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## IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY & MANAGEMENT A STUDY OF “IGNATIAN EXECUTIVES”

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**Abstract:** We describe the results of a first empirical study conducted on the relationships existing between the fact that executives experienced St. Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises and their managerial practices. Based on in-depth interviews of 20 senior managers and top executives who have practiced the Ignatian Spirituality for many years, we describe six general categories where these relationships appear to be the most important: Decision-making, Human Resource management, the organizational mission, social responsibility, career development, and the meaning of work. These results demonstrate that their leadership attitudes are influenced by discreet spiritual values. These values influence the organizations.

**Keywords:** Management, Leadership, Ignatian Spirituality.

### Introduction

In this article, we report on the relationship observed between the experience of a particular spiritual practice and the exercise of management. Our research strategy springs from the fourth definition of spirituality proposed by Ken Wilber, i.e. that —spirituality is something you do, with your mind and your body, in actual practice, moment to moment || (Wilber, in Pauchant et al., 2004, p. 117). This research strategy thus attempts to better understand the effects that a distinct spiritual practice has on management thinking and doing. While we do respect other types of studies that attempt, for example, to better understand the overall influence of particular religious doctrines, values or rituals on management (see, for example, Cortright and Naughton, 2002, or Fernando and Jackson, 2006), we have chosen to focus on a personal, inner and reflective approach to spirituality. We are aware, however, that this strategy of research also incorporates elements belonging to the other definitions of spirituality which include the influence of values and faith. Indeed, the practice we have studied, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola challenges the dichotomy, hinted above, between —religion || and —spirituality || : while the Exercises are grounded in direct and concrete experience, they also belong to a distinct religious community, the Catholic Church and, in particular, the Order of the Jesuits.

### Ignatian Spirituality and its Exercises

Currently, there exists a large body of research on the effect of different religious and spiritual practices

(meditation, contemplation, prayer, chanting, etc.) on individuals. For example, a large number of rigorous studies have been conducted on the effects of such practices on medical and health care (see, for example, Koenig, 1999) and on psychological and social well-being (see, for example, Roof, 1999). In relation to work and the practice of management and leadership, there exists, comparatively, much less empirical work (Benefield, 2003; Delbecq, 1999; Lips-Wiersma, 2004; Neal & Biderman, 2004; Schwartz, 2006). The most studied spiritual practice has been the Transcendental Meditation (T.M.), with more than 500 studies (See Harung et al., 2009, for a review). Very interesting studies have also been conducted on practices used in different traditions, such as Buddhism (Kemochan et al., 2007), Christianity (Biberman & Whitty, 2000), Hinduism (Ramstedt, 2008) and many others.

In the spirit of inter-faith dialogue, we wanted to conduct an empirical study of one the world's major spiritual traditions which has never been examined with regards to its relation to the practice of management. While studies have found links between Ignatian Spirituality and the social engagement of individuals (Ryan, 1996), we are not aware of any empirical work conducted on its relationship with the practice of management per se. However, management experts, such as Casanova (1992), Delbecq (1999), Lowney (2005) or Falque and Bougon (2009) have presented and discussed the importance of the *Exercises* for the practice of management, and in particular its focus on —discernment || .

The spiritual practice we have chosen is one of the major spiritual practices in the world. The —*Spiritual Exercises* || , as they are called, were first published in 1548 by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founding father of the Society of Jesus. Since its first publication, the book of the *Exercises* has been understood as a book of experience and of practice, rather than a book of doctrine (Ganss, 1992). For more than 450 years, orders in the Catholic Church have been educated and trained, using the Ignatian *Exercises* as a central component. We believe that it is important to better understand the effects of this specific spiritual practice on management as the Jesuits are the largest religious order in the Catholic church, close to 20,000 members in more than 100 countries, educating a very large number of professionals and potential leaders. In addition, the *Exercises* are practiced today by different protestant denominations, through organizations such as the Christian Life Community (CLC), counting more than 120,000 members. Further, management experts (Falque and Bougon, 2009) have recently revised the *Exercises* so they can be used by people of different faiths or by people who do not wish to be associated with a religious community.

Originally, the *Exercises* were meant to be undertaken over 30 days during a secluded retreat and under the guidance of a spiritual director. In another version, the *Exercises* are practiced over a 9 month period, by men and women of many different occupations without leaving their day to day occupations. Their purpose is to seek and find God's will, for one's life, and thus to fulfill the main principle of the Ignatian Spirituality —finding God in all things || . This posits that the Divine is ever active in people lives, at work, in family, in meetings, everywhere. Through a process of attentiveness and responsiveness, Ignatian practitioners attempt to sense what the Divine is asking and to respond to this call in daily activities in order to trace God's footprints everywhere. *Ignatian spirituality* uses various prayers styles, meditations and techniques of contemplation as well as a spiritual self-review, a daily examination of one's actions and processes of discernment, to be used in making major decisions.

### Methodology and Sampling

Since our study was the first on the subject, we decided that it should be exploratory and we have adopted the Naturalist Inquiry approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This approach is particularly suited for ill-structured research projects and inquiries which require the interpretation of subjective experiences. Since we wanted to generate hypotheses on the relationship between the Ignatian Spirituality and the practice of management, we were careful to include in our sample respondents who have experienced the *Exercises* on a regular basis over many years.

Further, in order to strengthen the link with management, we have not included in this study men and women belonging to the clergy but only lay people who were managers in a variety of organizations of the private, public and associative sectors. In total, 20 leaders-executives took part in this study, all of whom were working in France. However, we made sure that a great variety of backgrounds, contexts and experiences would be represented. The 20 participants exhibited a wide age range (35 to 63, with an average of 55); they represented different professional backgrounds (engineering, business administration, medicine, science, etc.); and they worked in 15 industries or sectors (Pharmaceutical, aeronautics, petroleum, medicine, distribution, edition, health-care, public sector, not-for-profit, etc.).

In addition, we only chose managers holding executive positions, at the V.P. or CEO levels. These executives enjoy a certain amount of power and freedom of choice inside and outside their organization. Each interview was conducted in the natural setting of the interviewer. We used a very general set of questions, entered the data in a database and then generated six categories through a process of crystallization and saturation. In order to reduce the chance of misunderstandings, we communicated a synthesis of the results to the interviewees and, after incorporating their feedback, they all agreed that our results were representative of their experience.

### Results

We present below the six general categories generated through this study and which have consequences on the leadership and the organization: 1) the Decision-making Process; 2) Human Resource Management; 3) Organizational Mission; and, 4) Social Responsibility; 5) Career Development; 6) Meaning of Work. For each, we will describe how —Ignatian executives || - as we shall call them - handled some typical managerial issues at work.

#### *The Decision-Making Process*

The process of decision-making is central to management. However, Ignatian executives frame the process in a unique way by using —spiritual discernment || prior to making some decisions, specifically for important decisions like hiring or dismissal, new contracts, joint ventures, etc. Spiritual discernment allows for a pondering the arguments of the decision, as well as providing a choice of means and a study of each possible option. In addition, this offers a better integration of subjective elements such as the attentiveness to interior motions and emotions and feelings related to how the Divine may or may not be guiding the discernment. As explained by one interviewee:

*(Bruno, V.P., Aeronautic sector). Ignatian Spirituality allows me to be aware of my interior motions as well to listen to my felling. I can then make more personal decision. God speaks through our actions and our emotions. In addition, I now find that it is*

*natural for me to examine the positive and negative sides of each option after having reflected on the situation and its particularities. I also like the practice of the Ignatian review : When I imagine myself in the future or on my death-bed, I can review my life, in relation to an important decision that I made, or I can sense the taste in my mouth and in my heart. My practice of daily prayer is also important as it clarifies my work. Daily prayer allows me to review the decisions I have made in the past and to place future decisions before God, asking him to help me to be more vigilant, especially in the moments when I am easily tempted to use an authoritarian manner or to restrict myself with a narrow interpretation. I would say that decision-making is the primary service that an executive can offer to his team but it is also the first place where the temptation of pride or the desire for power can surface.*

While the above quotation is about an individual decision-making process, other Ignatian executives have used a particular process of consensus for collective decision-making processes. This involves seeking unanimity in the integration of the spiritual dimensions, listening systematic to everyone involved in the decision-making process without interruption, periods of silence, discernment, writing, dialogue and voting. As explained by an interviewee:

*(Marc, executive in an investment network). We have an important rule, based on consensus and a communitarian discernment with different phases: 1. The decision team of seven people study the data; 2. The entrepreneur presents his project to the team for ten minutes, followed by twenty minutes of questions; 3. Each person takes a moment of personal reflection in silence and each submits his decision in writing; 4. Each member is then asked to explain his decision without commentary by the others; 5. The team then has an exchange on the different decisions; 6. A vote is taken and the investment is accepted if all seven members agree on, refused if two or more members disagree. 7. If only one member disagrees, he must meet the entrepreneur again for one day in order to study, one more time, the proposal and come to a decision. If he agrees the investment is accepted; if he disagrees, it is refused*

### **Human Resource Management**

Just as the issue of decision-making, Human Resource Management is central to the practice of management. All interviewees emphasized the respect they give to their employees. They try to foster good interpersonal relationships and a climate that values human growth and personal development. They strive for a deep respect of each human being, and want to honor their spiritual nature. This attitude is also present in the process of evaluation where Ignatian executives are playing the role of a guide or of a coach, as opposed to an evaluative one or simply correcting mistakes. For example, they try to help people through attentive listening; they try to incorporate in their work elements of discernment in the process of the individual growth of their colleagues. They try to take into consideration the whole of the person, his or her personal or familial constraints as well. Some of them see their role as a helper for their collaborators to discover that they are in charge of their own development, helping them to find what they need. As stated by one interviewee:

*(Marie, medical doctor, health care industry). The Ignatian spirituality helps me to better help people to develop all of their abilities. My role is more to assist each collaborator to discover that they are in charge of their own development, helping them to find what they need. An executive has more of a role as a guide who challenges and inspires. The employee has the responsibility to find his own path.*

While Ignatian executives attempt to preserve the freedom of their collaborators, they are also very aware of the constraints associated with working in organizations. Many acknowledge that one of the most difficult tasks is to terminate the employment of a collaborator due to economic necessities. In these cases, they attempt to keep as many employees as possible by using different strategies such as a salary freeze across the board, time sharing, voluntary retirements, etc. However, when they are forced to reduce their workforce they attempt to do it in the most human way possible. In times of lay-off the temptation to flee from interpersonal meetings is very strong. To sit down with each employee is a very difficult exercise. But in these difficult times, they have discovered that it really changes things when one attempts to meet with the employee and when people are authentic. During these times they discovered that one can give a promotion in a disdainful way and that one can terminate some one's employment in a very human way. As stated by one interviewee:

*(Martin, General director of a research laboratory). In times of lay-off the temptation to flee is very strong. To sit down with each employee is a very difficult exercise. This is what I have done with my associates. But in these difficult times, I have discovered that it really changes things when one attempts to really see the employee and when you are authentic. During these times I have discovered that one can give a promotion in a disdainful way and that one can terminate some one's employment in a very human way.*

### **Organizational Mission**

All the Ignatian executives that we have interviewed emphasized that for them the mission of their organization is centered neither on profit maximization nor on efficiency. While they take the notions of profits and efficiency very seriously both are at the service of human development. Their spiritual life has transformed things for them. Their relationship to others is different as well as the relationship to their organization's mission. Its official objective – profit and performance – is important, but it needs to be put into perspective and modified. Of course, they cannot afford not to be efficient, but efficiency is only one of the many pieces of the puzzle. True performance is really the development of people, the growth of each person. And this different conception has many implications for the notions of authority and power.

Many interviewees emphasized that these different conceptions in management can trigger conflicts with their colleagues and sometimes even with themselves. As emphasized by one respondent:

*(John, Director, cosmetic industry). My spiritual life has transformed things. My relationship to others is different as well as the relationship to my organization's mission. Its official objective – profit and performance – is important, but it needs to be put into perspective and modified. Of course, we cannot afford not to be efficient, but*

*efficiency is only one of the many pieces of the puzzle. True performance is really the development of people, the growth of each person. And this different conception has many implications for the notions of authority and power.*

Ignatian executives are, indeed, also attracted by power, honor and financial success. They, sometimes, feel some tensions around the notion of the purpose of the firm. They need to constantly check whether the firm's development serves not only their own needs but also those of the shareholders. Financial growth is important but so is also the question of how to stay with one's two feet on the ground! How to refuse financial growth for its own sake?

*As explained by two of them:*

*(Dominique, V.P., industrial sector) Sometimes I disagree with the decisions taken by my colleagues when we do not share the same perspective on the mission of the organization. For example, recently, we had the opportunity to expand our market shares in two different countries, with the potential of very healthy profits. I refused to sign the contract because I believed we were not ready to expand internationally due to questions of human development. If I had not the habit of reflecting on fundamentals, I would have been seduced by the enthusiasm of the others. The decision was different for my colleagues since they were only considering the financial aspect of the opportunity.*

*(Daniel, CEO, Mechanical engineering) I sometimes feel some tensions around the notion of the purpose of the firm. I need to check constantly whether the firm's development serves not only my own needs and those of our shareholders. Financial growth is important but so is also the question of how to stay with one's two feet on the ground! How to refuse financial growth for its own sake?*

### **Social Responsibility**

As previously proposed, Ignatian executives are keenly aware of their responsibilities towards their employees. At the same time, their social responsibility is not limited to human resource management. Ignatian Executives attempt to integrate their personal quest for social justice into their interactions with their employees, clients, suppliers, i.e. all the stakeholders they deal with in their daily activities, including the natural environment. For example, as manager of a company, they have a responsibility to exercise an attitude of justice with the suppliers and subcontractors.

They try to be very strict and careful that they do not seek to lower their prices so exaggeratedly that it could cause their suppliers to lose money. Some of them have always defended the stance that suppliers or contractors should earn a just wage and therefore that they should not choke them by imposing unjust rates. When at times, they have had difficulties and had to lower their prices, they always succeeded in maintaining a good margin of profit for suppliers and contractors on other projects. Also, they have always tried to remain committed to the same suppliers, in order to help to ensure their financial viability. Conversely they know many companies which do not act justly as this and which, in the end, —kill || their subcontractors.

Further, some Ignatian executives use their power to attempt to stop projects with which they disagree from a moral standpoint. For example, one of them, an executive in the aeronautics industry tell us that he prefers not to conclude a contract, such as the sale of weapons to a country that will use them ostensibly against peace or the selling of material to people who are starving and where the money could be used for other more useful purposes. If justice is really at stake and if this Ignatian executive is in a position of responsibility, his margin for actions is always larger than what people think. He needs to dare to block a sale even if it could be an excellent one from a financial point of view. This is a decision that is never easy to make, since people and situations are never —all black and white || .

Finally, Ignatian executives attempt to integrate in their working activities a number of disadvantaged people such as those with disabilities, those who suffer from racial discrimination or the unemployed.

But these choices are not easy. Some interviewees have even stated that they had to pay the price for their quest of personal integrity or of their social sensibility. For some of them, their quest for the absolute was very strong. However, their professional life was a life of constant compromise. They have often sought to be honest in the economic and political fields. Sometimes they have publically denounced what they had perceived to be an injustice and their colleagues did not like this. Sometimes, the consequences were that they were excluded from external political situations or that their career was deflected or stopped. But, as much as this was not easy to accept, still the kind of freedom they experienced was fundamental for them.

### ***Career Development***

Due to varying conceptions, career development of Ignatian executives can be rather different from the norm. Some attempt to complement their usual work with an engagement in humanitarian causes while others quit their organization if it cannot provide them with a sense of meaning. These behaviors are different from the more usual ones where the marketing of self and managing one's career in the hope of future promotions is quite important if not paramount.

Some Ignatian executives use the process of discernment for making these moves which go against a —traditional || career. Their experiences of discernment offered them the opportunity to think about the place of the work in their life. They discovered that they often forgot the spiritual dimension of their life. During their discernment process, some of them heard they could develop their career according to in a spiritual dynamic while working in business enterprises. Instead of choosing the way which gives them power, honour or riches, they chose the way of service. For example, one of them chose to keep working in headquarters and to develop a training department instead of going to India to become a director of sales department. He chose this option because during his discernment, he understood that to stay was the quest for a greater service rather than his career-building. It was the way of the Ignatian magis —mas || .

### ***Meaning of Work***

In Ignatian Spirituality, the Divine is not found outside daily reality. It is uncovered at the heart of every action, every encounter and hence at work. It is therefore not surprising that practically all our interviewees stressed that the most important issue at work was finding meaning. To say it another way,

Ignatian managers resisted the temptation to live a compartmentalized life. They strived for authenticity, where their life at home, at work and in other areas, including the spiritual world, is integrated. They tried to be —contemplatives in action || . Some of interviewees understood that work was a privileged place for relationship with others and a privileged place for confronting the dimensions of power and money. Working then becomes the place for a dialogue between themselves, God and the world, as well as with oneself.

For those who worked in social and medical care, they were led to be in touch with people who suffer. Through their encounter with these people, they became aware of the presence of God in the fragility of humanity. Marie, an M.D. working with terminal patients, expresses this special integration in a poignant way:

*The spiritual life means to be in relationship with God. My work is relational. Encounters with patients and their families are ongoing contemplations of God which supports my way of being with others and with God. Monks separate themselves from the world in order to find the Divine. In the Ignatian spirituality, I am invited to be in the world to seek the Divine. I find God in sick people and most particularly when they are at the end of their lives. I find myself again facing the fragility of being and of its mystery. When I am with someone who has lost everything, everything that made him someone, I experience both God and the desert. There are no other things than the patient name and, yet, God is the face of all the people I encounter, without limiting myself to a particular face. For me, this is the Incarnation.*

Many Ignatian executives also emphasize their participation in the natural world or in what they call the —creation || , from the point of view of an enlightened stewardship. Through the innovative work, they believe that they participate in a certain way in the creation, in the transformation of the world. For example, to build a new instrument which will serve human-beings is a way to participate in the development of the creation. For them, there are three types of creative innovations: technological and material innovation, creation of employment, and development of relationships among people.

### Conclusion

In this article we have presented how Ignatian executives, i.e. executives who share the spirituality and practice the St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, manage their work in different organizations. Due to their integration into society, their practices and sensibilities are no different than those of managers whom we count as —humanists || . However, they do ground themselves in a specific faith and spiritual practice. We have also seen that Ignatian practitioners do not attempt to convert others. Theirs is not an attitude of proselytism but a contemplative attitude that includes the desire that their work become an opening to the Transcendent, letting the Divine to be present in their daily life and a mean to develop a leadership with values dissemination.

We do not claim that Ignatian spirituality is superior to others or that the categories we have described are unique. Indeed, it seems that many elements are similar to the ones emerging from other spiritual and non spiritual traditions. For example, the specific and sophisticated decision-making process Ignatian executives utilize has some similarities with other traditions and can be used outside of

any tradition (Delbecq, 1999; Falque & Bougon, 2009). Similarly, the focus on Human Resource management, considering the other managerial functions of marketing, finance, production, etc., as means and not ends, has been emphasized by other authors. Peter Vaill, for example, who wrote an influential book on spirituality and leadership (1998), affirmed that —All management is people management, and all leadership is people leadership. It's all people || (Vaill, 1989, p. 126). The refusal by the Ignatian managers to accept that profits and efficiencies are ends in themselves is also emphasized by, for example, the Buddhist community (Kemochan et al., 2007).

We have conducted this study in the spirit of a growing inter-faith dialogue and as a contribution of the expanding literature on spirituality at work. Further studies are necessary to verify the results of this research. Studies on this specific spiritual practice need to be conducted in different countries and to use an array of diverse methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative. It is also important to compare the effects on management of different spiritual, religious and ethical practices and to become more rigorous in assessing their positive and less positive effects.

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