

## Ethical Leadership Development Using Rules from St. Benedict <sup>1</sup>

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Leadership development in several industries becomes more relevant today— more so, in a project environment. Questions regarding how to develop the leadership of others remain in the heads of executives. Giving continuity to plans, actions, strategy, and short- and long-term objectives become essential for any organization's ongoing growth. A leadership development system should be aligned with the organizational strategy and with differentiated corporate roles in mind to enhance an individual's leadership effectiveness and the organization. Leadership development aims to expand a person's capability to be effective in leadership roles and processes, which is more important than ever for project managers today.

Leadership development has found several processes—such as performance improvement, succession management, and organizational change—that help leader in this endeavor. However, ethical aspects sometimes remain untouched or ignored when leadership without ethics is just not possible. Taking the teachings from St. Benedict will allow us to understand better and complement personal leadership, help others grow in ethical aspects as well, and consider values as part of the leadership development process.

*The Rule of St. Benedict* (St. Benedictus, the abbey of Monte Cassino, Dean, & Legge, 1964) is well known and useful to build a unique set of values, conduct, and ethical guidelines. It is also helpful when it is applied in leadership development that is sustained through several organizational challenges. This set of rules is known to offer the opportunity to use ethics as a fundamental part of this process.

As we continue, you may notice that St. Benedict's rules are in total compliance with the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (PMI, n.d.).

### Why St. Benedict?

References to religious figures sometimes seem awkward or bizarre in a business or project management context. However, relevant concepts can be applied in the organization, management, and leadership aspects that might possess an ethical background that is challenging to find in other examples.

Not much is historically known about St. Benedict, apart from the short biography found in the second volume of Pope Gregory the Great's four-book *Dialogues* (593 A.D.). According to Christopher (2011), St. Benedict (ca. 480-547) was born within a wealthy family; he was a Roman noble who later became a monk. Since St. Benedict was born in Nursia, Italy, he is also commonly referred to as Benedict of Nursia.

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He left Nursia for Rome as a teenager in pursuit of higher education. Still, He experienced a deep aversion to the city's hedonistic ways and the prevalence of Roman timocratic leadership approaches. Timocratic leadership (from *timao*, the Greek word for honor) is a leadership mainly interested in recognition, power, privilege, and prestige.

Benedict fled Rome and took up residence in a cave near Subacio, the town where he devoted his time in solitude and searching for God. His reputation for wisdom, humility, and godliness soon drew crowds of willing followers. He responded to this call to lead by establishing communities where followers could "seek God" and confront the contemporary pagan culture. He finally settled in one of these communities, on a hill above Cassino's town (today, the Abbey of Monte Cassino). While at the monastery in Monte Cassino, he took time to reflect on the ideals of life and compiled a set of guiding principles called the Rules of St. Benedict (RSB), where he constructed a rule of life and organization for these communities. *The Rule of St. Benedict* has served monastic Christian communities since that time. Its instructions on spiritual formation and humility have been the foundation for organizational leadership development in many Christian communities.

Although the RSB, which contains 73 chapters, is designed to provide a structure, guidance, and inspiration to live out one's life in faithful service to Christ. Most of the rules deal directly with human interaction and, therefore, have widespread appeal and application to modern organizations, especially human resource management. (Christopher, McBey & Scott-Ladd, 2011).

## **Personal Ethical Values According to St. Benedict**

According to Bekker (n.d.), St. Benedict's process description of the formation of humility in his rule might be the world's first 12-step program to help leaders and followers serve in humility and deference. His twelve steps toward humility can be summarized as follows:

1. **Respect God:** As a monk and religious person, St. Benedict promoted having respect for God and considering God first. Whether you consider yourself a believer or not, or if you think religion is not a part of management, respect will always be fundamental in leadership development.
2. **Love not one's own will:** Humility, according to St. Benedict, is at the top of personal values for people. This could especially apply to leaders or project managers.
3. **Submit to one's superior:** This value helps people and organizations build a better leader-follower relationship. Project managers often report to someone else; the success in Benedictine organizations resides in respecting superiors.
4. **Be obedient at all times, especially in stressful situations:** The fourth degree of humility is that when one holds fast to patience with a silent mind in obedience, they can face difficulties and contradictions, even injustice, without growing weary or running away.

5. **Be transparent:** Being transparent goes accordingly with living with honesty, one of PMI's core ethical values. Ethical values are present in project management as a code of ethics, and they are the backbone of any leadership style.
6. **Be content with lowly and menial jobs:** This goes against ambition. Being content with menial jobs does not necessarily mean that you must be satisfied or lack objectives, but it can help leaders or project managers to get involved in routine activities with the same energy as high-level tasks.
7. **Have a correct but lowly estimation of self:** This point is related to humility, self-reflection, recognized the condition of being human, the chance to make mistakes, but to get back and ask for forgiveness and continue the path. It also refers to not being overvalued or having false self-esteem, looking at others over the shoulder.
8. **Stay within the boundaries of the organization and the role.** It would be best if you tried to be aligned with your leader and the organization and deliver what is expected of you.
9. **Control one's tongue:** Avoid extra talking or spreading information besides what is needed.
10. **Avoid frivolity:** This concept is intrinsically related to humility since an ethical person (or a religious one) should stay away from silliness and temptation.
11. **Speak clearly and plainly:** Again, honesty plays an integral part of ethical behavior.
12. **Adopt a humble posture:** It is to say that the person should be modest in attitude and appearance. Wherever we go, we should show a proper position in front of others.

### **Leadership Themes Related to *The Rules of St. Benedict***

St. Benedict's rules are helpful in effectively running an organization. Over the centuries, the RSB has been interpreted in various ways while retaining the nature and traditions of St. Benedict's rules. A modern interpretation of the RSB, given by Barry (2005), will be used to illustrate the applicability of these rules in various aspects of new employment relationships. Four key themes arise from a closer examination of the RSB, which include: (1) leadership, (2) consultative approach, (3) cultivating humility and obedience, and (4) disciplinary and termination issues. (Christopher, 2011, p.3).

- **Leadership**

A particular set of rules is dedicated to leadership, precisely when an ethical or religious person is either prepared to take a leadership position or how they are supposed to behave. A person in a leadership position, according to St. Benedict, should be cognizant of the title and responsibilities associated with the role. Project managers need to prepare, especially when

projects are more significant or under challenging challenges when the leader is expecting to hold another position.

Although a leader is expected to be personally accountable for the actions of the organization's members, St. Benedict has also mentioned that "if the flock has been unruly and disobedient, and the superiors have done everything possible as shepherds to cure their vicious ways, then they will be absolved in the judgment of God" (Barry, 2005, p. 16). Praise is required for the leaders to observe good behaviors and, at the same time, discourage nepotism or zero tolerance for errors, as some examples can be taken.

These rules are directed to leaders who want to observe ethical behavior and are willing to teach and lead by example. In this way, leaders should be an example of the desired conduct and establish what is expected from others. The accountability expected from leaders using these rules has helped religious organizations succeed because they focus on improving their communities. Organizations must follow this example of best performance and promote ethical conduct.

Another relevant aspect from St. Benedict's rules addresses selecting a president or CEO for a secular or business organization. Leadership roles should emphasize characteristics such as conscientiousness, personal accountability, the ability to discern the right type of encouragement, and the discipline to dispense self-control and self-sacrifice at times, with overall maturity and awareness the self as vital for ethical leadership.

- **Consultative Approach**

Consultative decision making is dominant in Benedictine communities. This aspect is a little bit surprising in St. Benedict's rules, as there is a high degree of consultation that is expected when there is an important matter to be considered. He explains, "After hearing the advice of the community together, the superior should consider it carefully in private and only then make a judgment about what is the best decision" (Barry, 2005, p. 19). The consultative climate among Benedictines is often marked by tremendous respect and obedience. The decision ultimately rests with the most senior person or the leader with the authority and accountability for the decisions made.

This provides the opportunity for other knowledge to be contributed before a decision is made and models ethical decision-making and problem-solving approaches that are recommended today. Thus, in the religious scenario, the abbot or abbess should make important decisions, such as administrators' appointments, with caution after carefully weighing the information. (Christopher, McBey & Scott-Ladd, 2011, p., 223).

Like the modern notion that good ideas can come from anyone at any level in an organization, St. Benedict identified that sometimes the Lord might speak through other channels or even the community's youngest members. So, for this reason, and despite rank, every member has equal input. Nonetheless, although there may be a great deal of consultation, the leader makes the

final decision and assumes responsibility for that decision. (Christopher, McBey & Scott-Ladd, 2011, p., 224).

- **Cultivating Humility and Obedience**

St. Benedict focused a great deal of attention on the concept of modesty and compliance in his rules. In the case of a monk recommended by the abbot to be ordained as a priest or a deacon, he should avoid self-pride at all costs and not take on more responsibilities than those already assigned. This practice suggests that positions and roles in a religious organization, similar to business organizations, are delineated to avoid duplication and confusion. Some leadership studies posit that genuine humility provides a greater sense of self-awareness and empathy toward others (Nielsen et al., 2010). Humility is fostered through the mutual respect that juniors and seniors are expected to show toward one another, as mentioned.

- **Disciplinary, Termination, and Readmission Issues**

*The Rule of St. Benedict* treats the problems of discipline, separation, and readmission in several chapters. Similar to modern-day human resource management practices, the rules invoke the use of a progressive disciplinary process. For any offense committed, the monks (and other leaders or followers, or project managers and team members) must undertake the penance assigned by their superior. For example, their seniors may give first warnings to relatively junior monks privately, usually in the actual context. This type of communication is highly recommended to achieve early awareness personally. The severity of punishment must be equivalent to the seriousness of the sin, error, or mistake, which is a point that should be noted by modern organizations.

Project managers also have several resources to promote discipline within the team members either inside or outside the project. Following companies' disciplinary policies, H.R. policies, or acting according to each organization's code of conduct, depending on the level of mistake and its implications, could be the penalty.

## **Leadership Development**

Velsor, McCauley, and Ruderman *defined leader development* in the context of leadership roles and processes that “facilitate setting direction, creating alignment, and maintaining commitment in groups of people who share common work” (2010, p. 2). It is an organizational priority to develop future leaders that give continuity to business success.

Facilitation of leadership development is achieved through five categories: developmental relationships, developmental assignments, feedback processes, formal programs, and self-development activities (McCauley, Kanaga, & Laggerty, 2010). The Project Management Institute (PMI), with their book, *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)* – Sixth Edition (PMI, 2017), presents this leadership and professional development. Even the continuous certification requirements system is oriented for practitioners to continue

developing their leadership through formal and informal programs and self-development activities.

Since leaders play a crucial role in the employer-employee relationship, organizations need to pay serious attention to the recruitment and selection of leaders who have demonstrated a solid understanding and everyday business ethics application. For example, talent search committees ought to consider a leader's moral character and specific past behaviors and decisions as facets of the selection criteria. Concurrently, there should be a system in place for mentoring future leaders within the organization. An emphasis should be placed on developing the ethical character and behavior of the person.

### **Performance Improvement**

From a system perspective, development should closely link to performance management, succession systems, and organizational levels, reflecting purposes served by the network, segments of the leader population, and methods of development, and an organization's climate for growth (Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010).

Performance improvement includes training programs that seek to make managers more competent and capable in their leadership roles or giving them opportunities to lead and even fail to build their experience and prepare them for increased responsibility. Performance improvement is also directed to followers who are part of a team or want to become the next generation leader; it gives feedback on right-standing areas and opportunities for growth areas. (Velsor, McCauley, and Ruderman, 2010).

PMI recognizes the importance of performance in projects and the success of that performance. That is defined as the aggregate investment performance that is measured in each project. The process in which a project can be measured and compared is in the Monitoring and Controlling processes for a project.

### **Succession Management**

Succession management addresses the long-term viability of an organization. Van Velsor, McCauley, and Ruderman (2010) describe this as serving the organizational need to identify future high-performing leaders and prepare them to take on higher responsibilities. One way to pursue this succession management is through corporate/institutional learning.

Succession management, if it is correctly implemented, will assure the continuity of the business. It is about training potential leaders or project managers to take over an upper-level position in a situation that requires that all strategic positions are covered.

Even when it is not described in the *PMBOK® Guide*, this theme has been covered in several educational sessions for volunteers to ensure that each PMI chapter's board of directors provides the business continuity. A past-president model, president, and president-elect has been put in place in several chapters and is a success story. Inside projects, it could be the project



manager or prominent leader with a couple of backups who can cover the absence of a leader if needed. Thinking in this way at either the project level or the organizational level will help businesses be prepared for who would be the next in charge.

## **Organizational Change**

At the most general level, "change is a phenomenon of time. It is the way people talk about the event in which something appears to become or turn into something else, where the 'something else' is seen as a result or outcome" (Ford & Ford, 1994, p. 759). About organizations, change involves difference "in how an organization functions, who its members and leaders are, what form it takes, or how it allocates its resources" (Huber et al., 1993, p. 216). From the perspective of organizational development, change is "a set of behavioral science-based theories, values, strategies, and techniques aimed at the planned change of the organizational work setting to enhance individual development and improve organizational performance, through the alteration of organizational members' on-the-job behaviors" (Porrás & Robertson, 1992, p. 723).

## **Putting It All Together**

Leadership development is needed in every context. Organizations that either search for organizational change, growth, or sustainability require having consolidated leaders. Leadership development, succession management, and performance are vital variables for preparing and forming new leaders and helping the organization go beyond change.

However, it does not matter how well defined the leadership development process is if there is not support for ethical development. A moral background, whether St. Benedict's rules are taken into account or not, is an essential consideration for organizations.

## **Conclusion**

Ethical values are timeless, and they can be applied in every context. From the time that St. Benedict lived in ancient Rome to our modern-day, values and a code of conduct has remained valid.

Benedictine organizations have reached a specific grade of success by applying his lessons at both the personal and organizational levels. The proof of the necessity for ethical values is seen in the Benedictine monasteries' centuries-long survival.

St. Benedict's rules apply to current management concepts such as leadership, a consultative approach, cultivating humility, obedience, and disciplinary and termination issues. These aspects are relevant today but are somehow not as strict as they are when used in religious organizations.

In terms of leadership, St. Benedict has successfully mixed leadership development with succession planning and performance measurement by preparing potential candidates to occupy

leadership positions in advance. Also, he applies personal and religious values to establish a code of conduct that applies to all levels.

A consultative approach is central to Benedict's leadership model. The leader involves others in the decision-making process that centers the community's benefit as a fundamental aspect. This is quite relevant because the cultural climate for Benedictines is often marked by tremendous respect and obedience.

At the core of leadership for St. Benedict is the idea that cultivating humility through several steps will help leaders be aware of their superiors' obedience, without being ambitious, and careful use of their words.

Another highlighted theme in his leadership concept related to organizational change is accepting the terms of a relationship. Disciplinary actions are needed for even the best members of an organization, with a policy of conclusion and readmission that is clear and set in advance.

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