

# Leadership in a New Lens

## Part II: Transformative Partnerships, a new lens for leadership

Video Presentation for the Allegany Franciscan Regional Gatherings

Ted Dunn, Ph.D., November 22 – 23, 2024

---

*“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion.*

*As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our (community).”*

~ Abraham Lincoln

---

Let's take a look at this new lens for leadership and what we mean by “transformative partnerships.” At the very least, we hope this will jostle your thinking and enhance your incentive to create something new. Ideally, this will help you to see, and potentially transform, how you might partner with one another and others outside of your community. Beyond any structural changes you might want to make, we want to know how you might wish to transform your relationships as leaders and members, or, as members, with others who resonate with your charisma and mission?

In this presentation we want to shift your consciousness regarding leadership to challenge the default thinking and status quo approaches to leadership. We want to invite your curiosity, imagination, and potential transformation in the way you govern your lives, influence one another, make decisions, and co-create your vision of the future.

First, we'll look at a few of the evolving definitions of leadership. Second, we will briefly recall the effects of lifecycles stages that you explored in your cluster and small group conversations. We will look at the kind of leadership needed when a community is at a crossroads and chooses to walk the ancient path of transformation toward new life. We will then look at leadership through this new lens of “transformative partnerships.” This is essentially an effort to introduce a new paradigm grounded in the value base of “mutuality.” Of course, this value base of mutuality is familiar to all of you given your Congregational training in CARE.

## Leadership Defined

Let's start by defining leadership. The most obvious and pragmatic definition of leadership is this: “you are a leader only if you have followers.” Notice the reciprocal relationship. There is no such thing as a leader without followers and there are no followers if there are no leaders. Their identities and purposes cannot be defined outside of this relationship. They are two parts of the same coin, yin and yang, two parts of the same system. Hold that thought and we will return to this notion of reciprocity later in our discussion.

For now, let's go back in time to gather a few definitions, starting with the advice given to Moses in Exodus 18: 21. “Choose from among the people, some capable and God-fearing people, someone who is trustworthy and incorruptible.”

Plato said a leader is someone of high “moral character.”

Aristotle agreed, saying this of leadership: “the difference between the exercise of power and the exercise of leadership is *morality* wherein sorrow promotes *understanding*, doubt engenders *reflection*, encourage initiates the *will to act*.”

More recent definitions of leadership have also emphasized the quality and character of the leader. According to Parker Palmer, a celebrated author among religious in the United States: “a leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what's going on inside himself or herself, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good.”

These understandings of leadership emphasized morality as the *sine qua non* of leadership. Literally, this means you are not a leader if you have no moral compass providing direction to your use of power. This definition takes us beyond the pragmatic or transactional relationship between leaders and followers. It speaks to the moral values that influence how a leader wields power and shapes the relationship with his or her followers.

Kouzes and Posner have researched leadership across the globe and have published more on leadership than perhaps any other authors on the subject. In their cross-cultural studies of thousands of people across the globe, they asked the same question: “Which leaders are you willing to follow?” Here is the list of what surfaced most often in response to this question across all cultures. Guess which characteristics were at the very top of this list? I'll give you 30 seconds to ponder this.

If you guessed honesty, forward-looking, inspiring and competent, well done! These are the top four characteristics, which they eventually summarized with one word – “credibility.” Bottom line: if a leader has these 4 characteristics, if they are perceived as credible, people will choose to follow them.

Let’s go beyond characteristics of leaders and return to this notion of reciprocity. More contemporary definitions have emphasized the relational dimension of leadership. Kouzes and Posner tell us that “leadership is a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow.” Quigley and Bell, also distinguished researchers and authors on leadership, speak of leadership not so much as a position or skill but as a relationship. Thus, we have evolved from definitions and characteristics of leaders alone, to understanding leadership essentially as relational.

Thus far, we have a few evolving definitions and key elements pertaining to the leaders:

- First, they are persons with followers.
- Second, they are persons with high moral character
- Third, people are willing to follow leaders they perceive as credible, meaning honest, forward-looking, inspiring and competent.
- And forth, you can't define a leader separate and apart from their followers. The essence of leadership lies in the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers.

### The importance of lifecycle in defining this relationship

Let me insert here the importance of lifecycle stages in determining the kinds of leaders and members needed at each stage. I won’t review all the stages because you studied and hopefully discussed these during your recent cluster and small group conversations. I want to focus here on what is needed among leaders and members at the crossroads, the stage at which Beth and I believe your Congregation has currently arrived.

Going back to the Big Picture for a moment, it's important to recognize that there is an inverse relationship between the amount of structure in an organization and the amount of Spirit that is alive in the organization. In other words, the Spirit is at her highest when the amount of structure is at its lowest.

As the structure of a community becomes increasingly systematized, organized, and fixed, it begins to smother the life out of the Spirit. She has no room to breathe and move unencumbered through the community. Entropy sets in and life become

stagnant and stifling. Eventually, a community reaches a crossroads where the Spirit will either die out under the weight of calcified structures or the community chooses to liberate the Spirit by loosening the structures and starting anew.

There have been many authors who have spoken to this dynamic in our Church and in Religious Life, including: Michael Crosby, Sandra Schneiders, Ilia Delio, Richard Rohr, and Pope Francis, just to name a few. Communities need to remove the heavy blanket of structures that are smothering the life out of its Spirit. They need to loosen their insistence on “doing what they’ve always done,” challenge the entrenched patterns of the status quo, and allow the Spirit to emerge once again.

At the crossroads stage in the lifecycle of a community, if there is to be any possibility of transformation, what is needed are both leaders and members who are collectively committed to the work of transformation. While you want leaders of high moral character and credibility, and members with the same characteristics, it is the relationship, their partnership that is essential. Leaders, by themselves, cannot transform a community. There needs to be a total engagement of both leaders and members, partnering in the work of transformation. Hence, the term “transformative partnerships.”

This notion of “transformative partnerships” is a shift in paradigms we'd like you to consider. There have been many attempted shifts in the approach to leadership throughout the years for religious communities. I'm sure some of these sound familiar: servant leadership, authentic leadership, collaborative leadership, shared leadership, shepherd leadership, and transformative leadership. Servant leadership, introduced by Robert Greenleaf, was particularly popular in the United States. While all of these have sound principles of leadership, what they miss is an equal measure of emphasis on the membership and, in particular, the relationship between the two.

Here, I'd like to borrow from Ira Chaleff who wrote a book called *Courageous followers*. This book stands out as entirely different from the countless books on leadership that have naturally focused on just leaders. He seeks to turn on its head the traditional notion of leadership as a top-down, command and control, structure. He widens the lens from its traditional narrow focus on leadership alone, and rebalances the equation by speaking about followership, or what we refer to as membership. He looks at both sides of the coin, not just one. He is describing a new paradigm that underscores the reciprocal relationship between leaders and members.

In our vernacular, and looking through our lens, Beth and I understand what Chaleff is describing as transformative partnerships. It's the kind of partnership that has the potential for transforming communities who have reached a crossroads. It's the kind of partnership built upon the principles and skills of CARE with its value-base of mutuality.

Chaleff tells us that members ought not orbit around the leaders. Rather, members and leaders should both orbit around the purpose, vision and mission of an organization. In other words, leaders and members, and others you might invite, work in dynamic parity with one another to co-create their future. They each bring courage, compassion, empathy, shared power, integrity, co-responsibility and mutual accountability to their work together.

Sound familiar? These are the very values and skills of mutuality introduced to you in CARE. This is how members can partner in shaping the vision with leaders, not just implement it. This is how members contribute, not just critique. This is where members share accountability, not pass the buck to leadership. The emphasis is on co-responsibility, co-authorship of truth, mutual accountability and shared power.

### Beyond structure

We have said before that you can change where you live, or where you minister, but you'll take your patterns with you; that is, until and unless you do the inner work of transformation. You could add or subtract one or two more sisters to your Congregational leadership. You could relocate your leadership to Brazil or Jamaica. You could make all the structural changes you want, but until and unless you do the inner personal and communal work of transformation, you'll take the same mindsets, heartsets, skillsets, and behavioral patterns of interaction, with you.

Remember that transformation is multi-dimensional. It requires deep changes in the personal, communal and systemic dimensions of the Congregation.

It is also multi-layered, requiring changes beyond structure. Most groups focus on surface changes and neglect the layers and layers of personal and communal work. You can draw new circles and squares in your organizational chart, but unless you do this inner work, you'll take your patterns with you and replicate the past.

In advance of elections, most communities look solely at the needed qualities of leaders and neglect the other half of the equation, namely, members. Most focus on leadership as an isolated structure, rather than a structure embedded in the entire system, the Congregation as a whole. And most look at leadership as shapers

and implementers of the vision, the drivers of transformation, rather than the dynamic relationship between leaders and members who, together, create a new paradigm in support of the Congregation. Most communities will try to change the structure of leadership but neglect the very culture that largely shapes how leadership functions. They try harder, rather than differently, and neglect the inner work. As a result, there is no transformation.

## Multilayered Iceberg

Beyond structural change, in order to attain the kinds of partnerships that are truly transformative, you will need to challenge the behavioral patterns that are embedded in the current mindsets, heartsets and skillsets of both leadership and members. This is what we introduced to you in CARE.

Just to recall one example, let's look at the mindsets, heartsets, and skillsets related to "power." Currently, power is seen predominantly in the hands of leadership, rather than members. During CARE, when we asked you to think of the most powerful people in the world, you shouted out: the Pope, the President, Gandhi, and many others, mostly men, who had "position power." You failed to mention Jesus, arguably the most powerful person ever to walk the earth. He had no position power, only an immense amount of "personal power." Where did he get his power? From God. What was the nature of his power? compassion, integrity, mercy, honesty, forgiveness, justice, healing... LOVE.

We all have this kind of personal power to the degree we cultivate it. Leaders and members, alike, have the power to be merciful and compassionate, to tell the truth, to forgive and reconcile. We all have the power to offer mutual respect and dignity to one another, to tend to the trust when it is broken, to manage our boundaries, and not be a victim. We all have the power of agency to act and influence others with our unique knowledge, experience, and wisdom. We have the power to empower one another through faith, hope, and, above all, love.

This notion of transformative partnerships is about leaders and members forming mature relationships based upon the values of mutuality. It is about forming partnerships, not parent-child relationships. It is about risk-taking, not avoidance, and commitment not compliance. It is about ownership, where there is participation, and sweat equity, not deflection or sitting on the sidelines. It is about speaking hard truths, not about avoidance or people-pleasing. It is about inter-dependence, not co-dependence or counter-dependence. This is where everyone is an agent of change, investing their love, and their pain, as courageous leaders and members.

Shared power is but one element among many that undergird that value-base of mutuality, the fundamental basis of “transformative partnership.” We could go down the list, but you already have the list. You already have been introduced to the kinds of mindsets, heartsets and skillsets needed to forge these kinds of partnerships that can help transform your Congregation.

You have begun to look anew at the worldviews that perpetuate the status quo (for example U.S. domination) or transform it (for example, through mutual interactions). You have begun to have the soul-shifting conversations about what really matters in your lives (for example, during the CARE training). The notion of transformative partnerships is an example of a shift in paradigms that certainly includes but goes well beyond structure. You can change all the structures you want, you can redesign the circles and squares in your organizational chart, but unless you transform your relationships, there will be no transformation.

So, let’s recap. We have looked at a few evolving definitions and key elements pertaining to the leaders:

- First, they are persons with followers.
- Second, ideally, they are persons with high moral character.
- Third, people are willing to follow leaders they perceive as credible, meaning honest, forward-looking, inspiring and competent.
- Forth, you can't define a leader separate and apart from their followers. The essence of leadership lies in the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers.
- And Fifth, the key to all of this, we believe, is to create transformative partnerships, the kind of partnerships that work together to transform the culture of community and liberate the Spirit.

A community needs leaders with credibility and skills to carry their members through the chaos of transformation. They need to challenge the very system in which they are elected and orchestrate the conflicts required to work through the chaos. They need to create a holding environment, a container, a safe and sacred space, in which members can withstand the messiness and discomfort of transformation. And they need to design and facilitate the kinds of processes that we now know contribute to the work of transformation:

1. Support a shift in consciousness.
2. Call forth the inner voice of members and the community.
3. Facilitate the healing and reconciliation of old wounds.
4. Encourage experimentation and learning
5. Inspire and co-create a new vision for the future.

And they need to do all this in collaboration and partnership with members and, at some point, with others outside the system who resonate with your charism and mission.

The handwriting is on the wall. Religious Life as you've known it is over. It is in transforming No one, not one community, has put a flag in the ground and said, "We have it! We have discovered the new model of leadership!" The quest for a new model is still very much an ongoing process of experimentation to see what works. You have a choice to be a part of this grand experiment or go down the same roads you've been down before. Which path will you choose?



## Reflection Questions Part II

### Leadership in a New Lens: Transformative Partnerships

---

*“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion.*

*As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”*

~ Abraham Lincoln

---

1. How has this notion of “transformative partnerships” shifted your thinking about leadership (or not)? What, if anything, sparked your curiosity and desire to pursue something new, to think and act anew?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Beyond structure, how might you want to transform your relationships:
  - a. With one another, as leaders and members?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. As members with other partners in mission?