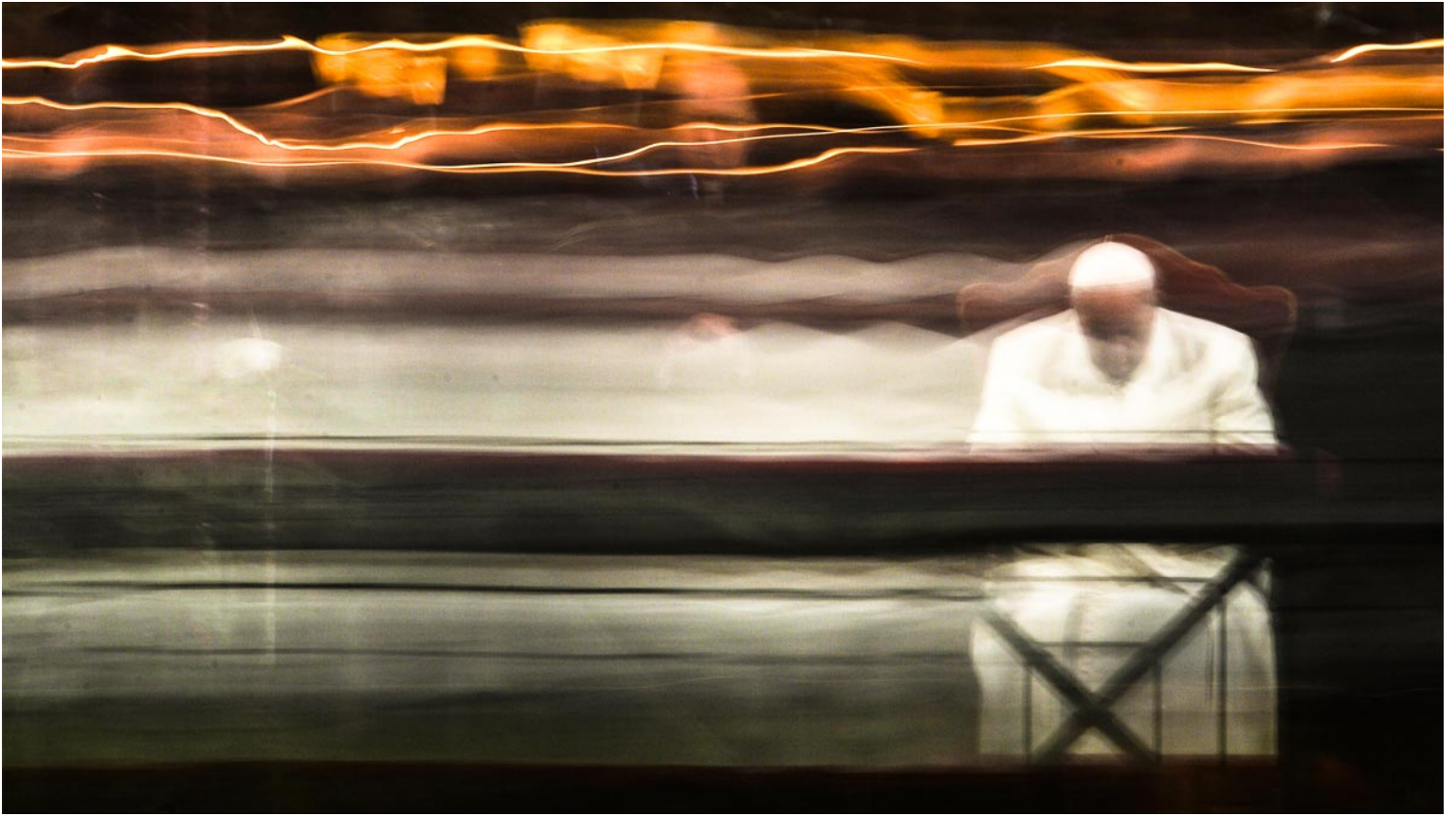


LEADERSHIP

The 15 Diseases of Leadership, According to Pope Francis

by [Gary Hamel](#)

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Pope Francis has made no secret of his intention to radically reform the administrative structures of the Catholic church, which he regards as insular, imperious, and bureaucratic. He understands that in a hyper-kinetic world, inward-looking and self-obsessed leaders are a liability.

Last year, just before Christmas, the Pope addressed the leaders of the Roman Curia — the Cardinals and other officials who are charged with running the church’s byzantine network of administrative bodies. The Pope’s message to his colleagues was blunt. Leaders are susceptible to an array of debilitating maladies, including arrogance, intolerance, myopia, and pettiness. When those diseases go untreated, the organization itself is enfeebled. To have a healthy church, we need healthy leaders.

Through the years, I’ve heard dozens of management experts enumerate the qualities of great leaders. Seldom, though, do they speak plainly about the “diseases” of leadership. The Pope is more forthright. He understands that as human beings we have certain proclivities — not all of them noble. Nevertheless, leaders should be held to a high standard, since their scope of influence makes their ailments particularly infectious.

The Catholic Church is a bureaucracy: a hierarchy populated by good-hearted, but less-than-perfect souls. In that sense, it’s not much different than your organization. That’s why the Pope’s counsel is relevant to leaders everywhere.

With that in mind, I spent a couple of hours translating the Pope’s address into something a little closer to corporate-speak. (I don’t know if there’s a prohibition on paraphrasing Papal pronouncements, but since I’m not Catholic, I’m willing to take the risk.)

Herewith, then, the Pope (more or less):

The leadership team is called constantly to improve and to grow in rapport and wisdom, in order to carry out fully its mission. And yet, like any body, like any human body, it is also exposed to diseases, malfunctioning, infirmity. Here I would like to mention some of these “[leadership] diseases.” They are diseases and temptations which can dangerously weaken the effectiveness of any organization.

1. **The disease of thinking we are immortal, immune, or downright indispensable,** [and therefore] neglecting the need for regular check-ups. A leadership team which is not self-critical, which does not keep up with things, which does not seek to be more fit, is a sick body. A simple visit to the cemetery might help us see the names of many people who thought they were immortal, immune, and indispensable! It is the disease of those who turn into lords and masters, who think of themselves as above others and not at their service. It is the pathology of power and comes from a superiority complex, from a narcissism which passionately gazes at its own image and does not see the face of others, especially the weakest and those most in need. The antidote to this plague is humility; to say heartily, “I am merely a servant. I have only done what was my duty.”
2. **Another disease is excessive busyness.** It is found in those who immerse themselves in work and inevitably neglect to “rest a while.” Neglecting needed rest leads to stress and agitation. A time of rest, for those who have completed their work, is necessary, obligatory and should be taken seriously: by spending time with one’s family and respecting holidays as moments for recharging.
3. **Then there is the disease of mental and [emotional] “petrification.”** It is found in leaders who have a heart of stone, the “stiff-necked;” in those who in the course of time lose their interior serenity, alertness and daring, and hide under a pile of papers, turning into paper pushers and not men and women of compassion. It is dangerous to lose the human sensitivity that enables us to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice! Because as time goes on, our hearts grow hard and become incapable of loving all those around us. Being a humane leader means having the sentiments of humility and unselfishness, of detachment and generosity.
4. **The disease of excessive planning and of functionalism.** When a leader plans everything down to the last detail and believes that with perfect planning things will fall into place, he or she becomes an accountant or an office manager. Things need to be prepared well, but without ever falling into the temptation of trying to eliminate spontaneity and serendipity, which is always more flexible than any human planning.

We contract this disease because it is easy and comfortable to settle in our own sedentary and unchanging ways.

5. **The disease of poor coordination.** Once leaders lose a sense of community among themselves, the body loses its harmonious functioning and its equilibrium; it then becomes an orchestra that produces noise: its members do not work together and lose the spirit of camaraderie and teamwork. When the foot says to the arm: ‘I don’t need you,’ or the hand says to the head, ‘I’m in charge,’ they create discomfort and parochialism.

6. **There is also a sort of “leadership Alzheimer’s disease.”** It consists in losing the memory of those who nurtured, mentored and supported us in our own journeys. We see this in those who have lost the memory of their encounters with the great leaders who inspired them; in those who are completely caught up in the present moment, in their passions, whims and obsessions; in those who build walls and routines around themselves, and thus become more and more the slaves of idols carved by their own hands.

7. **The disease of rivalry and vainglory.** When appearances, our perks, and our titles become the primary object in life, we forget our fundamental duty as leaders—to “do nothing from selfishness or conceit but in humility count others better than ourselves.” [As leaders, we must] look not only to [our] own interests, but also to the interests of others.

8. **The disease of existential schizophrenia.** This is the disease of those who live a double life, the fruit of that hypocrisy typical of the mediocre and of a progressive emotional emptiness which no [accomplishment or] title can fill. It is a disease which often strikes those who are no longer directly in touch with customers and “ordinary” employees, and restrict themselves to bureaucratic matters, thus losing contact with reality, with concrete people.

9. **The disease of gossiping, grumbling, and back-biting.** This is a grave illness which begins simply, perhaps even in small talk, and takes over a person, making him become a “sower of weeds” and in many cases, a cold-blooded killer of the good name of colleagues. It is the disease of cowardly persons who lack the courage to speak out directly, but instead speak behind other people’s backs. Let us be on our guard against the terrorism of gossip!

10. **The disease of idolizing superiors.** This is the disease of those who court their superiors in the hope of gaining their favor. They are victims of careerism and opportunism; they honor persons [rather than the larger mission of the organization]. They think only of what they can get and not of what they should give; small-minded persons, unhappy and inspired only by their own lethal selfishness. Superiors themselves can be affected by this disease, when they try to obtain the submission, loyalty and psychological dependency of their subordinates, but the end result is unhealthy complicity.

11. **The disease of indifference to others.** This is where each leader thinks only of himself or herself, and loses the sincerity and warmth of [genuine] human relationships. This can happen in many ways: When the most knowledgeable person does not put that knowledge at the service of less knowledgeable colleagues, when you learn something and then keep it to yourself rather than sharing it in a helpful way with others; when out of jealousy or deceit you take joy in seeing others fall instead of helping them up and encouraging them.

12. **The disease of a downcast face.** You see this disease in those glum and dour persons who think that to be serious you have to put on a face of melancholy and severity, and treat others—especially those we consider our inferiors—with rigor, brusqueness and arrogance. In fact, a show of severity and sterile pessimism are frequently symptoms of fear and insecurity. A leader must make an effort to be courteous, serene, enthusiastic and joyful, a person who transmits joy everywhere he goes. A happy heart radiates an infectious joy: it is immediately evident! So a leader should never lose that joyful,

humorous and even self-deprecating spirit which makes people amiable even in difficult situations. How beneficial is a good dose of humor! ...

13. **The disease of hoarding.** This occurs when a leader tries to fill an existential void in his or her heart by accumulating material goods, not out of need but only in order to feel secure. The fact is that we are not able to bring material goods with us when we leave this life, since “the winding sheet does not have pockets” and all our treasures will never be able to fill that void; instead, they will only make it deeper and more demanding. Accumulating goods only burdens and inexorably slows down the journey!
14. **The disease of closed circles,** where belonging to a clique becomes more powerful than our shared identity. This disease too always begins with good intentions, but with the passing of time it enslaves its members and becomes a cancer which threatens the harmony of the organization and causes immense evil, especially to those we treat as outsiders. “Friendly fire” from our fellow soldiers, is the most insidious danger. It is the evil which strikes from within. As it says in the bible, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste.”
15. **Lastly: the disease of extravagance and self-exhibition.** This happens when a leader turns his or her service into power, and uses that power for material gain, or to acquire even greater power. This is the disease of persons who insatiably try to accumulate power and to this end are ready to slander, defame and discredit others; who put themselves on display to show that they are more capable than others. This disease does great harm because it leads people to justify the use of any means whatsoever to attain their goal, often in the name of justice and transparency! Here I remember a leader who used to call journalists to tell and invent private and confidential matters involving his colleagues. The only thing he was concerned about was being able to see himself on the front page, since this made him feel powerful and glamorous, while causing great harm to others and to the organization.

Friends, these diseases are a danger for every leader and every organization, and they can strike at the individual and the community levels.

So, are *you* a healthy leader? Use the Pope's inventory of leadership maladies to find out. Ask yourself, on a scale of 1 to 5, to what extent do I . . .

- Feel superior to those who work for me?
- Demonstrate an imbalance between work and other areas of life?
- Substitute formality for true human intimacy?
- Rely too much on plans and not enough on intuition and improvisation?
- Spend too little time breaking silos and building bridges?
- Fail to regularly acknowledge the debt I owe to my mentors and to others?
- Take too much satisfaction in my perks and privileges?
- Isolate myself from customers and first-level employees?
- Denigrate the motives and accomplishments of others?
- Exhibit or encourage undue deference and servility?
- Put my own success ahead of the success of others?
- Fail to cultivate a fun and joy-filled work environment?
- Exhibit selfishness when it comes to sharing rewards and praise?
- Encourage parochialism rather than community?
- Behave in ways that seem egocentric to those around me?

As in all health matters, it's good to get a second or third opinion. Ask your colleagues to score you on the same fifteen items. Don't be surprised if they say, "Gee boss, you're not looking too good today." Like a battery of medical tests, these questions can help you zero in on opportunities to prevent disease and improve your health. A Papal leadership assessment may seem like a bit of a stretch. But remember: the responsibilities you hold as a leader, and the influence you have over others' lives, can be profound. Why not turn to the Pope — a spiritual leader of leaders — for wisdom and advice?



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Mark Chussil 4 years ago



Outstanding!

The use of "disease" is terrific, as it connotes something that doesn't belong in our natural state of being. And even though we often are not at fault for catching a disease, we always want to cure the disease.

On #1, "feel superior to those who work for me"... I suggest that we question the "work for me" idea. No one works FOR me; they work for themselves and their families. I have to earn their agreement to work WITH me. I find it useful to think of colleagues as volunteers (who get paid).

Thank you, Professor Hamel and Pope Francis.

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