

## Changing images of leadership

# A Leadership of communion

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*Leadership roles are sometimes ambiguous and need discerning in order to be of authentic service to the community and foster participation. In this brief reflection offered at an international meeting of community leaders, the Focolare Movement's co-president speaks of a twofold understanding of leadership.*

It is generally customary to think of leaders as individuals who have strong personalities, endowed with an indomitable spirit and powerful convictions. They carry others ahead with them towards identifiable goals. But often, unfortunately, these goals are passed off as being real, deep needs of everyone involved. Not always, but often enough.

North American sociologist, Susan Cain, devoted much research to the analysis of the "extroverted" personality which, in her opinion, has characterized figures in leadership there since the early decades of the twentieth century. There has been a clear, effective, strategic campaign supported by countless numbers of (leadership) courses, publications and educational tools. They speak to a type of person who is magnetic, charming, attractive, bright, domineering, decisive, and energetic. And this image has established itself in much of the world as emblematic of leaders.

But in her 2012 book (*Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*<sup>1</sup>) Cain also tells us that things have been changing for a while now and a new type of personality is coming to the forefront. It is precisely the introvert, the reflective person who, with his or her calmness, focuses attention more and more on social environments and begins exercising a completely different kind of leadership.

### Styles of Leadership

While traditional, more "extroverted" leaders may favor action over reflection, effectiveness over relationship, a newer type of leader does the opposite. They prefer to stop or pause before taking an initiative. (Not too much stopping . . . not too much pausing! But the right amount.) He or she prefers to "waste time" on relationships with others instead of seeking efficiency at all costs, conscious that in the long run, cultivating relationships is the most fruitful thing.

A shining example of this kind of leader, to use Cain's framework, is Gandhi. When he traveled to the New Delhi capitol to address Congress, he had thousands of miles by train behind him during which he visited villages throughout the country. And he carried within himself thousands of relationships. When he took the floor that day, Gandhi spoke simply and highlighted the actual situations of the people that he had seen. No one in the hall

expected those words and there was a dead silence. A leader was born then, a non-violent one, who would lead his thousand-year-old nation to independence from England.

### **Prioritizing “us” over “me”**

Nowadays we see that many individuals trained to exercise more domineering, electric ways of leading may actually have their feet stuck in the mud. At times, a kind of paper-mâché castle has been constructed that does not convey conviction, because there is a lack of reflection and of love.

So, a new kind of leadership is welcomed. We need it. With our categories, we would say the world today – and our communities – need leaders of communion. Certainly, there is a need for determined, convinced – and also high-powered – people, but ones who can also be capable of giving priority to the “we” over the purely “I”. There is need for people who generate consensus, reverse old trends of unnerving competitiveness and create space for everyone, including the weakest – or rather, they create space especially for the weakest. With this kind of leadership, everyone's talents come to the table and are not buried underneath envy.

### **Traits of a “leader of communion”**

A ‘leader of communion’ favors listening over speaking, allowing others to do instead of doing, prioritizes service before profit, meekness over violence, love over selfishness, fostering agreement instead of control and wisdom over ideologies.

Such a leader facilitates reciprocity in relationships and thus also the presence of Jesus that He promised to those united in His name. Such a leader is the first to love and take upon himself or herself the burdens of those around them and care for the pain of others. Such a leader works to resolve conflicts, avoid polarizations and is ready to take the blame when necessary.

A ‘leader of communion’ distances themselves from the trappings of power and thus knows how to ‘walk away’ when the time comes to let go of a role or responsibility. He or she seeks the truth and therefore often breaks malicious cycles of gossip and condemnation that surface.

For a leader of communion, their methodology is synodality. It is walking together with others. Deeply spiritual, they are also concrete and accessible to others. Guided by humility, their own self-awareness ensures continual growth. Such leaders are free because they are afraid of no one, except their own ‘old self’<sup>2</sup>. Ultimately, a leader of communion is a ‘Marian’ leader, full of love and focused on service.

### **Idealists, with their feet on the ground.**

You might say this is an idyllic vision. No one has all these traits. But I would say it is not idyllic. It is ideal. This means that it is also real, like the passage about the first community in Jerusalem which certainly wasn't exactly as it is described in the Acts of the Apostles. But they wrote it in that way because they saw a number of these traits in so many communities. So, they assembled them all together. That is why it is not idyllic, but rather it is ideal. The important thing – and this is the advantage of ideals – is to orient ourselves in that direction.

It is tending towards an ideal with our feet firmly planted on the ground, with the help of grace that continually sustains us and urges us forward.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Cain, *Quiet: Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, Random House, New York. 2012.

<sup>2</sup> **See** *Colossians* 3: 9-10.