

A Closer Look at the Four Pillars of Heroic Leadership

by Chris Lowney

What are the Jesuit leadership secrets? How did individual Jesuits become leaders and why were their corporate efforts successful?

Four principles stand out. Jesuits became leaders by

- understanding their strengths, weaknesses, values, and worldview
- confidently innovating and adapting to embrace a changing world
- engaging others with a positive, loving attitude
- energizing themselves and others through heroic ambitions

These four principles don't come from a Jesuit rule book or leadership instruction manual. It's pretty certain that no early Jesuits — and no one else in the sixteenth century, for that matter — ever used the word leadership as we understand it today. Nor did they speak explicitly of self-awareness, ingenuity, love, and heroism as four core principles driving their organization. Instead, their leadership principles emerge only as we sift through their words and actions to find those themes that animated them at their most successful. In the early Jesuits' case, one could do the sifting with a pitchfork: these four themes infused their work and achievements, leap from their writings, and dominated their carefully mapped training program.

These four leadership principles guided individual Jesuits, and the same four formed the basis of Jesuit corporate culture.

Self-awareness: "To order one's life"

Leaders thrive by understanding who they are and what they value, by becoming aware of unhealthy blind spots or weaknesses that can derail them, and by cultivating the habit of continuous selfreflection and learning.

Only the person who knows what he or she wants can pursue it energetically and inspire others to do so. Only those who have pinpointed their weaknesses can conquer them. Obvious principles, but rarely heeded in practice.

The early Jesuits invented an array of tools and practices to mold self-aware recruits. Cut off for a month from work, friends, news, and even casual conversation, Jesuit trainees dedicated all their energy to a searching self-assessment. Engaging in the Spiritual Exercises was the peak developmental moment of a training regimen that encompassed everything from scutwork to begging for food and lodging on a solitary long-distance pilgrimage. Recruits emerged from training knowing what they wanted in life, how to get it, and what weaknesses could trip them up.

Self-awareness is never a finished product. Granted, some guiding life values are usually adopted early on and thereafter remain nonnegotiable. But our already complex world keeps changing. Leaders must keep changing as well. Every early Jesuit dedicated an intensively focused week each year to revitalizing his core commitment and assessing his performance during the previous year.

Moreover, Jesuit self-awareness techniques accommodated change by instilling in recruits the habit of continuous learning, of daily reflection on activities. These techniques remain relevant today precisely because they were designed to allow busy people to "reflect on the run." Most religious prior to the Jesuits counted on the cloister walls to help them remain focused and recollected each day. But Loyola essentially tore down the monastery walls to immerse his Jesuits in the maelstrom of daily life. Once those walls came down, Jesuits had to employ techniques to remain recollected while all hell was breaking loose around them—just as everyone else has to today.

Centuries later, academic studies are finally catching up to Loyola's vision and are validating his emphasis on self-awareness. Though executives frequently rise through the ranks on the strength of their technical expertise, raw intelligence, and/or sheer ambition, these traits alone rarely translate into successful longterm leadership performance. Research increasingly suggests that IQ and technical skills are far less crucial to leadership success than is mature self-awareness. In other words, the hard evidence points to the critical soft skills that are encompassed by knowing oneself.

Ingenuity: "The whole world will become our house"

Leaders make themselves and others comfortable in a changing world. They eagerly explore new ideas, approaches, and cultures rather than shrink defensively from what lurks around life's next corner. Anchored by nonnegotiable principles and values, they cultivate the "indifference" that allows them to adapt confidently.

Loyola described the ideal Jesuit as "living with one foot raised" — always ready to respond to emerging opportunities. Self-awareness is key to successfully living with one foot raised. A leader must rid him- or herself of ingrained habits, prejudices, cultural preferences, and the "we've always done it this way" attitude — the baggage that blocks rapid adaptive responses. Of course, not everything is discardable baggage. Core beliefs and values are nonnegotiable, the centering anchor that allows for purposeful change as opposed to aimless drifting on shifting currents. The leader adapts confidently by knowing what's negotiable and what isn't.

Our generation has been dizzied by seemingly unending change. Within the last fifty years, a handful of humans has stood on the moon; the Earth-bound majority learned to e-mail friends. The early Jesuits faced equally profound changes. Voyages of discovery had more than tripled the size of the settled world then known to Europeans. Asia and the Americas had begun to appear on the world map — the European version of the world map, that is — first in sketchy outline but with increasing definition over the early decades of the sixteenth century. In Europe, a Protestant reformation sparked by Martin Luther had in one generation ended Roman Catholicism's monolithic domination of Christendom, winning broad support for new religious ideas and practices. The reformers helped spur the world's first media revolution. It's been estimated that Martin Luther alone was responsible for composing one-quarter of all the titles published in Germany over a ten-year period. As Luther and others exploited the full power of the printing press for the first time in its short history, publishers inundated Europe with more books in a fifty-year period than had been published in the previous millennium.

In those troubled times, the Vatican hierarchy vacillated between deer-in-the-headlights paralysis and defensive overreaction to the roiling environment.⁷ Distracted by other priorities or wallowing in denial, church authorities first allowed Martin Luther's challenge to fester; then, by summarily

excommunicating the dissident monk, they handed him a platform with which he could rally support. While Luther and others swamped Europe with books and pamphlets outlining their reform message, Vatican authorities got busy publishing their first index of banned books.

While the Vatican sputtered in its efforts to halt unwelcome changes, Loyola's Jesuits plunged headlong into this changing world. In Europe, Vatican officials were condemning the vernacular Bibles and prayer books used in Protestant worship; outside Europe, Jesuits were compiling groundbreaking translating dictionaries for Tamil, Japanese, Vietnamese, and a host of other languages so that they could present their message in local languages through local culture. While a lumbering institutional church squandered nearly a decade in preparations for the Council of Trent — where they would galvanize strategic responses to the Protestant threat — nimbler Jesuits pursued their strategic agenda with greater speed and urgency. Within a decade of identifying higher education as a key priority in the 1540s, they had opened more than thirty colleges around the world.

How did the early Jesuits make themselves so immediately and totally comfortable in a world that had probably changed as much in their lifetimes as it had over the previous thousand years? Jesuits prized personal and corporate agility. They were quick, flexible, open to new ideas. The same set of tools and practices that fostered self-awareness, Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, also instilled "indifference," freedom from attachments to places and possessions, which could result in inappropriate resistance to movement or change. The "living with one foot raised" message was reinforced constantly: Loyola's chief lieutenant barnstormed Europe reminding Jesuits that for men open to new and ever changing missions, "the whole world will become [their] house."⁸ He meant it literally, urging them to speed, mobility, and rapid response. But he was also describing a mindset for each Jesuit to cultivate.

Love: "With greater love than fear"

Leaders face the world with a confident, healthy sense of themselves as endowed with talent, dignity, and the potential to lead. They find exactly these same attributes in others and passionately commit to honoring and unlocking the potential they find in themselves and in others. They create environments bound and energized by loyalty, affection, and mutual support.

Machiavelli counseled leaders that "to be feared is safer than to be loved." Unsurprising advice from a man convinced that humanity was "ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain."

Ignatius Loyola was his polar opposite, counseling Jesuit managers to govern using "all the love and modesty and charity possible" so that teams could thrive in environments of "greater love than fear."⁹

This starkly contrasting Jesuit approach stemmed from their starkly contrasting worldview. Whereas Machiavelli beheld a world peopled with fearful, ungrateful deceivers, Jesuits viewed the world through a very different lens: they saw each person as uniquely endowed with talent and dignity. The Jesuits' behavior flowed from their vision, as Machiavelli's advice did from his. Love-driven Jesuits worked with passion and courage, whether teaching teenagers or confronting colonialists who abused indigenous peoples in Latin America.

Jesuits remained committed to this vision because it worked. They were energized by working with and for colleagues who valued, trusted, and supported them. Teams were bound by loyalty and affection, not riddled with backstabbing and second-guessing. The company's pioneer in Asia, Francis Xavier, eloquently exemplified the depth and far-reaching power of these ties. Crisscrossing Asia, thousands of miles and some years removed from his cofounder colleagues, he drew energy from mere scraps of paper he carried bearing each one's signature. Why? Their signatures alone reminded him of "the great love which [colleagues] always showed and are still showing toward me."¹⁰ It's hard to imagine today's corporate road warriors snapping open briefcases to draw similar energy from the latest memo from headquarters.

Their egalitarian, worldembracing vision enabled Jesuits to create teams that seamlessly blended recruits from European nobility, the world's poorest families, and most everything in between. Jesuits working in China included nationals from half a dozen countries, all this centuries before the term multinational teams entered the corporate lexicon.

Everyone knows that organizations, armies, sports teams, and companies perform best when team members respect, value, and trust one another and sacrifice narrow self-interest to support team goals and their colleagues' success. Individuals perform best when they are respected, valued, and trusted by someone who genuinely cares for their well-being. Loyola was unafraid to call this bundle of winning attitudes "love" and to tap its energizing, unifying power for his Jesuit team. Effective leaders tap its power today as well.

Heroism: "Eliciting great desires"

Leaders imagine an inspiring future and strive to shape it rather than passively watching the future happen around them. Heroes extract gold from the opportunities at hand rather than waiting for golden opportunities to be handed to them.

Management consultants endlessly search for the elusive surefire formula to elicit motivated, committed performance from individuals and teams. As much as managerial America would like to throw a switch or push a button to ignite a corps of charged-up workers, it doesn't work that way. There is no on switch for motivation. Or, more accurately, there is a switch of sorts, but it is on the inside. Ultimately, only each individual can motivate him- or herself.

Loyola once encouraged a Jesuit team in Ferrara, Italy, by saying that they should "endeavor to conceive great resolves and elicit equally great desires."¹¹ It was not an isolated sentiment. Jesuit culture spurred Jesuits to "elicit great desires" by envisioning heroic objectives. Outstanding personal and team performance resulted, just as it does when athletes, musicians, or managers focus unrelentingly on ambitious goals. Jesuits were also driven by a restless energy, encapsulated in a simple company motto, *magis*, always something more, something greater. For Jesuit explorers all over the world, *magis* inspired them to make the first European forays into Tibet, to the headwaters of the Blue Nile, and to the upper reaches of the Mississippi River. For Jesuit teachers in hundreds of colleges, *magis* focused them on providing what was consistently the world's highest-quality secondary education available-one student at a time, one day at a time. Regardless of what they were doing, they were rooted in the belief that above-and-beyond performance occurred when teams and individuals aimed high.

The Jesuits built their company on this conviction. They looked to enlist total team effort in something that was larger than any one Jesuit. Yet team commitment followed individual commitment. Each recruit first went through the process of personally shaping and owning the team's goals, of eliciting his own "great desires" and motivating himself.

How did the Jesuits build the most successful religious company in history? And how do individuals become leaders today? By knowing themselves. By innovating to embrace a changing world. By loving self and others. By aiming high.

Self-awareness, ingenuity, love, and heroism. Not four techniques, but four principles forming one way of living, one modo de proceder. No early Jesuit succeeded by adopting three and ignoring the fourth. To understand Jesuit leadership, we must first dissect it to study its four core elements and then conclude by reassembling them to bring Jesuit leadership to life. For its real power lies not in the mere sum of its parts but in what results when these four principles reinforce one another in an integrated life.

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Notes

7. Strictly speaking, the term Vatican — as a synonym for the papal bureaucracy — is not appropriately used for the period before 1870. It is used throughout this work — admittedly anachronistically — as an informal, short-hand reference for the papal bureaucracy.

8. John J. O'Malley, S.J., "To Travel to Any Part of the World: Jeronimo Nadal and the Jesuit Vocation," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 16, no. 2 (March 1984):7.

9. *Constitutions*, #667.

10. Georg Schurhammer, S.J., *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times*, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J. (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1973-82), 4:438.

11. William J. Young, S.J., ed. and trans., *Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1959), 245.

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