

## **Engaged Vincentian Leadership: The Values and Competencies That Inspire leaders to serve in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul**

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### **Abstract**

What are the values and competencies behind engaged leadership practices? This article presents the competencies and themes emerged from the analysis of in-depth interviews and leadership assessments administrated by DePaul University's Leadership Project. The emerged profile of engaged Vincentian leaders indicates the importance of balancing mission, service, task and people orientations.

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In 1617 Madame Gondi who witnessed the poverty and needs of French peasants asked Vincent de Paul: "What must be done? What must I do? What must we do to meet the challenges that we see so clearly before us?" St. Vincent de Paul, considered the founder of organized charity, spent all his life trying to answer those questions. After almost four centuries, these fundamental questions shed light on community engagement, the mission, and the praxis of many individuals and organizations. DePaul University is among these institutions that support countless examples of social engagement and dedicated commitment to service, social justice, empowerment, inclusiveness, and personal attention. This article results from the analysis of values and competencies emerged from 68 in-depth interviews and 883 Vincentian leadership assessments administrated by The William and Mary Pat Gannon Hay – Vincent de Paul Leadership Project between 2003 and 2006. The analysis of the Vincentian leadership practices shows that effective service and quality management go hand in hand. As Vincent would say, "doing good, by doing it well." Engaged Vincentian leaders demonstrate unique competencies in service entrepreneurship and servant-transformational leadership practices. The competencies and leadership model emerged from this study indicate how engaged leadership practices are best achieved when actions are accompanied by a value-centered education and personalized leadership development process.

At DePaul University, the Vincentian mission and values are much more than a passing nod to a statue of a seventeenth century saint. They are the vivid characters that animate and inspire the programs, services, activities and leadership practices of the DePaul community. As the largest Catholic higher education institution in the United States, DePaul University is a Vincentian founded institution best defined as *Congregatio Missionis*, "a community gathered together for the sake of the mission" (Udovic, 2003, p. 4). This definition is confirmed by the many examples that DePaul University students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni offer

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in regards to community service, action research, poverty reduction, service learning, and civic engagement throughout Chicago and around the world. These engaged and service oriented practices speak of the character and commitment of many value-centered leaders (Cohan, 2003; Covey, 1992).

Locally, DePaul's Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning has collaborated on academic and service learning projects around Chicago. Internationally, DePaul is affiliated with the United Nations as the first higher education institution serving the Department of Public Information, collaborating with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and joining the academic conversations on the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Human Rights Law Institute, the Business and Professional Ethics Institute, and other programs manifest the institutional engagement that DePaul has offered to make a difference in the world. These institutional commitments emerged from the visionary and engaged leadership of the DePaul community reflect a "catholic" vocation to serve and a leadership choice toward stewardship over self interest (Block, 1993).

The significance of the inter-personal and institutional alignment of commitment, vision, mission, and values are captured by the popular University phrase, "We are DePaul" (Udovic, 2005, p. 294). Behind the representation of these expressions of personal and organizational best practices in civic engagement there is a fundamental research question addressed in this article: What are the values, competencies, and conditions that allow civic and social engagement to flourish? What are leadership characteristics that make individual and organizational missions align in order to promote service to society?

### **DePaul and Academic Social Responsibility**

The current discussion of "social capital" focuses on the decline of trust and civic engagement among the general public (Putnam, 1993, 1995a, 1995b). Robert Putnam shows that in the face of this boom in higher education, it is all the more disturbing that civic participation appears to decline even among college and graduate level students (Putnam, 1995a). Although most of Putnam's studies principally focused on mass political participation, a connected and largely unexplored corollary of Putnam's work is the connection between civic engagement and leadership styles. Putnam defines "social capital" as "features of social life — networks, norms, and trust — that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam, 1995a, p. 664). The DLP studies on value-oriented leadership practices offer insightful data on the importance of investing our academic institutions and programs toward the creation of a new culture of public service and social commitment (Tavanti & Hollinger, 2006).

A sign of hope is represented by more than 300 university and college presidents who signed, under the auspices of the Campus Compact coalition, the "Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education," a pledge to strengthen civic learning on their campuses. President Fr. Dennis Holtschneider, C.M., continues the University's commitment to community based service learning and actively promotes these innovative leadership initiatives. For a larger number of American colleges and universities, service learning and civic engagement through active community and political participation is becoming a serious commitment, shaping an institution-wide approach to civic learning. Service learning, action research and local/global community collaborative initiatives are particularly important pedagogy for promoting civic responsibility not only for undergraduate, but also for professional graduate programs, staff, faculty, and administrators. At DePaul the commitment to civic engagement is much more than a "good effort." Local, national and international

engagements are core characteristics of this Vincentian higher education institution. Across the large diversity of identities and practices at DePaul University, a common characteristic is strongly emerging – the commitment to make a difference in a society (see: Nanus & Dobbs, 1999; Popper, 2005).

DePaul University, like other member institutions of Campus Compact, is investing in civic engagement on all levels and in ways that advance academic (value), quality in teaching, research, and service. Nearly all college president members of Campus Compact have redefined themselves and actively promoted their institution's commitment to responsible citizenship, community engagement and public service (Langseth & Plater, 2004). These personal and institutional priorities are visible, for example, in DePaul's commitment to poverty eradication through an active engagement with the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) initiative for implementing inter-sectoral partnerships for sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Fussler, Cramer, & Vegt, 2004; Tavanti & Hollinger, 2006).

### Personal and Institutional Engagement at DePaul

Vincent de Paul was quite inventive in organizing effective charity service benefiting the poor of Paris and France. From his prolific letters and communications, Vincent conducted a busy life between leading people, managing his organizations, fundraising for his works, and keeping in touch with the poor (Abelly & Rybolt, 1993; Pujo, 2003).

DePaul community exhibits a clear identification and commitment to the Vincentian values of service to others, civic engagement and dedication to social transformation. DePaul is a place where people get in touch with the Vincentian charisma of service and making a difference in the world, especially in the life of the poor. Fr. Dennis Holtschneider, C.M., President of DePaul University, recognizes DePaul University as a contemporary example of Vincentian civic engagement.

*I think if Vincent was alive today he would be both surprised and proud. I don't think Vincent could have imagined in his day that we would be running one of the major universities in the United States. I think he would be enormously proud because of the difference this University makes in the lives of people in very substantive ways [...]. Our faculty are not just looking to have a book sitting on a library shelf. They want to do research that actually changes some part of the world because of the work they have done. (DLP Interview to Father Dennis Holtschneider, CM, 05 March 2005)*

Engagement is a hot topic in today's leadership and higher education studies. Like most companies, universities want their students, staff, and faculty to be engaged fully in order to retain and maximize their performance. Leadership research reveals that engaged performers are better performers, happier performers, and more motivated performers. Engaged leaders are more productive, produce higher quality, and show higher rates of retention. They display more pride in the work and mission of their organizations and share that pride with others. The DePaul University community, classified by the Princeton Review of US Colleges and Universities as the "happiest" in the nation, demonstrates job satisfaction through personal and professional commitment to the Vincentian mission of the institution. According to the 2003-2004 Faculty and Staff Survey on Mission and Values, DePaul employees exhibit a clear perception of the institution as inclusive and committed to community service and service learning. DePaul people are committed and creative leaders that have found the institution's

mission to be a fertile ground for their personal mission. Karl Brooks, Director of the Student Leadership Institute states:

*My personal approach is to serve the mission of the institution, which is an extension of my personal mission, to empower individuals, to allow them to see their full potential, to allow them to have visions for themselves as well as for the greater community (DLP Interview to Karl Brooks, 09 Jan 2004).*

Mission, along with service and people-task orientations, is among the strongest leadership dimensions emerged from the DePaul Leadership Project (DLP) studies (Tavanti, 2006). A commonly used concept across religious based and non-profit organizations, mission is also a central element in the Vincentian and corporate activities at DePaul University. However “mission” is mostly associated with the Vincentian characteristics of social accountability and community engagement. Dr. Ann Stanford, professor in the School for New Learning and founder of the Incarcerated Women Reading Program, considers this an important distinction:

*When I think about the notion of leadership orientation and the terms that are used around Vincentian leadership like mission and tasks and people and service, I'm sort of at a loss, because I really dislike the term mission, particularly mission and service. I have a hard time even when we say service-learning. Mission...seems like a very lofty, highly moral thing that only the people who live on a higher plane do...When a colleague said, "I think we should call it community accountability," I loved that because I think it's true (DLP interview to Ann Stanford, 29 Jan. 2004).*

Community accountability and academic social responsibility at DePaul are vital characteristics of its Vincentian mission as a higher education institution. The values and competencies that emerged from the study of Vincentian leadership practices confirm DePaul University's organizational culture defined as “a growing and influential network that enables students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends to advance personally, professionally and intellectually” ([http://www.depaul.edu/about\\_DP/](http://www.depaul.edu/about_DP/)). The institution is commonly perceived as innovative, diverse, risk-taking, connected to community, pragmatic, and value-centered.

### **The Values of Engaged Vincentian Leaders**

The DePaul Leadership Project (DLP), along with the Faith and Civic Engagement (FACE), the DePaul Value Inventory (DVI), and other initiatives of the Office of Mission of Values are competency studies in an attempt to raise the awareness of Vincentian values, encourage community service and social engagement. Following a methodology of participatory action research (PAR) and appreciative inquiry (AI), the DLP aims to develop personal and organizational value-leadership through scientific research and professional assessments. The study of leadership practices through the analysis of competencies is particularly helpful for taking personal values and service leadership to a new level of community building. The specifically designed assessments at the individual (VLA-self), team (VLA-obs), organizational (VLA-org) and intercultural levels (VLA-ccc) are useful tools for identifying and developing value-centered leadership strengths. Assessments, along with coaching, actions plans, and leadership education are instrumental for stimulating and strengthening the practices of leaders committed to community-building. Managers are drivers; leaders are builders. The Vincentian value-oriented dimensions associated with community building leadership are:

**MAKE NO SMALL PLANS:** Engaged Vincentian leaders look at the big picture. They are concerned with innovative ideas. They are not afraid to take calculated risks keeping in mind the organizations' strategic and sustainability planning. The issue of leadership succession addressed by the DLP follows this dimension of looking at the bigger picture and long term plans.

**PEOPLE AND PROCESS FIRST:** Priority is given to people, relationships, and processes. DePaul's own concept of "personalism" basically signifies to put people and processes first. The assumption is that when relations are good and people feel involved, results occur. Priority is also given to personnel; having the right person in the right position and giving the necessary support to help people and initiatives grow and adapt.

**SUSTAINABLE INSTITUTIONS:** The institutionalization and sustainability of a project are essential elements in effective leadership for community building. It is not enough to develop servant leaders unless we also engage in the development of servant structures (Fuechtmann, 2005; O'Connor, 1991).

**CONCERN FOR THE POOR:** Whether a Vincentian leader is engaged in direct or indirect service to the poor, the call to leadership is first and foremost a call to serve. Priority and planning should therefore be done with a clear vision and dedication toward service to the poor, concern for social justice, work for the eradication of poverty and empowerment through education (Mousin, 2005). This language, that may sound paternalistic or idealistic, is actually at the core of Vincentianism and should be the discerning element for personal and organizational practices.

These four value-characteristics are interwoven among the Vincentian Leadership Orientations (VLOs) of mission, people, tasks, and service. They also parallel the multi-faceted definition of intelligence as the capacity to read and relate with reality. In this case, engaged leadership intelligence (LQ: Management ability, institutional strengths and program sustainability) entails, in addition to Cognitive Intelligence (IQ: Intellectual capacity to read situations, adapt and respond adequately) also Spiritual Intelligence (SQ: Compassion, personal passion and compassion for the poor), Emotional Intelligence (EQ: Personalism, attention to individual, emotional and social intelligence), Cultural Intelligence (CQ: Service effectiveness, intercultural competency, empowerment, systemic change) (Tavanti, 2005).

Engaged Vincentian leadership intelligence entails the essential skills in the ability to relate with different people but apply the same degree of respect, humility, and simplicity (McKenna, 2005). This does not mean to ignore the uniqueness of each person. On the contrary, it is to recognize in each person the human dignity and equality that we are all children of God. Fr. Dennis Holtschneider, C.M. expresses how Vincent very clearly had these skills:

*One of the characteristics of a Vincentian leader is the ability to see the person in front of us. Whether it is a student or a colleague or someone from outside the University, to see in that human being, the love that God has for them. . . . The ability of Vincent de Paul to be with the King of France one moment and then to walk across town and be in a soup kitchen the next and to know everybody's name in both places is an example of this. . . . There is something about the enormous respect for the individual that should absolutely characterize who we are as an organization, no matter where we are in the organization. (DLP Interview to Father Dennis Holtschneider, CM, 05 March 2005).*

Fr. Dennis also reflects on the importance of keeping an eye on the big picture. This value is important in all types of leadership. But it is extremely important for keeping an organization's plans and practices on track with its values.

*If you were going to study what makes someone a Vincentian manager you would want someone that keeps the bigger picture. We are part of making something larger happen for society and that is an enormous privilege and an enormous responsibility. The day to day activities can wear us down. And yet it seems if we can step back and ask, "What is the larger picture?" I think if you are going to look at what makes someone a Vincentian manager you are going to want Vincent's pragmatism. Someone who asks, "How is this going to make a difference to people and how we are we going to create and structure it and make it work? Are we going to have to compromise? Are we going to have to seek outside assistance?" Vincent did not walk through life planning to be a saint. Vincent walked through life saying that people are in need and we need to do something. And I think that characterized those who were part of his mission too. It is less about us as individuals and more about what we can do together to provide an extraordinary higher education. (DLP Interview to Father Dennis Holtschneider, CM, 05 March 2005)*

### **The Competencies of Engaged Vincentian Leaders**

The competencies emerged in the research of the DLP explain the personal and institutional social engagement at DePaul University. Twelve competencies and four orientations resulted from the analysis of Vincentian leadership practices of more than 883 assessment participants and 68 in-depth interviews between 2002 and 2006. The Engaged Vincentian Leadership model illustrates the competencies and their relationships, as demonstrated by the practices of DePaul and other Vincentian leaders. This leadership model shares many of the findings in other value-based leadership studies such as Kouzes and Posner's Leadership Challenge and the servant leadership model suggested by Robert K. Greenleaf (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). What is unique about this approach to leadership is both the transformative and transformational dimensions and the leadership inner-to-outer orientations (Greenleaf, Beazley, Beggs, & Spears, 2003). The engaged Vincentian leadership model considers attention to individuals (personalism) and collaboration, pragmatism, and other competencies driven by the call to serve and create sustainable conditions of self-fulfillment. The Engaged Vincentian leadership model is a roadmap for personal and organizational orientation toward value discovery and formation through service and action. The competencies and orientations of this leadership model are not benchmarks of best performance and best practices. Rather, they are meant to stimulate and accompany an ongoing dialogue in personal and organizational leadership development. The DLP, through its leadership development services and collaborative approach is in itself an expression of DePaul's civic engagement.

Vincentian leadership orientations indicate an inner-to-outer direction, expressing the idea of leadership as an engagement with society. It is useful to think that these orientations are not independent practices or cognitive abilities. Rather, they are essential components of Vincentian leadership. They provide direction and orientation to leadership in its personal, collective, and organizational contexts. The study of Vincentian leadership focuses on the analysis of personal and organizational leadership practices oriented by mission/vision, service/empowerment, tasks/commitment, and interpersonal relations. Vincentian leaders demonstrate to align and balance effectively the task-orientation, relations-orientations, mission-orientation, and service-orientation.

The competencies illustrated below are the driving forces of engaged Vincentian leadership orientations toward Mission, People, Task, and Service practices. The engaged leadership intelligence is the capacity to read the day to day reality of leaders operating in interpersonal and organizational environments. Intelligent engaged leaders know their leadership strengths and the best leadership style to adopt for a specific situation and context. The Vincentian leadership assessments (VLAs) are instrument designed to help leaders to identify their value-driven leadership strengths at the personal (VLA-SELF), collective (VLA-OBS or 360), organizational (VLA-ORG), and in a cross-cultural context (VLA-CCC). The assessments are like a leadership compass that helps us identifying and discerning what the most appropriate leadership styles and most needed competencies and orientations are in specific situations.

**Vision Competency:** Vincentian leaders lead with vision. They inspire a clear vision of the future, base decisions on a strong sense of mission, and articulate directions for the organization's future.

**Values Competency:** Vincentian leaders have values. They maintain high ethical standards, find inspiration in spirituality, and are driven by values of honesty and integrity.

**Innovation Competency:** Vincentian leaders lead with innovation. They offer new perspectives and ideas and welcome changes from others. They also look outside of their organizations for ideas and opportunities for improvement.

**Commitment Competency:** Vincentian leaders are committed. These leaders strive for excellence by staying involved with a task until it is completed and clearly direct people to achieve set objectives.

**Pragmatism Competency:** Vincentian leaders are pragmatic. They effectively communicate ideas and plans, base their judgments on facts, and set clear and realistic goals.

**Risk-Taking Competency:** Vincentian leaders are risk takers. These leaders view conflict as an opportunity to grow, welcome innovation even when it involves risk, and openly receive criticism and challenges from others.

**Inclusiveness Competency:** Vincentian leaders are inclusive. They treat others with respect and dignity. They welcome people who come to them with their problems because they accept people's ideas and personalities.

**Collaboration Competency:** Vincentian leaders are collaborators. They promote teamwork and collaboration, delegate responsibility within the group, and communicate enthusiasm and confidence to encourage teamwork.

**Communication Competency:** Vincentian leaders are communicators. They clearly communicate their expectations to motivate people and to disseminate appropriate information to those at all levels of the organization.

**Service Competency:** Vincentian leaders are committed to service. They inspire others with their example of service by practicing leadership as a responsibility rather than a position and by serving others regardless of race, gender, religion, or position.

**Empowering Competency:** Vincentian leaders are empowering. They help others to become better leaders by creating an environment that promotes learning and by delegating appropriately to encourage others to work.

**Social Justice Competency:** Vincentian leaders work for social justice. They do this by seeking to transform the causes of poverty and challenge situations of injustice.

The ongoing data collection of the DLP continues to refine this list. The qualitative data analysis on in-depth interviews and open ended questions in the Vincentian Leadership Assessments have generated a number of complementary themes in Vincentian leadership. Among them, it is worth mentioning how Vincentian leaders perceive “effectiveness,” “networking,” “dealing with conflict,” “relationships,” “compassion” and “advocacy” as important elements in Vincentian leadership practices. International comparison and more substantial participation from other higher education Vincentian and value-centered institutions will offer additional comparative results. The question addressed in this article: what are the values and competencies of engaged Vincentian leaders, does not simply suggest a list of “good” characteristics. The emerged models are not a rigid strategy for effective engaged leadership. Rather they suggest how an institution like DePaul has a strong sense of shared identity among people who have and apply the institution’s mission and values (Holtschneider, 2005). Today’s reality of local and global community persuades us to invest in the development of service oriented leaders. It invites us to invest in the leader’s passion and compassion. Passion is what moves leaders to do incredible things. Compassion is what helps us all make sure we do the right things.

Vincent de Paul, a French Roman Catholic priest, founded in 1625 the Congregation of the Mission, who founded St. Vincent’s College in 1898 that later became DePaul University. Vincent is the apostle of charity and a servant leadership example across the DePaul University community. Driven by his strong sense of faith and his passion and compassion for the poor, Vincent is a vivid example of socially engaged leadership and total dedication to the service to the poor. His sayings, images, and statues around the DePaul campuses are not just a reminder of the past, but a living reflection of the engaged Vincentian leadership practices of DePaul’s people—a community of people gathered for the sake of the mission.

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