

Developing Leaders

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Leadership Journeys

Pope Francis - Leading Positive Change

Isn't it ironic that the leader of an antique, conservative religion would become an icon for progressive change in the digital age? It's not often a leader catapults to the Forbes Top 10 list, especially a religious leader. We expect to see these lists filled with titans of business and politics, maybe a handful of entrepreneurs and, occasionally, a rock star here or there.

By Bob Rosen

The phenomenon we have witnessed over the past two years is none other than the leader of the Catholic Church, the Bishop of Rome, and Sovereign of the Vatican City, Pope Francis. He is holding steady to his #4 position on Forbes' list of the World's Most Powerful People – right between China's Xi Jinping and Germany's Angela Merkel.

Pope Francis rose to his leadership position essentially unknown and untried. He was not particularly notable as a reformer in his home country of Argentina and gave little indication that he would be any kind of change agent. He has surprised many, though, by quickly and easily moving on to the world stage and becoming not only a media darling but a social media savant as well. Francis literally touches the minds and hearts of millions of followers, every day, through direct contact on social media.

So how does a relatively inexperienced leader in an inertia-filled organization grab the reins of change while cautiously protecting and reinvigorating the Church? By leading from his heart, and from the knowledge of who he is, Pope Francis has been able to transform himself as he adapts to new environments and to the ever-changing demands of his job. His first big, strategic decision was his selection of the name Francis, in honour of Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of the environment and the poor.

The very nature of the papal job is to protect the status quo. The Catholic Church, as an institution, stretches back over 2,000 years. It is safe to say it has outlived everyone. The pope has unbridled powers and authority. Francis's choice of how to use that power is deeply embedded in his personal mission and beliefs to make global society more inclusive, fair and socially responsive. He has put a spotlight on things that can be fixed, rather than building a wall of ideological isolation. He has made it clear what is on his agenda (poverty, climate change, unchecked free-market capitalism) and has set aside divisive social issues like birth control, gay marriage, and abortion. Francis is making haste slowly, changing nothing while changing everything about the Church.

Pope Francis Leadership Journey Lesson #1: Use Your Values as Your North Star

When you lead down in the weeds, you never know when you are lost. Pope Francis does an excellent job of avoiding the weeds. His North Star is clear -- to him, to the media and to his followers. It guides him to where and how to engage others with the issues he cares about.



Leadership is hard, especially when confronting policies and people that simply do not work anymore. Caving in to doubt and criticism just creates organizational mirages that perpetuate dysfunction. And we are all familiar with outward manifestations of that dysfunction: “Nothing needs to change,” “all is okay,” “it’s not my job to change that,” “it’s too risky for me to get involved,” “I could get fired for challenging that.”

Being clear about your North Star, your core values, will give you the courage, confidence and humility to hold steady under pressure.

Try this exercise to stay aligned with your North Star:

Like Pope Francis did, select a name that embodies what you believe in and who you are, someone you admire for their leadership. When in doubt, or when confronted with value dilemmas, remind yourself of that name. Let them help you keep your North Star in view.

Pope Francis Leadership Journey Lesson #2: Be a Catalyst for Positive Change

Pope Francis’s clever use of social media has already changed the dialogue among progressive forces advocating for the common good around the world. For example, Pope Francis is considered the most influential world leader based on the number of messages retweeted by his Twitter followers. He has over twenty-two million followers on nine Twitter accounts, each in a different language. As a result, Twitter has become his pulpit to evangelize and be a catalyst for positive change.

One very astute use of Twitter by the pope came on June 18, 2015, when he released his 183-page encyclical on the topic of climate change and the environment. Rather than wait for this tome to trickle down through the Church and media, he also posted this 17-word tweet which made his encyclical go viral:

“The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.”



The Jesuit-trained pontiff knows how to communicate and scale his message. His vivid use of metaphors and analogies can capture the mind's eye and touch the emotional part of the brain where decision-making happens. The 17-word tweet illuminated his message instantly and placed the spotlight on his agenda. Most importantly, Francis is comfortable serving as the lightening rod to influence others.

Like Pope Francis, you can scale your message via internal networks and social media. As a leader, you need to be comfortable being out front, driving change, talking about real things that need fixing. Your peers and employees are endlessly curious about you, how you approach a problem, what is important to you. Your employees love to peek into your world and guess what you are thinking, what you are planning to do next. They want to read your mind. You can act as a catalyst for positive change by feeding them your message strategically, simply and repeatedly.

Try this exercise to be a catalyst of positive change:

Start sharing content that articulates the change you want to see happen in your organization. Use the channels you prefer and the ones your peers and employees use. For a month, every day, share something that will open or continue a dialogue about the change you want to happen. It could be a Ted Talk, a news article, a tweet, an Instagram, a blog, a book excerpt, a video, or a podcast. Be thoughtful and strategic, and respond to any input and comments you receive. When the month is up, assess whether you are influencing the discussion and the flow of ideas. If the answer is yes, keep it going and add this task to your ongoing to-do list.

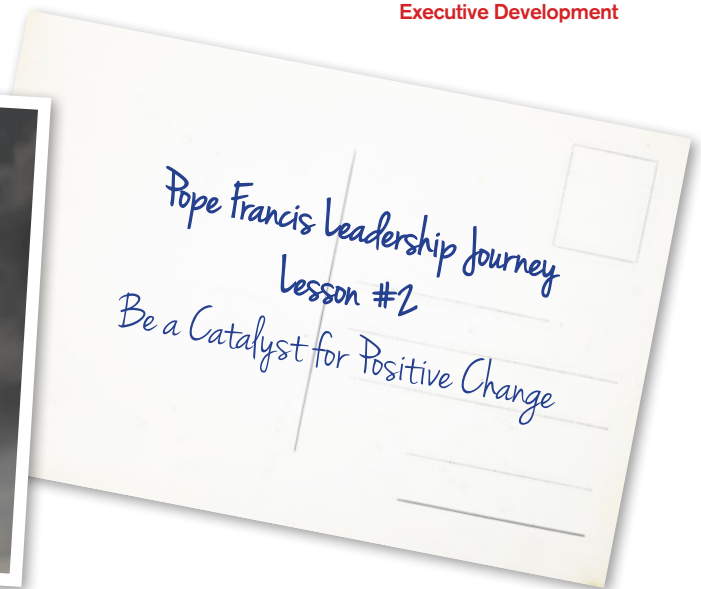
Pope Francis Leadership Journey Lesson #3: Walk Your Talk

Pope Francis is a master of walking his talk. He is very comfortable being his authentic self, exhibiting his core values in following the path of St. Francis. Upon assumption of the papacy, he made a point of discarding the more flamboyant pontifical accessories and chose to live and dress more simply. He spends more time with the people, greeting them, doing selfies, smiling in public (rare behavior from previous Popes). He is even seen driving his own car, a Ford Focus. He lives more like a parish priest than a world celebrity.

Pope Francis frequently demonstrates gestures of openness, like stopping to let followers take photos with him or putting on a yellow miner's hat at the end of a speech he gave in Bolivia. He knows that a photo opportunity is as or more powerful than a tweet.

Everything you do in the digital world must reflect your core values and agenda. You live in a 24/7 leadership world. People are always scrutinizing leaders. Walking your talk is more important than ever today in an increasingly cynical world.





Walking your talk is deeply connected to your ego, and managing your ego requires you to manage a complex duality. You need to operate both as a big 'I' and as a little 'i'. A strong big "I" allows you to be comfortable in the limelight, rubbing shoulders with humanity (literally and figuratively), demonstrating confidence in your values and ideas, and nudging people towards success. But you also need the little "i" to be humble, respectful, compassionate, accessible, and open to learning.

Pope Francis is an interesting example of how to balance this ego duality. He strikes a balance between recognizing the needs of others and managing his personal ego needs. In public, his behaviour encourages people to approach him -- whether he is eating at a pizza shop, holding a baby, talking with tourists or answering questions from reporters. This is an important skill because the complex problems facing leaders and businesses today require the input of many minds to solve.

Try this exercise to ensure you are walking your talk:

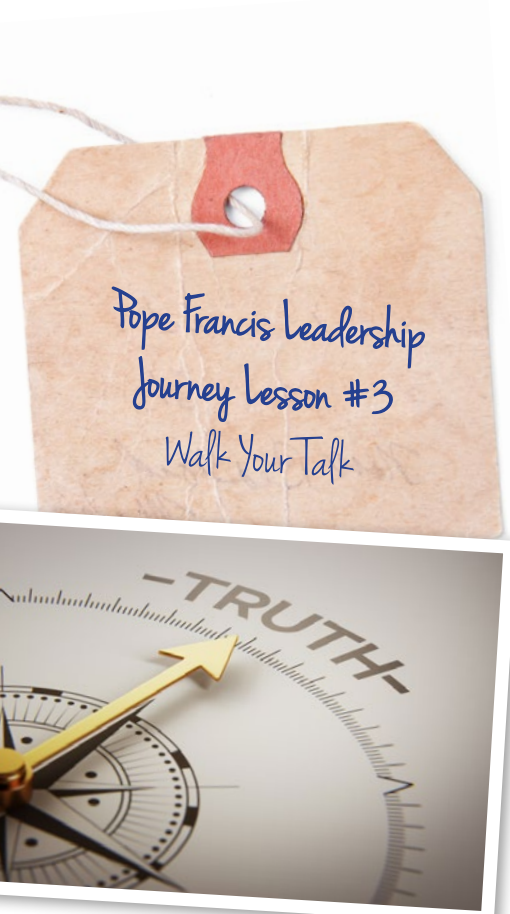
If you are a leader, most likely you have a well developed big "I." Work on your little "i" and identify situations or times in the past week where you have had the opportunity to be humble, be respectful or be open to learning. How comfortable were you? When was the last time a subordinate taught you something new?

Pope Francis is one person trying to make a difference for humanity. His stage is the world. He is the spiritual leader to one-sixth of the world's population. Your stage may not be quite as big, but individuals with much smaller platforms are making change happen every day.

This first Jesuit pope understands that people who are kind are happier. He knows altruism is healthy for the body and the soul, and that joy comes from a place of humility. People respond to humility with greater engagement, commitment and effort on behalf of the leader and their organization. Pope Francis is a shining example of that simple leadership principle at work.



Bob Rosen is an organizational psychologist and author of six books, including his latest, The New York Times Bestseller, Grounded: How Leaders Stay Rooted in an Uncertain World. His firm, Healthy Companies International (healthycompanies.com), has worked with Johnson & Johnson, Brinks, Northrop Grumman, Citigroup, PepsiCo, ING and PricewaterhouseCoopers among others.



Despite much discussion about the need for leadership development in corporate and public organizations, and the considerable industry that surrounds it, this is the first authoritative periodical focused entirely on this area.

Developing Leaders looks at the critical confluence between the provision of executive education and the real everyday needs of organizations to strengthen their management teams, their corporate performance, and their leadership.

The publication presents the latest thinking and most recent developments in both academic and commercial executive education provision worldwide, what it is achieving and which are the best models for success, sharing the experience and expertise of top leaders and world class educators.

Developing Leaders is published in both hardcopy and online “page turning” format. The quarterly magazine complements the IEDP website - the definitive resource for executive developers worldwide.

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