an effective leader, and note the leadership challenge facing Vincentian institutions today.

"The Heart of Change"

Face it; most people do not want to change. Literature on change is filled with discussions on resistance to change and how to overcome that resistance. According to Kotter and Cohen, people will be more committed to changing if the change speaks to their hearts. The writers contrast a "see-feel-change" approach to change, with an "analysis-think-change" approach. During all phases of the change model, the primary challenge is to change behavior. This may be best accomplished by enabling people to see a truth that influences their feelings; the heart of change is in emotion.

What can this tell us about a leader's role in enacting change? During times of change, a leader's "true self" may appear, especially in times of crises. It is crucial that during these times, a leader's spoken message and enacted message are congruent. Actions do indeed speak louder than words, and it is a leader's actions that have the strongest impact upon followers' perceptions of leadership and change. For example, if a leader says that an organization's values include the empowerment of employees, yet publicly humiliates an employee for making a mistake, then employees will be unwilling to make decisions and take the risks necessary to achieve empowerment. Therefore, it is imperative for a leader to be fully aware of his or her own values, and in what manner those values are displayed during times of crisis. This idea is also important in the context of cultural change within organizations. As Schein noted, the primary means for changing and maintaining culture are the leader's roles of modeling, coaching, and reacting to critical incidents.⁵ Although the structures of organizations, and artifacts like the spoken and published mission statements, should be congruent with the primary mechanisms, they are of secondary importance to the leader's role in organizational culture formation and maintenance.

The Flow of Change

John Kotter, and Kotter and Cohen, presented a process model

⁵ E. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985).

for the flow of change. Incorporated into the model are eight stages that generally take place during the process of change. Although these stages will be presented in order, it is important to realize that change does not necessarily follow a “blueprint,” beginning at step 1 and ending at step 8. However, if change is to occur, and if effective change is to be maintained and “frozen” (or institutionalized), then chances are all of the stages of the change process have occurred. The process begins in increasing the urgency for change, followed by the stages of creating a guiding coalition, establishing a vision and strategy for change, and communicating that vision. Others then need to be empowered to take action to fulfill that change. Creating and rewarding short-term wins maintains the change momentum, and additional change efforts need to occur to support the initial change. Finally, if the changes are effective, they need to be institutionalized, so that the people and the organization do not slide back into old comfortable routines.

Consider the stages of Kotter’s, and Kotter and Cohen’s change process when more fully defined and integrated with the behaviors of Saint Vincent de Paul, and Saint Louise de Marillac.

Establish Urgency. In the beginning of any change or renewal process the major crises and resulting opportunities must be identified and the competitive realities must be examined.⁶ Urgency is also established by creating a compelling picture of the risks of not changing. Lindsay Levin was the leader of change at Whites, a car dealership and repair group in London. To establish urgency with employees, Levin showed them videotapes of customers, wherein employees recognized themselves.⁷ Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac were effectively able to establish the urgency necessary to mobilize the resources to help people in need. Saint Vincent de Paul saw people in need and felt a personal responsibility to make a difference in their lives, and to change the world. Saint Louise de Marillac formed the Daughters of Charity for serving the poor, and impressed upon the Daughters the need for gentle compassion.

Today Vincentians can establish an urgency for continuing Saint Vincent’s mission by introducing people to the poor. This mission may touch the hearts of religious, as well as lay people searching for meaning in their lives. Another urgent issue that

⁶ Kotter & Cohen, *Heart of Change*.

⁷ J.M. Kouzes and B.Z. Posner, *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, A Wiley Imprint, 2003).

requires awareness is the Vincentian leadership crisis. This crisis stems from the diminishing numbers of religious leaders, who are faced with a daunting task of effective leadership; that is, to maintain a strong Vincentian culture in their organizations after their religious leadership has passed. It may be time to empower “Vincentian” laity with the increased responsibility of maintaining the culture.

Build the Guiding Team. Kotter and Cohen pointed out that trust and teamwork should be modeled by leaders, if a team that operates with trust and emotional commitment is desired. Some of the ways to provide change leadership include exercising credibility, skills, connections, reputations, and formal authority. At Whites, employees formed small voluntary teams that worked directly with customers.⁸ Saint Vincent de Paul worked with those who shared his vision and dedication to the poor, and the team’s synergistic efforts enabled the growth of its individual members into servants themselves.⁹ The collaboration of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac fostered the formation of the Daughters of Charity, whose core values included humility, simplicity, and charity, and became the basis of their communal spirit for generations of Vincentian women.¹⁰ Furthermore, as Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., noted, the Vincentian mission was enacted via collaboration, teamwork, and networking toward shared goals.

The Rev. Dennis Holtschneider, C.M., has raised the idea of utilizing a core group of individuals who would be charged with the responsibility of maintaining Vincentian culture in their colleges. This would be much the same as the small core group at the center of the Vincentian family that has kept the Vincentian tradition alive for its members.

When organizations move from the present to a desired future state, during the transition the organization and its members must learn to accomplish the change. Transition management structures may be very useful for facilitating an organization’s movement from the present state to another desired state. To help navigate the organization through the ambiguity of the change process leaders of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ J. Patrick Murphy, C.M., “Servant leadership in the manner of Saint Vincent de Paul,” *Vincentian Heritage* 19:1 (1998): 121-133.

¹⁰ Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., *The Role of Women and the Vincentian Culturescape* (2003). Presentation at the Vincentian Leadership Conference, sponsored by the William and Mary Pat Gannon Hay Vincent de Paul Leadership Project, DePaul University. The article can be found in this issue of the Heritage.

a transitional management structure should be able to mobilize the necessary resources, be respected by the existing leadership, and have the interpersonal and political skill to lead the change effort.¹¹

Create a Transformational Vision. What do we mean by “transformational?” Unlike incremental or linear change, transformational change results in something completely different from the original state. For example, witness the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, the one being completely unrecognizable from the other. What is required for transformation to occur? According to Kotter and Cohen, there must be a vision to direct the change effort, so that possible futures may be “seen.” Where transformation is desired there should be bold strategies to achieve bold visions, or as Collins and Porras term them, “big hairy audacious goals (BHAGs).”¹² Lindsay Levin’s vision for Whites was “...every customer to have ‘an excellent experience dealing with us.’”¹³ Visions should be clear, easily articulated, and moving.¹⁴ These visions speak to the heart, as noted above.

Saint Vincent de Paul had a vision that spoke to a higher purpose. Consider the following statement of purpose: “Extend mercy towards others, so that there can be no one in need whom you meet without helping. For what hope is there for us if God should withdraw His mercy from us?”¹⁵ It is easy to see how this vision could incite others to action, and it is a prime example of a BHAG. Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac “shared a vision, that of Jesus Christ to be loved and served in the person of those who are poor.”¹⁶ This shared vision enabled the two saints to collaborate in achieving their goals of service to the poor, and they “modeled their decisions on Jesus in order to carry out God’s will in their lives.”¹⁷

¹¹ R. Beckhard & R. Harris, *Organizational Transitions: Managing Complex Change*, 2nd ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987).

¹² J. Collins & J. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (Harper Business, 1994).

¹³ Kouzes and Posner, *The Five Practices*, 6-7.

¹⁴ Kotter & Cohen, *Heart of Change*.

¹⁵ From F.W. Johnston, Burns & Oates, eds. *The Voice of the Saints* (1965, Reprinted by TAN, 1986).

¹⁶ Louise Sullivan, D.C., “‘God wants first the heart and then the work:’ Louise de Marillac and leadership in the Vincentian tradition,” *Vincentian Heritage* 19:1 (1998): 173.

¹⁷ Page 20 in Loretto Gettemeier, D.C., “Vincentian discernment and decision-making,” *Vincentian Heritage* 19:1 (1998): 19-28.

According to Gettemeier, seeking God's will is an example of a vision that is values-driven, and this drive is what distinguishes leaders in the Church from other for-profit organizations.

This idea of "a higher purpose" is becoming more prevalent in organizations today, as they strive to have employees committed to performing and behaving in ways that are consistent with their vision and its fulfillment. Some examples of these organizations are Amway, Mary Kay Cosmetics, and Herbal Life. A transformational style of leadership is consistent with organizations' attempts to provide meaning for their employees through their visions and goals. Transformational leaders inspire followers to go beyond their self-interests and serve the needs of the group, organization, or society.¹⁸ Some of the behaviors that transformational leaders demonstrate are articulating a vision, providing an appropriate model, providing individualized support, and setting high performance expectations.¹⁹ Furthermore, when followers associate their work with "higher purposes" other than making money, transformations occur.²⁰ Recently, Sparks and Schenk utilized multi-level marketing organizations to examine transformational leadership and higher purpose, with several outcome variables.²¹

What constitutes a "higher purpose" for employees of for-profit organizations? Perhaps making the world a better place would qualify as a higher purpose. According to Sparks and Schenk, when a product has exceptional benefits, individuals or groups benefit also, and customers' lives may be improved. For example, consider the benefits that ensue from the sale of an educational toy. In the Sparks and Schenk study, sponsors served as leaders to their recruits, but did not have formal supervisory authority. The study found that sponsors' transformational leadership was positively associated with recruits' higher purpose in their work, which was positively related to

¹⁸ B.M. Bass, Bass and Stodgill's *Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research and Managerial Applications*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1990).

¹⁹ P.M. Podsakoff, S.B. MacKenzie, R.H. Moorman & R. Fetter, "Transformational leader behaviors and their effects on followers' trust in leaders, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors," *Leadership Quarterly* 12 (1990): 107-142.

²⁰ B.M. Bass, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (New York: Free Press, 1985); and G. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998).

²¹ J.R. Sparks & J.A. Schenk, "Explaining the effects of transformational leadership: An investigation of the effects of higher-order motives in multilevel marketing organizations," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 22 (2001): 849-869.

their effort, job satisfaction, and cohesion. Indeed, consider that belief in a higher purpose may also inspire commitment for organizational citizenship, or the motivation to perform beyond the formal job requirements.

How else might the Vincentian notion of higher purpose be applied to the for-profit organizational world? Some organizations have begun to address serving the poor. For example, Target Corporation has been committed to supporting and empowering the communities it serves since it first opened in 1962. With its other companies, which include Marshall Field's, Target Corporation gives away over \$2 million per week to neighborhoods, programs, and schools across the country. Surely, Saint Vincent de Paul would see these acts of corporate charity as congruent with the Vincentian mission.

Communicate the Vision for Buy-in. It does not matter how meaningful the purpose of the vision is, without communication the commitment that comes from buy-in would not occur. Kotter and Cohen stress every possible vehicle should be utilized to continuously communicate vision and strategy. The message should be kept simple and heartfelt in order to develop understanding, commitment, and energy towards attaining the vision. Leaders should role model the behaviors necessary to achieve the vision, and communicate emotionally with followers. It is important to address any anxiety, confusion, anger, or distrust that may inhibit followers' desires to attain the vision. Lindsay Levin of Whites, in Kouzes and Posner, realized and discussed the importance of communicating values.

Sullivan relays how communication of the vision was another area where Saint Vincent de Paul excelled, as both he and Saint Louise de Marillac transmitted their vision to the men and women they worked with. McNeil details how Saint Vincent de Paul directly communicated his vision via conferences, letters and memos with those who lived nearby and far away. It is estimated that throughout his life, Saint Vincent de Paul wrote at least 30,000 letters. He also printed accounts of the desolated provinces touched by the Thirty Years War, and even developed a periodical newspaper, "Le magasin charitable." McNeil also noted how the recording, preservation and publication of the founders' writings have transmitted Vincentian culture over time. Other tools that have also served well to transmit Vincentian culture include the founders' values, example and storytelling. Schein believes artifacts that portray the values of a culture are also

an important means of reinforcing that culture. Even though they are of secondary importance to the leaders' roles, such things like the mission statement, symbols, organizational charts, structures, stories, and language play critical roles in both maintaining and creating culture.

Empower Others to Act. Leaders cannot achieve visions on their own, and as noted above, communication is necessary to enlist the buy-in of others. However, even if employees buy-in to the leader's vision, it will not be attained without the empowerment of followers. Empowerment has been defined as "providing motivated employees with the responsibility and authority to implement the vision."²² However, employees are not empowered by simply telling them they are. Leaders must direct the way to empowering their followers.

What this means is that all obstacles to the vision must be removed, including blockers, systems and structures that undermine the achievement of said vision say Kotter and Cohen. Risk-taking needs to be encouraged on the part of followers, and self-confidence should be built by providing recognition and rewards.

Another key to empowerment, as well as commitment towards goal attainment, is participation by followers. When participation occurs early on in a change process it may help to bypass the resistance that can occur from a dictatorial approach to change. Kouzes and Posner feel leaders should be open to receiving ideas from anyone and anywhere. Finally, the feedback process is necessary to enable better vision-related decisions, and to provide followers with information on how close they are to achieving their goals.²³

Lindsay Levin of Whites felt her employees had to be motivated, empowered, and trusted. Teams of employees suggested changes to improve customer service, and then implemented those changes. Training also increased the confidence of employees, and those who were trained went on to train others.

Saint Vincent de Paul excelled in the process of empowerment. He listened to others' ideas and sought their advice. One prime example of this was the founding of the Daughters of Charity. This organization was founded with Saint Louise de Marillac, whom Saint Vincent de Paul worked with as a peer. Vincent provided the tools that

²² Page 22 in G.G. Dess & J.C. Picken, "Changing roles: Leadership in the 21st century," *Organizational Dynamics* (Winter 2000): 18-33.

²³ Kotter and Cohen, *Heart of Change*.



Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul.
Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

were needed by collaborators in achieving the Vincentian mission. He empowered his followers by stipulating core values, rules and virtues such as respect and mutual support; he encouraged participative relationships as a means of serving the poor.

Both Vincent and Louise were models of servant leadership, and Jesus Christ was the model of this style of leadership. Indeed, servant leadership may be a key to empowerment, and several authors have noticed the connection between the two concepts. What is servant leadership? “Exemplary leaders use their power in service of others” and enable them to act by strengthening them and developing them into leaders.²⁴ Greenleaf noted that a great leader is a servant first, and that the conscious choice of wanting to serve first makes one want to lead.²⁵ The ultimate goal of a servant leader is fulfilling others’ needs. Contrast this with the traditional style of leadership that emphasizes power and control. In a sense, servant leaders assume the role of followers and serve others to promote their empowerment, which thereby enables them to accomplish organizational goals.

Dess and Picken also noted that a great leader is a great servant.²⁶ Servant leaders may be effective in providing keys to empowerment, such as flexible resources for employees depending on their needs. For example, leaders may be coaches, listeners or

²⁴ Kouzes and Posner, *The Five Practices*, 8.

²⁵ R.K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

²⁶ Dess & Picken, “Changing roles.”

providers of information, if that is what is needed by their followers. Servant leaders also facilitate the growth of their employees, both professionally and emotionally. They enable others to discover their own inner spirit and potential to make a difference.

This idea of fulfilling the needs of employees is called “enabling” by Stephan and Pace.²⁷ Enabling is essential in order for workers to accomplish their work in the most effective manner, and may include capacitating, equipping, facilitating, simplifying, and/or assisting workers. Why? According to Stephan and Pace “...the prime purpose of leadership is to maximize the potential of people and assist them in kindling the fire within their souls in order to move the world and give meaning to life. Leaders should be undaunted in the face of corruption and fierce in achieving a sense of the proper stature in which people should be held.”²⁸ As noted above, the heart of change is in emotions, and when people are enabled to see a truth that will influence their feelings, behavior can be changed.

An outstanding characteristic of both Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac was “leadership of service.”²⁹ Saint Vincent de Paul realized that followers accomplished things when leaders served them, by searching, listening and expecting better solutions. Examination of Saint Louise de Marillac’s relationship with Saint Vincent de Paul shows that she was not simply his puppet. For her, leadership was service. Louise served as a model of servant leadership, and she mentored her collaborators, especially the Daughters and Ladies of Charity, to grow spiritually, personally, and professionally. She realized the importance of setting clear performance expectations for living the Vincentian vocation, and communicated those expectations early on. Louise also allowed others to develop to their own potential, and recognized the importance of feedback in this development. Louise wrote to two sisters and provided them with constructive performance feedback. Louise took a “sandwich” approach to this task, first in complimenting them on the good they were doing, and then directly confronting their problem behavior, before concluding with her confidence in their ability to work things out. Commendably, Louise also took responsibility for her role in the

²⁷ E.G. Stephan & R.W. Pace, *Powerful Leadership: How to Unleash the Potential in Others and Simplify Your Own Life* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2002).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

²⁹ Kathryn LaFleur, S.P., “Christological aspects of Vincentian leadership: The Christ of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise” *Vincentian Heritage* 19:1 (1998): 29-44.

sisters' behavior, and suggested ways that they all might improve.

Create Short-term Wins. "Winning," or achieving goals, can go a long way towards establishing a momentum of change. Kotter & Cohen believe long-term visions may be broken down into short-term subgoals. When these are achieved, they should be rewarded. Effective short-term wins are those that come fast, are visible to as many people as possible, and are meaningful. It is also important not to overwhelm people with change; incremental change and small wins build confidence, and these contributions toward change should be celebrated say Kouzes & Posner. At Whites car dealership and repair group, the initial action taken by teams did not impact customers — which was the focus of their vision. However, these small changes gave employees the confidence needed to move on to bigger projects that made a difference in customer service.

Don't Let Up. So, for effective change to occur all you have to do is start at step 1 and proceed through step 8, right? If only it were so easy. The steps may be utilized as a blueprint, but sometimes blueprints need to be adjusted along the way. Sometimes, it is necessary to begin in the middle, and then look back. The point of not letting up though, according to Kotter & Cohen, is that assimilating differences and building momentum is important if change is to stick. The vision must be supported by all systems, structures and policies. If one part of the organization changes, then other parts of the organization need to be examined for ripple effects. For example, if an organization fosters the development of teams, then a system of compensation should reward teams, and not simply the individuals that comprise them. People who can implement the vision need to be hired, promoted and developed. The urgency at the beginning of the change effort needs to continue, even after small wins occur. When change speaks to the heart any goal left undone is urgent. Finally, the importance of modeling cannot be overemphasized.

Institutionalize. When Kotter's, and Kotter and Cohen's, models of change are utilized to develop or renew an organization's culture, and that culture is working well for the organization, then it should not only be "frozen" into place but continuously nurtured. This "refreezing" process can occur through the orientation of new employees, promotions and rewarding of key individuals, and the continual telling of stories.³⁰ Most importantly, notes Schein, it is the

³⁰ K. Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

role modeling on the part of leaders and key individuals, especially during critical incidents, that will continually remind organizational members of the higher purpose, values, and behaviors that keep their culture strong.

Conclusion

The above discussion illustrates the stages of a change model for organizations today, and how Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac utilized key concepts to live and spread a Vincentian culture that began almost 400 years ago. The role modeling of these two servant leaders, both humble and possessing strong will, provides us with long-lasting examples of the “heart of change.” Of special note is the importance Vincent and Louise placed on their higher purpose and on the empowerment of members of their organizations. Their shared vision of service to the poor has become an institution, and their leadership has stood the test of time.

Collins noted that Level 5 leaders ensure their organizations’ future success by choosing superb successors.³¹ In contrast to other leaders who see organizational floundering after they leave as tribute to their own greatness, Level 5 leaders realize a better reward in an organization that can continue to be great without them. Sullivan also noted that the “great test of leadership is the capacity for the works to continue and flourish when the leader is no longer there.”³² Vincentian institutions may require laity to assume more leadership roles, as well as a responsibility for the continuation of the Vincentian character and mission. There is a challenge before Vincentian institutions to achieve a broader embodiment of Vincentian culture, especially with lay people. To continuously renew Vincentian culture, individuals need to be inspired and committed to the higher purpose of these Vincentian institutions. One key way that Vincentian institutions can support their inspirational vision is through the empowerment of their members.

A last look at the “for-profit” organizational world, and several long-lasting companies (with an average age of nearly 100) that have outperformed their competitors in the stock market since

³¹ J. Collins, “Level 5 leadership: The triumph of humility and fierce resolve,” *Harvard Business Review* 79:1 (2001): 67-76.

³² Sullivan, “God wants first the heart,” 176.

1926, might help conclusively integrate these organizations with Vincentian institutions. Collins and Porras found that companies like Disney, Wal-Mart, Hewlett-Packard, and Ford had self-effacing leaders and devotion to a central ideology. Other factors that made those companies exceptional were values that never changed, a purpose beyond profits, a relentless drive to change and improve everything but core values, and “big, hairy, audacious goals.”

The mission and values of Vincent and Louise have been infused into the visions of Vincentian institutions, carrying out this mission for nearly 400 years. Time will tell if these generations of Vincentian leaders, following in the footsteps of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, will also be successful leaders... successful at renewing, maintaining, and continuing to nurture the Vincentian mission.
