

## Career Compass No. 90: Leadership Lessons from Pope Francis

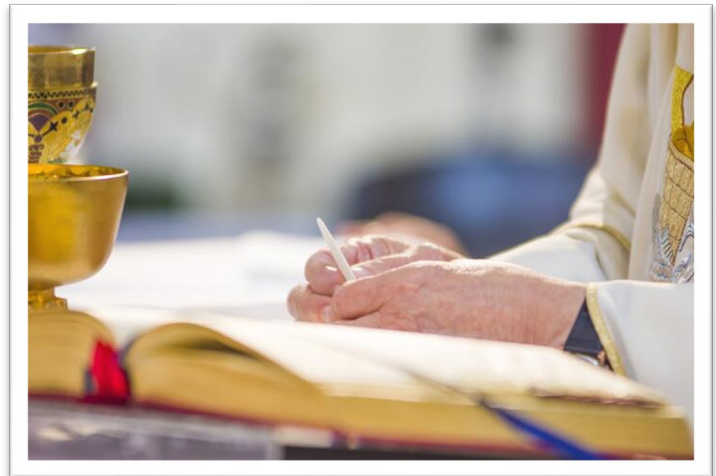
No 'great leader' is perfect, but there are leadership attributes we can emulate from some of the world's most visible leaders.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Jun 01, 2021 | ARTICLE

*Dear Frank:*

*As one way to enhance our leadership capabilities, you have suggested in previous columns that we observe and critique the leadership traits and behaviors of other leaders, past and present.*

*Of all the prominent leaders of the last century, who is your favorite national or international leader whom we can all emulate and learn from?*



Frank Responds:

Yes, we can all learn from historical figures who have been great leaders nationally or globally. Ed Everett in part one of his Local Government Leadership series in ICMA's online [PM](#) magazine suggests that "leadership is the art of influence and encouraging others to help move a team, organization, community or nation to a better place." So, who has served on a national or global level and has exerted such positive influence?

I nominate Pope Francis as a great leader to emulate. Pope Francis has certainly tried to influence church officials, world corporate and government leaders, and his flock of 1.2 billion Catholics in order to create a better society.

As an Arab Jew, I have an outside-in perspective of Pope Francis and his leadership capabilities. One does not need to be a Catholic to appreciate the leadership lessons from Pope Francis.

In terms of full disclosure, I must acknowledge that I have some progressive biases in assessing Pope Francis' leadership behaviors and attributes. I endorse the Pope's views on social and economic justice and the urgent need to save the planet. While I do have these biases, this column offers me the opportunity to share my perspectives.

## All Great Leaders Are Flawed

Let me say from the outset that all great leaders have flaws and make mistakes. It is one of the paradoxes of leadership (see [Career Compass No. 56: The Paradoxes of Leadership](#)). For instance, a revolutionary leader whom I truly admire is Nelson Mandela. Mandela fought the injustices and cruelties of apartheid and led the Black majority to power in South Africa. After being imprisoned for 27 years, Mandela was elected President of South Africa and led Blacks and whites through an incredibly difficult yet remarkable period of reconciliation.

In spite of these incredible leadership achievements, Mandela by all accounts did not do enough to root out the corruption of officials from the African National Congress (ANC) party which took over the government and still governs today. This lack of action from Mandela still hampers South African progress. (See "[Mandela Was Flawed Icon. But Without Him, South Africa Would Be a Sadder Place](#)," *The Conversation* blog, July 17, 2020.)

Franklin D. Roosevelt is my favorite President of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. FDR led our nation to survive the Great Depression, win World War II, and began to weave together a basic safety net for all Americans. FDR was also flawed. He had a long-time mistress and hurt his wife and family. Most importantly, FDR gave into the demands of Stalin at the Yalta Conference and thus ceded Eastern Europe to the authoritarian control of the Soviet Union.

In the private sector, Steve Jobs was a design genius creating a top-ranking valued global enterprise that makes incredible products. By many accounts, Jobs mistreated a number of employees and colleagues.

While I consider Pope Francis a great leader for a variety of reasons (see below), he too has flaws and has made mistakes. Most significantly, Pope Francis was too slow to recognize and has inadequately addressed the sex abuse and pedophilia crisis that continues to haunt the Catholic Church. He publicly defended the bishop who covered up the pedophilia of a priest in Argentina and discounted the horror stories of victims.

All great leaders are imperfect. However, we can still learn from their triumphs and failures.

## Emulate but Don't Try to Clone

We can learn by observing and studying other leaders, what they have done well and not so well. Early in my career, I worked for a city manager who spent a lot of time relating to councilmembers and gaining their support but failed to engage employees and connect with them. He was ultimately a failed leader. Later in my career, I learned from other colleagues how to become more humble and less arrogant.

The key is to learn from the missteps of other leaders and emulate what other leaders do well. However, we do not want to be clones. (See "[Learn From Bezos, Just Don't Try To Be His Clone](#)," *Smart Leadership* blog, Feb 2, 2021.) By observing other leaders, we want their behaviors and attributes to inform how we can become over time the best version of ourselves.

## Leadership Attributes of Pope Francis

Here is my assessment of the attributes that make Pope Francis a great leader whom we can all emulate.

### Self-Awareness

Francis is self-aware and knows his life story and how it has informed his leadership journey.

Born Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Argentina, Francis suffered as a young man from a life-threatening case of pneumonia and had a portion of his lung removed. Early jobs in Buenos Aires included working as a bar bouncer and a janitor sweeping floors. As a young ordained priest, Francis ministered to the poor in the slums of Buenos Aires. As a bishop, he doubled the number of priests assigned to poor neighborhoods and was called the "Slum Bishop."

Francis is not afraid to take on powerful interests. For instance, in the 1970s, the military dictatorship in Argentina tortured and killed thousands of opponents during the "Dirty War." While Francis did not publicly denounce the military junta, Francis hid the victims of the "Dirty War" in churches and helped them escape the country. (See Helen Popper and Karina Grazina, "[Argentina's Pope Stood Up to Power, But Has His Critics](#)," *reuters.com*, March 14, 2013.)

Pope Francis' calling as the leader of the Catholic Church flows from his life history and the lessons he learned along the way. As Bill George states in [Discover Your True North](#), "self-awareness is the starting point of leadership."

## Humility

Many of the Pope's strengths flow from his basic humanity and humility. Unlike many formal leaders, Pope Francis does not stand on privilege. When Francis was introduced to the world as the new Pope in March 2013 and stood on the balcony in front of the crowds in St. Peter's Square, he did not don the majestic vestments of the Pope but rather a simple white cassock and a simple silver cross. Instead of the tradition of blessing the crowd, the new Pope asked for their prayers.

Pope Francis' living quarters at the Vatican are not the palatial papal penthouse of his predecessors but rather an ordinary two-room apartment in an adjacent guesthouse. Francis eats in a communal dining hall and wears worn-out shoes instead of the papal red slippers. Whenever possible, Pope Francis rides in a nondescript car, not a chauffeured limousine. Francis often makes his own phone calls (how many chief executives or city managers do that?).

## Values-Driven

The Pope is a values-driven leader. Francis stresses in many ways that all of us (non-Catholics, gays, homeless people, AIDS victims, prisoners, refugees) are brothers and sisters under God and deserve our support and love. Beyond his speeches and writings, Francis has symbolically washed and kissed the feet of the homeless, prisoners, and Muslim and Hindu refugees to emphasize the humanity of us all and how we leaders must serve everyone.

Francis promotes the value of inclusion, the acceptance of differences, and our shared humanity regardless of our religion, ethnic group, status, wealth or power. We are all part of the Pope's flock.

To promote inclusion, Pope Francis knows that an institution's leadership must be diverse and consider different experiences and perspectives. Therefore, the Pope recently named 13 new Cardinals, including the first Black U.S. Cardinal and new Cardinals of color from Africa, the Philippines, and South America. To better inform his leadership, Francis also created a council of eight Cardinals from around the world to provide different voices and new insights.

## Nonjudgmental

Given the Pope's mission of serving all humankind, he tries to be nonjudgmental. Francis has strong opinions but tries his best to be open to different life experiences. For instance, he now allows divorced people to receive communion. In response to whether gay people should be embraced by the church, Francis famously stated, "who am I to judge?"

## A 'Regular Guy'

Pope Francis connects with everyone and demonstrates a joy for life in many small ways. He loves football (soccer) and is a rabid fan of his home football club San Lorenzo from Buenos Aires. Francis has an “intense fondness” as he puts it for dancing the tango. In fact, to celebrate his birthday in 2014, 3,000 followers danced the tango in St. Peter’s Square. Francis loves children and is visibly energized by them. Francis eats pizza as a favorite meal and keeps in contact with long-time friends.

Francis does not take himself too seriously and is often playful. He takes selfies with visitors and has donned a clown’s red nose to surprise newlyweds who volunteer at a charity that provides clown therapy to sick children.

All of these simple joys helps the Pope connect with us and thus increases his influence as a leader.

## “Incremental Radical”

In the words of Jim Collins, Pope Francis is an “incremental radical.” (See ICMA's Leading Ideas [video interview of Jim Collins: “Good to Great.”](#)) An incremental radical knows the general direction of positive change but cannot move the institution, community, or nation all at once. For instance, FDR knew the United States had to enter World War II but faced great isolationist sentiment and opposition among Americans prior to the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor. Therefore, FDR created the Lend Lease program providing ships, aircraft and weaponry to Britain as an incremental step towards entering the War.

In the same vein, Francis knows that he needs to help the church adapt. Francis realizes that church leadership must be more diverse, women must play a larger role, and new constituencies (such as indigenous people from around the world) must be embraced to grow the church.

However, the Pope cannot change the institution of the church all at once due to powerful conservative forces within the church, including the opposition of the Curia or Vatican bureaucracy that wants to keep its power and influence. Consequently, the Pope takes incremental steps. Instead of legalizing gay marriages within the church, the Pope supports gay civil unions. Francis states that gay and transgender people are loved by God and deserve the ministry of the church. In supporting gay civil unions, Francis stated “Homosexual people have a right to be in a family. They are children of God.”

Instead of allowing women to serve as priests, the Pope has supported women reading at masses but not getting ordained as priests. He has created a commission to consider women as deacons who can perform many of the duties of priests, such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals.

In 2019, Pope Francis did not grant a request from the Catholic bishops of the Amazon to allow for the priestly ordination of married men in their territories in order to address a severe lack of ministers across the nine-nation region or for the ordination of women. Assuming that Francis believes that women should be ordained and serve priestly functions, some progressive critics of the Pope suggested that this was a missed opportunity to take a step forward.

As an institutional leader who knows that the church needs to be reformed, Francis must have patience yet still take concrete steps forward and thus create further momentum for positive change.

In short, incremental radicals embrace change and try to shape it for the better over time.

## Courage

Like all of us, Pope Francis has fears. Like any courageous leader, Francis must acknowledge his fears and act anyway.

During the financial crisis in Argentina in 2001-02, Francis called out in his homilies corrupt government officials who he viewed as responsible for the “food riots” in his country. As Pope, Francis is now a vocal critic of powerful monied elites who engage in unbridled capitalism, promote consumerism, and benefit from over-development and the destruction of our planet. At the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the Pope spoke directly to world leaders from the private and public sectors: “I ask you to ensure that humanity is served by wealth and not ruled by it.” (See “[The World’s Biggest Change Agent](#),” *Changing Winds* blog, Nov 22, 2020.)

In speaking about the world-wide refugee crisis to government leaders, Francis quotes *Leviticus*: “When the stranger lives with you in your land, you should not oppress him.”

## Learning from Mistakes

Any leader will make mistakes. Great leaders acknowledge and learn from mistakes.

As indicated, Pope Francis did not adequately respond to the sex abuse crisis in the church. He has publicly apologized for his “grave errors” and asked forgiveness. As one example, Francis took responsibility for his misguided defense of the Chilean bishop who covered up abuse by a pedophile priest. (See E.J. Dionne Jr, “[Penitent Pontiff Should Serve as Model for Profane President](#),” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 16, 2018.)

Francis instigated an investigation into the abuse in Chile, confessed his “pain and shame,” recognized that he was part of the problem, summoned the Chilean bishops to Rome to address the tragic history, and then reached out and met with some of the

Chilean victims of the abuse and committed to respond. (See Emma Green, “[The Pope’s Turn-Around on Sex Abuse May Have Tsunami Effect](#),” *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2018.)

To reverse course, Pope Francis created in March 2014 the Pontifical Commission on the Protection of Minors, called together in February 2019 a Vatican summit on the sex abuse crisis, and issued mandates that church officials must report sex abuse claims to local authorities. (It should be noted that critics seem to rightfully claim that these responses are inadequate given the opposition of the Vatican bureaucracy and the lack of accountability of bishops and thus they urge more radical reforms. See Emma Green, “[Why Does the Catholic Church Keep Failing on Sexual Abuse?](#),” *The Atlantic*, Feb 14, 2019.)

Acknowledging mistakes and apologizing for them demonstrate vulnerability. Vulnerability creates connection and trust with followers. In addition, if leaders take action to remedy their mistakes, they can learn and grow as a result of their errors.

## **Symbols and Storytelling**

The Pope is not a particularly good orator. However, he is a great communicator. Why?

First, Francis effectively uses symbols. As Pope, he pointedly named himself after St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of the environment and dedicated servant of the poor. Francis washes the feet of the marginalized. He resides in a simple apartment.

Second, Francis reaches out to people and connects with them through conversation. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the Pope made countless telephone calls to COVID patients, elderly shut-ins, and health care workers and volunteers. Francis listened to their experiences, shared their suffering, and provided encouragement and support. The Pope is a wonderful conversationalist because he is intensely present, tunes into the other person, listens deeply, and is thus able to connect.

Third, the Pope has adapted to the new media. He uses social media to communicate with his global constituency and has over 6 million followers.

Finally, Francis is a storyteller. He recognizes that storytelling is the most powerful way to teach and lead. For instance, in the documentary *Francesco*, the Pope broke from long-standing church doctrine about the place of gay people in the church. He told the story of a moving letter that he received from a gay man who had adopted three children with his partner and wanted to desperately bring them up in his Catholic faith. Francis telephoned the man and told him to go ahead and the local church accepted the family into the parish. The Pope concluded the story by stating that “homosexuals have the right to be part of the family. They are children of God.” (See [Francesco](#) documentary, 2020.)

## Servant Leader

Pope Francis is a “servant leader.” A servant leader is committed to enhance the well-being of the organization, coworkers, and the people they serve. Servant leaders are “other-centered,” as opposed to “me-centered.” They seek to exert positive influence (rather than increase their own power and status) so that they can better make a difference and serve others.

While great leaders are humble, they are still passionate. They just demonstrate their passion in a quiet manner. They are not boisterous about their commitments but they demonstrate their commitments every day in small ways. They model the way.

We leaders cannot copy what Pope Francis does but we can flex our behaviors to incorporate some of his humility, authenticity, and courage as a change agent. As a global leader, Francis has influence because he has the ability to connect with others by:

- Being present.
- Deeply listening.
- Demonstrating empathy and compassion.
- Sharing experiences and stories.
- Taking incremental steps forward in pursuit of his mission and vision.

In all our roles (local government professional, colleague, partner, parent, family member, friend), let us also try to change the world for the better.



Part of the ICMA Coaching Program, *ICMA Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail [careers@icma.org](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly

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