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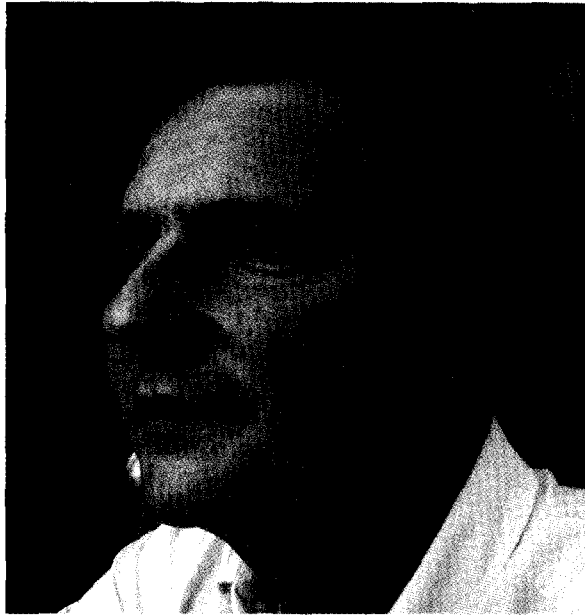
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Being Creative in Vincentian Leadership: the Case of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul

BY
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Courtesy of The Hay-Vincentian Leadership Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an example of an international society based on Vincentian Leadership principles which has been in existence for 180 years. I intend to introduce my concept of a model of Vincentian Leadership and present an overview and evolution of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SVdP). Subsequently, an analysis of the adequacy of the Society as a model of Vincentian Leadership is offered, articulating the sustainability of the Society based on this model. Finally, based on the SVdP experience, some recommendations are proposed to DePaul University's project on Vincentian Leadership.

A Model for Vincentian Leadership

Leadership can be defined in different ways, and there are many different kinds. However, the following definition expresses the essence of leadership:

“The skill of influencing people to work enthusiastically toward goals identified as being of common good”²

This definition incorporates a key element of the type of leadership to be discussed, Service/Vincentian Leadership. A leader can influence people to work enthusiastically to accomplish his/her own goals, which may not always correspond to the common good. Here we are stating explicitly that the leader is a servant, a servant of the common good.

The first question to ask is “what are the necessary ingredients for someone to be considered a servant leader?” This question assumes that the leader can acquire the skills – or ingredients – to be perceived as a real servant leader. The subsequent question is “how to acquire these skills?” The initial answer to this second question is that these skills cannot be acquired only through training, but must be accompanied by the leader’s true desire to serve.

² James C. Hunter, *The Servant: a Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership* (Rocklin, Calif.: Prima Pub., 1998), 187 pp.; James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: When Leaders are at Their Best* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 12 pp.

“Servant leadership forces us to think of others before ourselves: in fact, the first element of service leadership is the desire to serve.”³

In fact, there are many ways to cultivate various traits of Service/Vincentian Leadership, but there is only one which makes them an intrinsic part of one’s life: the genuine desire to serve, that is, to put others ahead of oneself, to make a difference by helping others for the better.

Saint Vincent de Paul is an example of just such a person with the desire and ability not only to exhibit Service/Vincentian Leadership traits, but also to teach them.

The first Service/Vincentian Leadership trait we should address, taught by Saint Vincent de Paul, is the ability to learn. We must learn about the needs of others and ascertain the best way to serve them. Vincent was able to identify others’ needs better than they could express them. This is possible only when we live as others live and we evaluate how their lives could be better when compared to our own standards. De Paul was able to read each event as if it was a message to him personally. This ability gave him the skill to constantly analyze any situation, to see what could be an improvement to those he was serving, and to ultimately identify an innovative solution.

“Love is inventive to infinity.”⁴

The second noteworthy trait of Service/Vincentian Leadership is related to style, or influence based on authority not on power. Many times Saint Vincent de Paul referred to himself as the least important member of the Congregation of the Mission, despite having founded it. Even though he suffered melancholic moods – self-admittedly very difficult – Vincent was able to exercise his influence based on knowledge, experience and infinite faith in Divine Providence. There is no better way of encouraging people than in demonstrating that it

³ This idea has been taught by Marvin Bower, the consultant who transformed the values of McKinsey & Co. into what became the essence of the firm’s decades-long sustainability.

⁴ Quote attributed to Vincent de Paul, found in Pierre Coste’s biography of the saint.

is not only our competence at stake, but also a matter of one's personal relationship with God. Being the founder of the Congregation of the Mission, Saint Vincent de Paul could have used the *Common Rules* as a concrete way of forcing his confreres to do what they should do. But he refused to rely upon this source of power.

“Our Lord has lived for 33 years and has never set a written rule.”⁵

Example by behavior forms the third trait. The will to serve must be constantly expressed in decisions, actions, and presentation. Saint Vincent de Paul was an example of a person who would make any sacrifice for his cause. He wrote some 30,000 letters, expressing his ideas and care for individuals, the Missionaries of the Congregation, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, his friends, and the members of his parishes. In any situation, but particularly in crisis, a leader's faith, values, and long-term vision is tested. The consistency of example and principle is the key element in building credibility of leadership. Daily actions have the power to express two dimensions of Service/Vincentian Leadership: first, the consistency between the will to serve and the intrinsic values of the leader; and, second, the real importance of short-term actions when compared with long-term vision. As a service leader Saint Vincent de Paul was very practical and he knew that all of his decisions, oral presentations, and actions would be taken as symbols by those he would influence. By constantly trying to be what God wanted him to be to others he was a personal expression of the essence of service.

Lastly, as mentioned previously, having long-term vision is a key trait of the Service/Vincentian leader. Saint Vincent de Paul may well have known that some of the works he created would last for centuries and be spread throughout the world. He may have dreamed that the Congregation of the Mission would have thousands of missionaries in every country. Two centuries later, following his example, Antoine Frederick Ozanam, the principal founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, had a long-term dream: spread a small band of members, grouped in a unit called “Conference” to every place in the world. In his own words, Frederick Ozanam introduced the concept of global networking to the nineteenth century:

⁵ Ibid.

"I would like to embrace the whole world in a network of charity."⁶

Long-term vision encompasses at least two values relevant for Service/Vincentian Leadership. First, it creates a common purpose to serve. Second, it provides fundamental criteria to evaluate short-term happenings and actions, as stated above.

Figure 1 summarizes these four traits, which, in my view, define the essence of Service/Vincentian Leadership.

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul: a Case of Success

The SVdP Society was founded in 1833 by a group of young students from the best university in France, the Sorbonne. As many projects launched by young students, it could have failed some months after it was founded. However, it grew so successfully that today it has more than 600,000 active members in over 130 countries, operating in the same manner it was founded, with the same vision and the same mission.

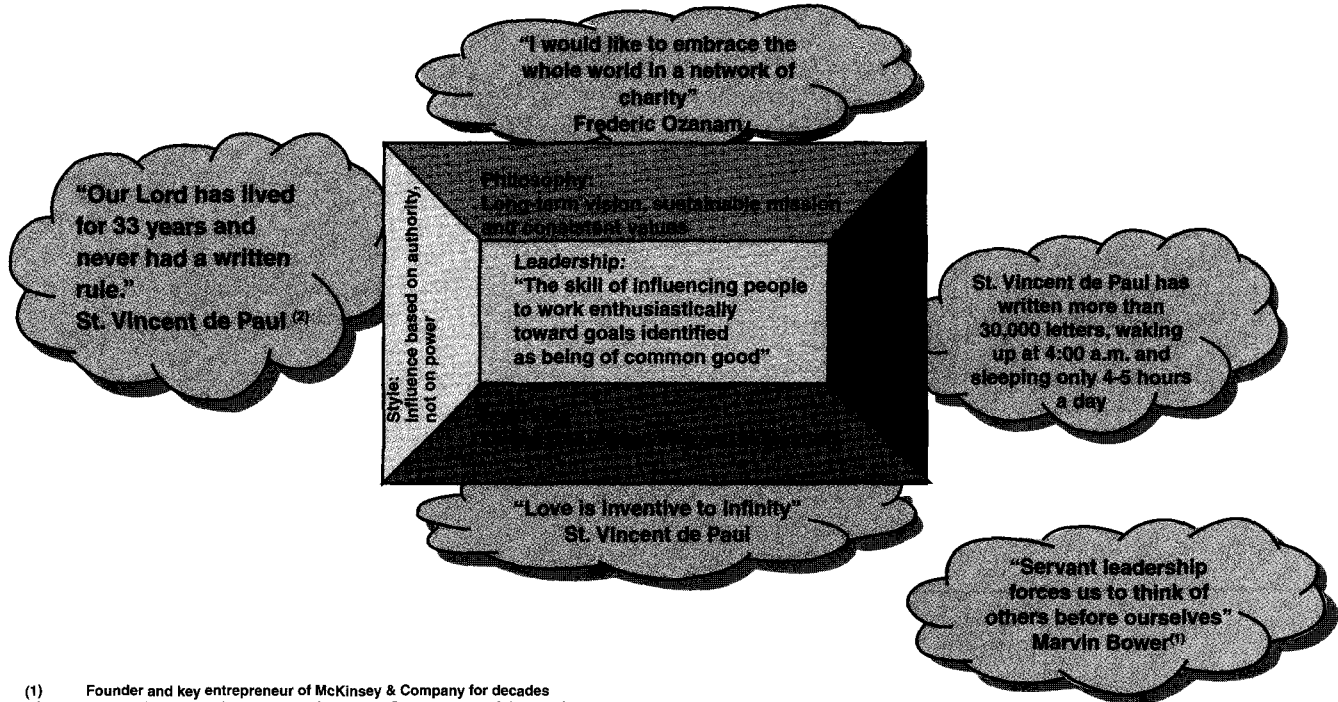
This phenomenon is a case for analysis. Why has the Society been so successful?

It is possible to provide an analysis based on the Service/Vincentian Leadership model, as Figure 2 shows.

⁶ This quote is traditionally attributed to Frederick Ozanam, although it is not found in his writings.

Figure 1: Service Leadership Model

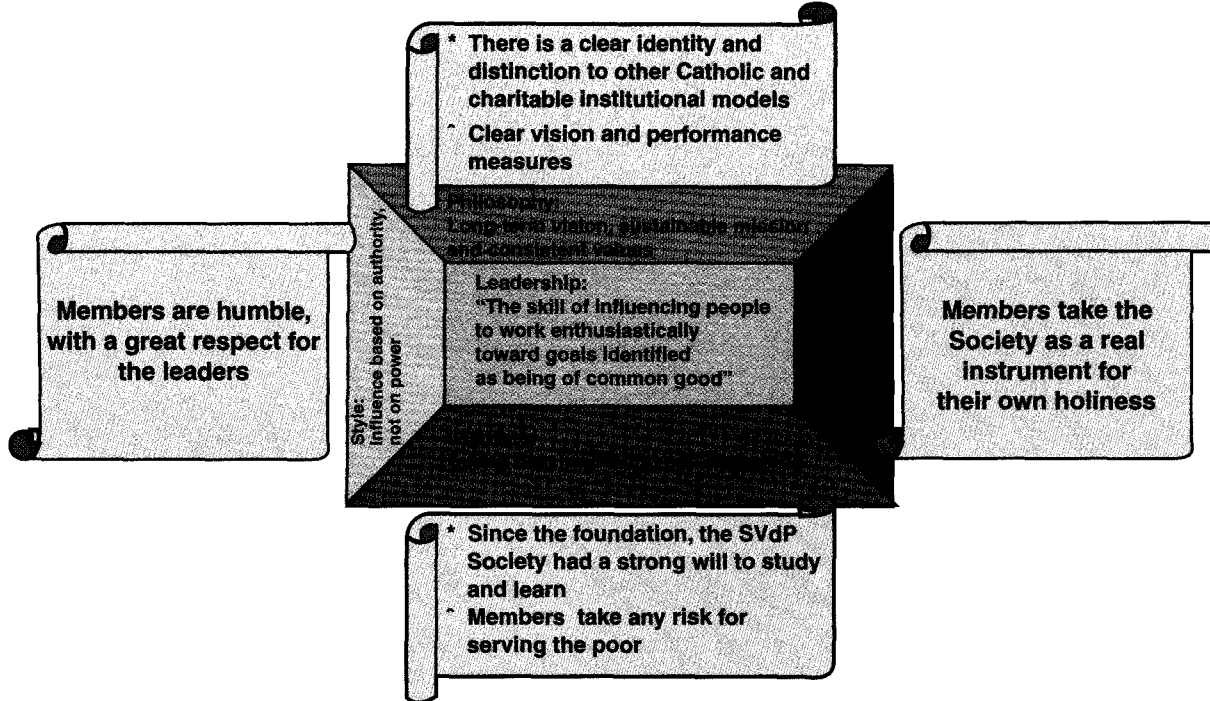
Quotes and examples on the Service/Vincentian Leadership elements



(1) Founder and key entrepreneur of McKinsey & Company for decades
(2) When asked about the need for rules for the Congregation of the Mission

Figure 2: The model applied to the SVdP Society

Examples of SVdP characteristics, which fit the Service/Vincentian Leadership elements



- *The SVdP Society learns from the past.*

From its very beginnings the Society developed a strong desire to learn from previous leaders and entrepreneurs. Initially, Ozanam learned the importance of serving the poor from Saint Vincent de Paul. As mentioned before, the Society was founded by students from a prestigious university who had a deep desire to learn and study.

In addition, the Society learned from taking risks. Ozanam wanted the Society to develop outside of France, covering every part of the world and following the model of the first Conference, which was used as a pilot for growth. His strategy was based on the concept of “thinking big, starting small and growing fast.”

Finally, the Society developed a very conservative approach to dealing with change, making decisions based on tradition and the International Rule in a centralized manner.

- *The members of the SVdP Society have an intrinsic will to serve.*

Direct volunteer service, listening to the needs of the poor and sharing their sufferings, is only sustainable if the server has the means to serve. Direct contact with poverty leads the membership of the Society to create innovative ways to reduce it, either through the formation of new Conferences or the launching of social works. Growth is a response to the exposure to poverty.

- *The members of the Society strive to accomplish their own holiness.*

The first objective of the Society is to provide a means to be holy through service to the poor. As this holiness is a relationship between the person and God, there is no need to pretend to serve. In other words, genuine service is a fundamental behavioral

trait of the Society's membership.

- *The Society has a distinctive mission and vision.*
The operational model of the Society is based on three components: first, direct service to the poor (through frequent home visits); second, the grouping of members in small faith communities (Conferences); and third, the laicity of its members. This differentiation had repercussions on the Society's growth – its adequacy in the world, and the positive reinforcement of being a member of a Society with a clear and complete set of values.

In addition, the leaders of the Society have clear performance measures, including quantitative and qualitative growth and the maintenance of the initial spirit of the Society.

The SVdP Society also Highlights some Concerns in the Implementation of Service/Vincentian Leadership

Despite being a case of success, the SVdP Society, as many large volunteer-based organizations, inhibits fully implementing the model of Service/Vincentian Leadership presented in this paper.

- *Learning is constrained by the avoidance of risk-taking, evaluation, and change.*
The essence of Service/Vincentian Leadership is to risk, to learn from mistakes and to review practices according to these opportunities without losing the initial spirit which differentiates an institution from others. To risk means to better serve, as the needs of the people served change over time. To learn from mistakes means to better serve, as the leader must accept that mistakes are sometimes made with the good intention of improving service. To review practices means to better serve, as a good leader puts the mission before that of his/her own position.

As a large society, based on a Rule, the SVdP has a tendency to be conservative. Its leaders tend to make decisions based on past experiences and current rules. In addition, being a society formed in humble spirit, they do not naturally possess the attitude to explicitly evaluate and give feed-back to other members.

- *Influence based on authority is constrained by the strong centralization of decision-making.*

The essence of leadership based on authority and not on power is decentralization.

As a large Society, the SVdP has continuously enforced the centralization of power as a key element of its management style. Leaders tend to make decisions based on the core position of the SVdP and its Rule. In addition, being a Society formed by humble members, they do not question this management style.

- *Long-term vision of the Society is constrained by humility and the nature of their operations.*

The essence of creating a long-term vision is the ability to see beyond the immediate horizon.

Being a Society formed by humble members (in most cases, not trained to “see out of the box”), it is difficult for its leaders to build a long-term and challenging vision. Even when leaders of the Society are trained in their professional lives to use concepts of vision building and managing by results, an interesting phenomena frequently takes place—they tend to forget these concepts in managing the Society. In addition the operations of the Society are based on “grass-root” and “small” actions performed individually to assist the poor, practices which do not necessarily motivate people to think globally.

- *Lack of training constrains leaders in teaching by example.*

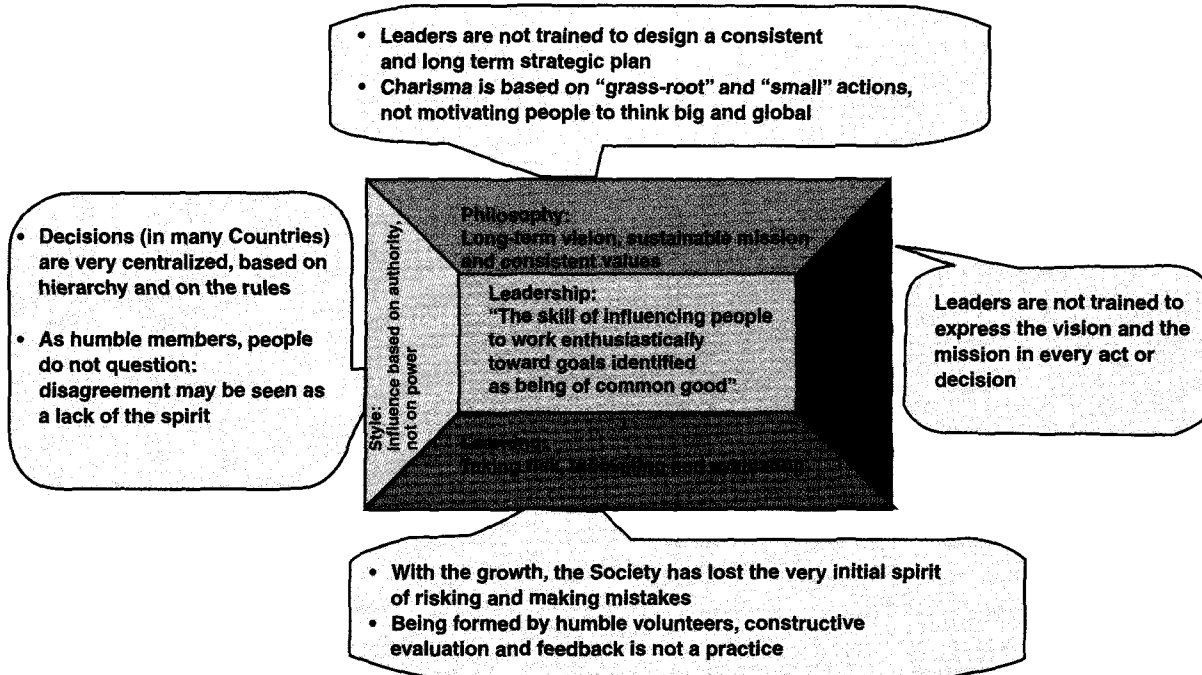
A servant leader must be aware that each action or

decision is a symbol of service.

Being a Society formed by humble volunteers unaccustomed to proclaiming the good they do, its leaders are not trained to evaluate the impact of their decisions and actions on the members' perception. There is a common belief that the Society's members have a vocation, which is a grace, and, as a result, does not need to be taught or reinforced by the examples of leadership.

Figure 3 summarizes the constraints presented above.

Figure 3 Constraints to the full application of Service Leadership in the SVdP Society



Lessons Learned as Applied to the Vincentian Leadership Initiative Expansion

The following are characteristics of the SVdP Society defined as obstacles to the full implementation of Service/Vincentian Leadership concepts, as stated in our model: to be conservative; to be formed by humble members; to enforce the centralization of power; to be formed by humble volunteers unaccustomed to proclaiming the good they do; and to have a vocation, which is a grace.

An analysis of these characteristics leads us to two key questions: (1) *are these characteristics real obstacles or key factors in the success of the SVdP;* and (2) *are they sustainable in a “globalized” world where flexibility, networking, and innovation are critical?*

There are no easy answers to these questions. Answers depend on the sociological environment in which each Conference of the Society is located. As a key principle, the Society is based on “unity in diversity,” and should, as a result, keep principles and the primitive spirit alive yet attuned to each particular social environment.

However, our analysis warrants the proposal of some recommendations for the implementation of the Service/Vincentian Leadership Initiative:

- **Recommendation 1: Respect diversity**

An institution where Service/Vincentian Leadership will be implemented should be adapted to reflect the local sociological environment. The key questions for implementation are: why, when and how to change?

- **Recommendation 2: Invest in education**

As leadership is a skill, current and future leaders should be trained to understand the meaning of Service/Vincentian Leadership, adapt it to local circumstances, and apply and develop it over time.

- **Recommendation 3: Think big, start small and grow fast**

Any initiative generated by the Service/Vincentian Leadership program will produce a sizeable impact only in the long run. As a result, it is necessary to create a vision, start with a pilot program, research, and plan how to adapt and expand.