What Does The Ignatian Leader Do?

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What Does the Ignatian Leader Do?
Reflections on Jesuit Wisdom in Practice

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Abstract

Plenty of resources exist regarding the history of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), Ignatian spirituality, and Jesuit education. Yet many colleagues still wonder how best to apply Ignatian principles in their everyday work and leadership, especially in the context of adaptive challenges and disagreement. Therefore, this article seeks to build bridges between Jesuit wisdom and concrete personal, interpersonal, and organizational strategies, particularly by bringing foundational Jesuit resources into conversation with contemporary leadership theories and practices. With four focus areas born from study, relationships, prayer, and a desire to be of help, these reflections explore practical ways of answering the question, “What does the Ignatian leader do?”

Introduction

“What are we supposed to do?”

This was a question I heard regularly during my time as a mission officer at a Jesuit university. It came from colleagues earnestly seeking to apply Ignatian principles in their work, but who felt unsure about what to do next. In many cases, they had already participated in formational programs or conducted their own study about the history of the Society of Jesus, Ignatian spirituality, and Jesuit education. Some had encountered the Spiritual Exercises. Others had long work experience in Jesuit contexts. They were inspired by Ignatian values and eager to participate and yet still, they were searching for something. What?

Over time, through dialogue and accompaniment, colleagues elaborated on this desire for more. Themes emerged, such as the need for resources that attend to the increasing uncertainty and complexity of their work. Their most pressing mission questions were framed by adaptive rather than technical challenges, meaning tough issues related to identities, values, and commitments, for which there is no single or obvious solution. Additionally, they wrestled with how to talk about and integrate Jesuit values in different contexts, especially highly contentious or polarized ones. And they raised poignant questions about personal, communal, and institutional integrity, particularly regarding ways that Jesuit institutions have themselves fallen short, bound up in unjust systems.

Without even more timely and practical preparation to integrate Ignatian values in organizational leadership, Jesuit identity ran the risk of remaining too abstract, rooted in the past, or confined to personal character formation. Given their questions about how to approach the complexities of institutional life in ways that advance mission, colleagues sought bridges between Jesuit wisdom and concrete personal, interpersonal, and systemic practices. Specifically, they desired ways of proceeding and contemporary strategies to operationalize the Ignatian vision across a wide range of responsibilities.

Recognizing and affirming that there are many ways to explore Ignatian leadership, including wonderful existing resources such as the Program for Discerning Leadership, the following reflections offer four ways of applying Ignatian wisdom in leadership and organizational practice. These themes, born from experiences, study, relationships, prayer, and a desire to be of help and hope, are intended to build upon one another as part of a journey over time. Each section, which includes questions, resources, and practical ideas, seeks to bring contemporary theories into conversation with meaningful resources in the Jesuit tradition, especially those of Saint Ignatius and the earliest companions. Ultimately, these
reflections aim to draw us more deeply into our inheritance as collaborators in Jesuit mission, calling on the discernment of those who have come before us, but orienting us with urgency to listen and respond to the impelling Spirit, and one another, as practicing Ignatian leaders today.3

Begin with Purpose

Questions of purpose feature centrally in the Ignatian tradition. Throughout his life, Ignatius quested to develop his identity, an authentic spirituality, and a framework that would enable himself and others to flourish in pursuit of union with God. Through attentiveness to his own experience, real presence to others in their spiritual journeys, and mystical encounters with the divine, Ignatius codified and refined a vision for human purpose in the Spiritual Exercises that has since become the foundation of all Jesuit endeavors.

With precision, and deriving from this central vision, Ignatius and his companions included statements of purpose in their earliest foundational works.4 This clarity was important because future decision making hinged on an understanding of the ultimate goal. Ignatius encouraged companions to do, as much as possible, that which is more conducive to their purpose.5 He provided extraordinary help, both personal and corporate, for choosing the better or more universal good in a variety of circumstances.6 But this guidance assumed the desire of persons, and unity of purpose in the Society, to fulfill the Jesuit mission as cultivated in the experience of the founders, expressed in key sources, and discerned over time.7

Today, Ignatius’s discipline about naming purpose has been reinforced by popular wisdom and steady encouragement from contemporary sources.8 However, we can easily take for granted that we have done enough to establish clarity about our own goals, especially in the most complex systems. Our mission statements necessarily inspire us with bold aspirations, but do we have a shared sense of what the words mean in practice? Does our vision orient us toward the right activities? If we participate in larger traditions and structures, does our work contribute to the bigger picture while honoring the unique creativity and integrity of our people?9 Do members of our communities, embodying different roles and identities, see how they contribute to a larger, common project? Are priorities understood in such a way to empower decision making, ingenuity, and initiative? Cultivating shared vision, whether among a small group or throughout a complex institution, can be a daunting task, especially when time is short and stress is high. However, this work may also unleash tremendous creative potential as a community negotiates who it is called to be and what it hopes to accomplish together. As Ignatius would remind us, establishing clear goals is essential when determining what we should be doing and what we need to decide next. If questions persist, reclarifying purpose is an important place to start.

Practical Ideas

• Develop, refresh, or reaffirm mission statements, vision statements, community values, and strategic plans.
• Where multiple goals exist, prioritize them.10
• Document key stories and case studies that demonstrate mission and values in action, and share them widely.
• Honor exemplars of mission in the community.
• Commission or receive proposals for artwork, photography, theater, dance, and more to creatively express mission and values.
• Create conversation spaces to envision goals in detail.
• Find ways to share joy in the work.
• Identify structures that support mission and structures that do not.11
• Pinpoint persistent questions and disagreements about strategy for deliberation and clarification.
• Identify and explicitly name cross PURPOSES when they emerge among a group or organization.
Empower Adaptation

One could assume that with such rigor in identifying purpose, Ignatius would be uncompromising about how to reach it. However, he deliberately left room for the mysteries of discernment, enabling different pathways toward realizing the Jesuit vision. In the First Principle and Foundation, he even cautioned against a disordered attachment to any single “gift of creation,” acknowledging that various realities have the potential of leading toward deeper relationship with God. In each circumstance, the goal is the same, but the approach varies, revealing a firm commitment to purpose but openness to different tactics.

This balance of structure and flexibility has profoundly shaped the identity and mission of the Society. In the preface to the first edition of the Jesuit Constitutions, the author commented on Ignatius’s wisdom in recognizing that different approaches to work and ministry would be needed in different contexts. If Jesuits were to be fruitful in accompanying people all over the world, their corporate structures could not interfere with their ability to perceive and respond to God’s invitation. These companions, after being formed in the mission, vision, and values of the Ignatian way, would need empowerment to use their own adaptive capacities: deep attentiveness to realities within and around them, thoughtful sensemaking through the affect and intellect, and loving action in collaboration with others and the Holy Spirit to bring about God’s deepest desires for the world.

This discernment, when cultivated through regular exercises like the Examen, facilitates creative and reflective practice.

As present-day Ignatian companions, we still live and work in different contexts, including ones that are progressively complex and increasingly unpredictable. We, too, rely on our capacities for adaptation, particularly by paying close attention to our experiences, drawing meaning from our observations, choosing next steps, and then starting the cycle over again. Scholars and practitioners have referred to these iterative cycles with different names and models, but often with steps or questions such as What? So What? Now What? Orienting ourselves to this kind of ongoing inquiry and action is especially important when engaging our biggest and more complex challenges, as we may need to take a step and assess the result before we can understand which actions need to follow.

Building adaptive capacity among colleagues and communities is as essential in Ignatian work today as it has ever been. The scaffolding for such empowerment includes freedom for colleagues to determine best pathways toward purpose; mechanisms to reflect on experience, share feedback and evaluate work; and nimble systems that allow for course corrections when needed. Designing organizations and communities to reflect this balance of structure and flexibility can take additional time and care at first, but with remarkable effect as people and teams become fully alive and activated in their work.

Practical Ideas

- Build time for reflection, thinking, and/or prayer directly into work schedules and structures.
- Create tools and rituals to ask powerful questions, individually and across teams and organizations, about experiences and environments.
  - Pay special attention to patterns,
  - Analyze bright spots and successes for clues about best practices.
- Identify content experts who can help make sense of observations.
- Differentiate the types of challenges you are facing (and their components) as either adaptive or technical, so you can design appropriate action plans.
- Define rules that empower people and teams to make their own decisions.
- Clarify roles and create a decision continuum to support creativity.
- Offer gestures of care and support to acknowledge the fatigue and discomfort that may occur while navigating complex and uncertain work.
Embrace Tension

A nuance of adaptation in the Ignatian tradition is an invitation to hold together realities that some might deem incompatible. As William Barry, S.J. and Robert G. Doherty, S.J. have described it, the spirituality of the Jesuits emerges directly from such tensions. For example, Jesuits are missioned to be both contemplative and active; sophisticated and humble; passionate and indifferent; worldly and counter-cultural; invested and available; inventive and receptive. These tensions infuse Jesuit contexts, and companions in the Ignatian way are invited to navigate similar polarities as they discern which path will better lead to their goal.

However, organizationally, it may not be possible to lean in both directions at the same time, or when making one specific decision. Therefore, naming polarities and orienting people and teams toward the work of navigating them is critically important. For example, are we encountering a tension between tradition and innovation? Between the needs of a person and the needs of a community? Between structure and flexibility? Between contemplation and action? Which side do we need to affirm right now, and why?

Framing the polarities in our work enables us to collaborate in maximizing the gifts of each pole. Through ongoing management, people and communities can discern when to favor one direction or another, appreciating that both sides are needed over time to fulfill the ambitious Ignatian vision. Furthermore, this approach provides opportunities to honor and value the advocates within our teams and organizations who remind us to pay attention to the other side of various polarities.

In leadership, we regularly encounter tensions that cannot ultimately be resolved. And, as we find in the Ignatian way, such polarities are needed to help us stay adaptive in pursuit of our purpose. Navigating tension as a way of proceeding challenges us to stay attentive and expand our thinking beyond either/or binaries. If we remove the expectation to eliminate tensions, and instead orient ourselves to embrace and navigate them, we open possibilities for even richer discernment and more complex accomplishments ahead.

Practical Ideas

- Identify and prioritize key polarities in the work.
- Engage colleagues in acknowledging the upsides and downsides of each pole.
- Determine the current state for the group or organization in managing these polarities.
- Design processes for making shifts from one side to another when needed.
- Find humor in the tension when possible.
- “Protect troublemakers,” meaning withstand pressure to dismiss voices of dissent, alternative perspectives, courageous questions, and uncomfortable observations that help the group achieve a more comprehensive perspective.

Create Cultures of Discernment

One of the key tensions in the Ignatian tradition is between the personal and communal, and the opportunities and challenges that come from striving to share life and work in community. Ignatius and the first companions took seriously the question about whether they should, in fact, become one mission body as a religious order, recognizing that such a decision would come with associated commitments and practices.

To maintain “unity of mind and heart” when dispersed in various apostolic activities, and to exercise co-responsibility for the life of the Society, would require active engagement from each person as well as a certain relational dynamic among them.

These companions modeled for us a profound connection between “life and mission, rooted in a discerning community”, an ideal of the Ignatian way. In Joseph F. Conwell, S.J.’s extraordinary work on the experiences of the founders, he painted a compelling portrait of the spirituality and mentality that enabled those first companions to be “bold, daring, innovative, creative, passionate, and filled with a sense of urgency.” They had deep faith that the Holy Spirit was active in each of their lives and in their Company as a whole, and therefore a sincere freedom and commitment to listening, within their own hearts and around them in the world. Conwell wrote:
The Company remains the work of the Spirit and of the Company, and as such it remains the responsibility of the whole Company. The Company comes into being through discernment, by being open to and trusting in the movements of the Impelling Spirit, and only through discernment can it fulfill its purpose...Discernment, in turn, takes place only in an atmosphere of prayer and of trust, of daring to trust in God and to trust in one another, of daring to trust that the Spirit reveals the direction to go and guides the Company along the right path.\footnote{33}

Such a vision invites and challenges us to consider the foundations we have created for our contemporary discernment. How have we cultivated shared vulnerability and trust among our teams? How have we honored the unique insights, identities, and experiences of our people? How free and safe do members feel to share what they see and know? How responsible does each person feel for the journey of the community? How does conflict become an opportunity to advance shared understanding? How do we create opportunities to listen deeply to one another and to the signs of our times?

These foundations take time to build and do not suddenly appear when a discernment question arises. Proactive, formative work to build strong relationships, make time for honest and deeper sharing, and express hopes and fears is a powerful investment toward creating cultures in which revelations about a path forward become possible. Sometimes, this work requires reassurance that tangible outcomes will emerge, even if the process gets messier before it becomes more orderly. In a healthy discerning culture, the push and pull of ideas and perspectives, combined with a genuine interest in learning from one another, will advance both tasks and relationships in service to the ultimate goal.

**Practical Ideas**

- Find images and examples that illustrate what you hope your discerning community will look like at its best.\footnote{34}
- Identify and find opportunities to collaborate with wise people, whose presence and insight help nurture cultures of discernment.\footnote{35}
- Employ tools to build up psychological safety among groups and organizations.\footnote{36}
- Intentionally cultivate trust through consistent behaviors that lead to a willingness to be vulnerable.\footnote{37}
- Create structures for giving and receiving feedback.
- Listen for sharing underneath the sharing, such as underlying hopes, fears, assumptions or competing commitments.\footnote{38}
- Utilize a model for discerning together, such as The Social Discernment Cycle.\footnote{39}
- Encourage adaptability among colleagues when working together with people who have different styles.
- Make and sustain commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.\footnote{40}
- Be courageous when facing the most challenging discernment questions, especially those that require transformation within the community or organization to more fully reflect the Jesuit vision of justice.

**Conclusion**

So, what does the Ignatian leader do?

The four suggestions offered here—begin with purpose, empower adaptation, embrace tension, and create cultures of discernment—are all oriented toward supporting the kind of attentiveness, active engagement, and collaboration that enable us to discover our path and walk it together. With intentionality, Ignatian leaders can frame and guide processes in which people and communities join in purpose and take steps forward, even in the face of complex or unsolvable dilemmas. In the best cases, such journeys lead to an impression that the collective is greater than its parts, the experience was meant to be, and Ignatian leadership is, in the end, ultimately about a spiritual sense of being led.

Saint Ignatius and the original companions handed on incredible resources that have changed lives and transformed the world for hundreds of years.
Perhaps most significantly, they modeled the quest, as persons, companions, and corporation, to listen and respond to God’s Word in all their activities. Their journey may give us confidence that with similar commitments and practices, and drawing on the wisdom available to us now, we, too, can experience the graces of striving toward the Ignatian purpose. However, their example also reminds us that we must embrace the challenges and invitations of our present-day discernment questions as we claim our co-responsibility for animating and adapting the Ignatian tradition today.

Endnotes


4 For example, see §21 of the Spiritual Exercises, §3 of the Jesuit Constitutions, and §7 of the Ratio Studiorum.


8 For example, Simon Sinek’s, “Starting with WHY,” https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action; Stephen R. Covey’s “Begin with the End in Mind” from The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change (New York: Fireside, 1989), 96-144.

9 I appreciate the references to creative loyalty from Arturo Sosa, S.J. in his address: “The University as a Source of a Reconciled Life” (presentation, World Meeting of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus, Bilbao, Spain, July 10, 2018), 8-9, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55d1dd88e4b0dce65a


12 Fleming, Draw Me Into Your Friendship, 26-27.

13 I am drawing here from the expression “steady in purpose, but flexible in strategy” from Gil Rendle, Journey in the Wilderness: New Life for Mainline Churches (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 23.

14 Chris Lowney’s comments on Jesuit ingenuity speak to this dynamic in Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003), 29, 127.

15 Padberg, Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, xvi. It is noted that the author of the preface is likely Father Pedro de Ribadeaneira.


17 Eoyang and Holladay, Adaptive Action, 32.

18 Eoyang and Holladay, Adaptive Action, 43-46. This section provides some guidance for identifying patterns by looking into similarities, differences, and connections.

19 This is an “appreciative” approach, drawn from Diana Whitney, Amanda Trosten-Bloom and Kae Rader, Appreciative Leadership: Focus on What Works to Drive Winning Performance and Build a Thriving Organization (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2010), 27.

20 Heifetz, Linsky, and Grashow, Adaptive Leadership, 19-20. This resource provides practical help for tackling challenges with existing expertise (technical) and orienting people to a change process (adaptive).

21 Eoyang and Holladay, Adaptive Action, 96.


24 This extraordinary resource gives structure to the work of navigating polarities: Johnson, *Polarity Management*.


34 For example, I like the image of the “Community of Truth” (contrasted with the “Objectivist Myth of Knowing”) from Parker J. Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 102-109.

35 Sosa, “The University as a Source of a Reconciled Life,” 5. He writes that “Wisdom exists through its embodiment in wise people…”


40 There are many important resources to support this work. From an organizational leadership perspective, I appreciate Abeni El-Amin’s chapter called “Improving Organizational Commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging,” 2022, https://scholars.fhsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=management_facpubs.