

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP OF THE PERSON AND THE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This article discloses the contemporary relevance of Ignatian leadership as a transformative model grounded in the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuit tradition. A qualitative methodology was used to review about 20 documents and to reflect the author's personal experience. The findings show that this leadership model emerged to renew the Society of Jesus's apostolic mission, modernise its educational management, and empower both laypeople and Jesuits in leadership roles. Grounded in Ignatian spirituality—particularly in the practice of discernment aimed at promoting actions inspired by the Magis, in ever deeper and greater service to the most universal good—it seeks to serve others and promote the common good. Over time, the model has expanded beyond religious contexts, offering a counter-cultural and ethically grounded leadership style applicable in educational, managerial and civic settings. This shift of focus not only paves the way for institutional change but also guides individuals towards a more authentic and meaningful life. Five main characteristics were listed to describe the transformative nature of this model.

Keywords: *Ignatian Leadership; Ignatian spirituality; leadership model; personal transformation; transformational leadership*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ignatian leadership style draws inspiration from the life and spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola, a sixteenth-century soldier, mystic and saint and especially from the most important of his writings - the Spiritual Exercises. It seeks the wisdom of this charism and brings the rich organisational tradition of the Society of Jesus to individuals, companies and modern-day organisations. Ignatian leadership integrates practical tools and strategies from organisational management with the spiritual foundations and practices of the Jesuit tradition. These elements have allowed it to become a unified and transformative model. Writings of St. Ignatius and his method of founding and governing the Society of Jesus reveal an intuitive grasp principles of *talent management, transformational leadership, or empowerment which are common to contemporary leadership* [1]; Following a deep process of personal transformation, Ignatius identified core principles of leadership and organisational culture that would shape the development of the Jesuit Order and underpin the global expansion of its educational mission, which today includes over 2700 institutions and more than 2 billion people worldwide [2].

2. METHODOLOGY

The first step in this methodology was to explore information sources and retrieve documents using the EBSCO, WoS, and Scopus databases. For database queries, English keywords were used: Ignatian leadership, Ignatian leader, transformational leadership, and servant leadership, reflecting the linguistic scope of our literature search, which is primarily limited to sources in English and Lithuanian. Another important source of the research was to retrieve and reinterpret the material from personal studies at Fordham University (New York, USA) in 1992-1993 in the so-

called CORD programme of Ignatian Leadership for the Jesuit prospective directors of educational institutions of the Society of Jesus, directed by J. O'Connell and R. Metz and later materials of ongoing formation for the heads of Jesuit Secondary schools. The third important resource was an overview of training programmes on governance of the Society of Jesus for Jesuit provincials, which the author attended in Rome in 2010.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Leadership is a broad topic. There is much discourse regarding the definition of a leader and the impact of leadership on society. Some leaders are internationally recognised figures, while others quietly live out this role in schools, small businesses, and families. Leaders may be icons or ordinary people. The focus of this article is leadership from an Ignatian perspective. More specifically, what wisdom can the Spiritual Exercises offer regarding the spirit and skills of a good leader for the sake of the whole society?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines a leader as “The person who leads or commands a group, organisation, or country” [3].

More specifically, leadership can be defined as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” [4]. The leader helps people move forward toward their desired goals. Leadership is multifaceted. There are approximately 1400 different definitions of “leader” or “leadership” [5]. Today, the word ‘leadership’ is often characterised by other words, such as collective, transformational, relational, or servant. For example, the idea of servant leadership, first coined by Robert Greenleaf, holds that a leader must act as a servant first and leader second. Such a person seeks primarily to help followers become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, able to reach their full potential, and more likely to become servant leaders themselves. Balancing conceptual thinking with day-to-day operations, servant leaders nurture in others the ability to dream great dreams [6].

The Spiritual Exercises were composed by the saint Ignatius before he was even a priest, and are often described as Ignatius' greatest gift to the world. These exercises unfold a dynamic process of prayer, meditation, and self-awareness. The main purpose is to make us more attentive to God's activity in our world, more responsive to what God is calling us to do.

How did Ignatius himself view the Exercises? In a letter he wrote to Fr. Manuel Miona in 1536. Ignatius writes, “The Spiritual Exercises are all the best that I have been able to think out, experience and understand in this life, both for helping somebody to make the most of themselves, as also for being able to bring advantage, help and profit to many others.”[7]

This spirituality presupposes that God is present in Scripture and the Church. It asserts that God can also be found in the everyday world around us and that God is active there. As the prominent Jesuit palaeontologist and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote: “God is not remote from us. He is at the point of my pen, my pick, my paintbrush, my needle — and my heart and my thoughts”.

The spiritual path laid out by Ignatius is a way of discerning God's presence in our everyday lives, and doing something about it.

Joseph O'Connell, SJ, in his manual *“Ignatian Leadership in Jesuit Schools: Resources for Reflection and Evaluation”*, describes Ignatian leadership: “Ignatian Leadership is linked to the *Spiritual Exercises* and to the ability to shape leaders who,

following Jesus' example, will live a life of service to others and choose to do the greatest good possible" [8].

It is important to distinguish between the terms Ignatian and Jesuit, which are sometimes used as synonyms even though they do not refer to the same reality or meaning.

- While Jesuit leadership specifically refers to the leadership style practised by members of the Society of Jesus,
- Ignatian Leadership includes all people and organisations who wish to live, lead and take inspiration from this charism [9].

According to Jesuit scholar Johnny C. Go from Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Philippines, Ignatian Leadership is, in fact, a radical form of servant leadership, since the Ignatian Leader is at the service not only of the Community, but also—and for Ignatius of Loyola, even more fundamentally—of the Mission entrusted to that Community. Leadership as a three-way relationship among the Leader, the Community, and the Mission, in the process, illustrating what *magis* and *cura personalis* might mean in one's exercise of leadership, but also, spelling out, in light of these relationships, the key functions of the Ignatian Leader [10].

3.1. Ignatius as leader [11]

The qualities he demonstrated include:

Vision: Ignatius' vision is nothing less than the Kingdom of Christ, as shown in his presentation of the Call of the King (Exx 91-98). He had an unfettered consciousness: no part of the world, no situation, was unimportant to him.

Attractiveness / Inspiration: Wherever Ignatius went, he had the capacity to attract women and men, young and old, of all classes: they came in crowds to listen to him teach and preach, they made the Exercises with him. He gathered three sets of companions in his pilgrim period, though only the last set, the Paris group, persevered. He won people over to his aims not by focusing on himself but on Jesus, by whom he himself had been captivated. People found in him someone interested in them, who respected them, and who had a huge capacity to listen deeply to what they said. They knew he loved them, so they felt safe and at home with him, and he evoked the best in them.

Imagination: An unpublished study on Leadership traces the qualities exhibited by Napoleon, Nelson, Trotsky, and Ignatius that enabled them to exert power over people. It is argued there that Ignatius had the capacity to identify persons of rich imagination. He would cultivate this quality in them until they were ready to make the Exercises, and then engage in imaginative contemplation of the Jesus of the Gospels to the point where they were won over to the Lord and his cause. This transformation occurred not only in the exercitant's mind and will, but in desire, emotion, physicality and affectivity. Then he would send them out across the world, confident that they would be true disciples and manage well whatever came their way. He pointed his followers, not to himself, but to Christ. He was even reluctant to be named general, and after ten years tendered his resignation (Alone and on Foot, Ch. 62).

Determination: This word had strong resonances for Ignatius. When he uses the Spanish verb *determinar*, he is resolved and will not be deterred from what he believes God wants him to do. This gave him his 'courage in difficult enterprises', which included the capacity to start all sorts of projects. He seems never to have given way to panic nor erred on the side of prudence when a legitimate risk was called for.

Openness: Ignatius is a supreme example of someone who learned from experience. From his conversion onward, he attended to his inner as well as his outer experiences,

which gave him this quality of openness. He let himself be taught by both failures and successes, his own and those of his followers, when they reported back to him on the execution of their tasks. He was aware, more than most leaders, perhaps, of his capacity to spoil the work of God by getting in the way.

Prayer/ Conviction: Believing that the founding of the Society was God's work rather than his own, Ignatius kept constantly in touch with God, asking to be shown what God wanted done in asking his followers to "keep God always before their eyes" Ignatius led by example, as his Spiritual Diary makes clear. He prayed his way to his decisions, and he proposes that the general of the Society should divide his daily time partly with God, partly with his advisors, and partly with himself. He was "led by Another", and his trust in that Other was absolute, even when the very existence of the Society was threatened.

- **Development/Formation:** Ignatius believed in a strong formation of his followers; they had to go through the experiences which he himself had found helpful – the Exercises, pilgrimages, work in hospitals and menial tasks, and later, studies. He respected each person's unique blend of strengths and limitations and worked to bring out the best in them. He required that the leader or superior should know what was going on in the hearts of those in his charge. In the Spiritual Exercises, the person who directs the retreat (the "spiritual director") should try to facilitate rather than direct, lest he/she gets in the way of the direct interaction between the retreatant and God. If we apply this approach to leadership, the leader serves as a facilitator, supporting team members as a companion and mentor. He/she is not expected to micromanage by giving very detailed instructions. Instead, the leader provides the space for the team to work out in detail how the job should be done. Even if the team's approach or solution is not the leader's preferred one, he/she may still refrain from outright intervention. This is perhaps why Jesuits are often seen as rather "liberal" in how they teach and lead.
- **Positive:** Rather than complain about the abuses in society and in the Church of his day, Ignatius "lit small candles everywhere". He went in the opposite direction to Luther: instead of public protest over the Church's woes, he supported it as best he could. Believing that the heart-to-heart approach was the best way to help people change their situations, his favourite task was to give the Exercises to selected people on a one-to-one basis. Ignatius was optimistic rather than pessimistic about people: he placed extraordinary trust in his men, empowered them, and they responded.

In summary, when we look at the qualities Ignatius demonstrated through his personal example, his writings, and his advisory commentary, we find most of the leadership attributes discussed in today's literature. These include vision, positivity, the ability to inspire, openness and humility, determination, a deep personal conviction, a belief in the development of self and of his followers. A prerequisite for your success as a leader is having the necessary qualifications and professional expertise to excel in the chosen area. Ignatius encouraged all his followers to achieve 'the more' ('magis' in Latin). The drive to achieve 'excellence' is consistent with effective leadership.

3.2. Leadership and Ignatian Spirituality [12]

The characteristics associated with Ignatian Spirituality:

- the belief that we are each gifted with a unique value in the overall plan of creation;

- the belief that we can all play a part in the unfolding of life around us and in our work and culture;
- a positive appreciation of the good in our world and a realistic belief in the future;
- the value of reflection on experience and listening to experience to adapt to our future reality;
- the conviction that we do not work alone, but can be of real service to others and make a difference through our personal intervention, with Christ as our role model, showing our faith through deeds more than words;
- the focusing of energy on what is of “greatest value”;
- the practice of ‘stopping to think’ before we act. This includes opening our minds to the possibility that the answer may not be obvious, inviting others to contribute their experience and wisdom, and believing that new possibilities will emerge if we have faith in the process of opening our lives to openness.

All of these characteristics are helpful and material to good leadership. Stephen Covey, when studying the habits of effective people/leaders, found that a common (and encouraging!!) trait they all shared was their preparedness to ‘work’ on developing their skills. None of the above happens overnight! Ignatius, as you have read in the account in ‘Alone and on Foot’, toiled for many years to adjust his personal approach to facilitate his growth. Slowly, with constant effort, he made progress!

Another point to remember is that we do the best we can in the circumstances and with the resources available to us – what is important is that we aim for the best but do not expect perfection. No one person embodies perfection; all have strengths and weaknesses. A good leader is aware of their strengths and has enough insight to leverage the support of others to compensate for their shortcomings.

The following 5 aspects of Ignatian leadership as a transformational model could be mentioned:

1. Ignatian Leadership as a Transformational Practice

Ignatian leadership is best understood not as a set of managerial methods, but as a transformative practice that changes both the leader and the community to which they are connected, striving generously for the Magis and the common good.

2. Inner Transformation as a Condition for Mature Leadership

In the Ignatian tradition, the transformation of structures begins with an inner transformation of the person — through spiritual discernment, reflection, humility and the inner freedom that arises from Ignatian spirituality.

3. Ignatian Leadership as an Instrument of Healing and Liberation

Ignatian leadership functions as a mechanism of human liberation. It promotes change wherever individuals or communities experience exclusion, injustice, or inner fragmentation.

4. *Cura Personalis* — The Healing Character of Leadership

At the heart of Ignatian leadership lies the commitment to *cura personalis*— leadership that recognises the dignity, vulnerability, and growth potential of each person. Such leadership cares not only about achievements but also about people themselves — their spiritual, emotional, and human well-being and authenticity.

5. Leadership as a Response to the Expectations of a “Wounded World”

Ignatian leaders are not formed merely to maintain existing structures, but to respond creatively and compassionately to the realities of a wounded world, transforming leadership into an instrument of reconciliation and healing.

Ignatian leadership is a form of servant leadership, in fact, a radical form of servant leadership, insofar as Ignatian Leaders ought to prioritise serving the Community they lead over their own interests. However, what distinguishes Ignatian Leadership from servant leadership is its explicit, non-negotiable prioritisation of the service of the Mission entrusted to that Community. Ignatian Leadership is a transformative model that combines organisational management principles with the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuit tradition.

This leadership model emerged to renew the apostolic mission of the Society of Jesus, modernising its educational management and empowering laypeople and Jesuits in leadership roles. It is grounded in Ignatian spirituality, particularly the practice of discernment, and is aimed at promoting actions inspired by the Magis in ever-deeper, greater service to the most universal good. It seeks to serve others and promote the common good. Over time, the model has expanded beyond religious contexts, offering a counter-cultural and ethically grounded leadership style applicable in educational, managerial and civic settings. This shift of focus not only paves the way for institutional change and transformation but also guides individuals towards a more authentic and meaningful life.

The increased accessibility and popularisation of Ignatian Leadership among people of different faiths and religious and non-religious companies and organisations was brought about in 2003 with the publication of *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World* by Chris Lowney, who was a Jesuit novice for several years before becoming a managing director at JP Morgan. In this book, Lowney applies Ignatian spirituality and the best practices of the Society of Jesus to modern personal and organisational leadership, identifying four key pillars: self-awareness, ingenuity, love and heroism. In his book, he stresses that every person is a leader, at least of their own life, and that this contributes to the developing discipline of workplace spirituality, based on the argument that spiritual principles and values can be integrated into the workplace. He also extended the possibility, discussed internally in the Society of Jesus, that Ignatian Leadership could be applied to people and businesses of all kinds, regardless of whether they are religious or not [13].

Ignatian leadership is not simply a subset of positional power, and the hierarchy is structured as a two-way, not a one-way street (each Jesuit provincial steps back ‘down’ after six years in office). It taps straight into vocation – every Jesuit leads, well or badly. Moreover, the domain of Ignatian leadership extends beyond directors of Jesuit workplaces. Everyone shaped by an Ignatian education is formed to lead, whether they are in charge or not. If Ignatian, a person is called to be aware of how they lead in their life and the impact it has on others.

Leadership infused by Ignatian spirituality orients us to our deepest vocation. In the first principle and foundation of the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius explains: “I ought to desire and elect only that which is more conducive to the end for which I am created.” We are created to serve God—that is our first vocation. However, how do we do so? How we choose to lead reflects how we understand our vocation. Do we lead for our own ends or for the greater glory of God? Whose interests are we serving? The concept of vocation is an important check against the tendency to think of leadership as a vehicle for personal advancement. Recalling that Ignatian leadership is an expression of a deeper vocation encourages humility, charity, and integrity, which also happen to be qualities of strong leaders.

Ignatian-inspired leadership is other-focused.

Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ, instructed us that our work must form people for and with others. Being a leader “for and with” others means considering the needs of those we are serving. It is a model of leadership that enriches individuals' lives, builds better communities, and creates a more just world. It requires a practice of discernment that allows us to act thoughtfully amid trying circumstances or competing goods. Moreover, it asks that we foster awareness of our emotional state, freeing us from impulse and enabling genuine, affirmative communication with others. Being a leader in this tradition means, as Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, tells us, we must be men and women marked by “competence, conscience, and compassion.”

Once again, Ignatian spirituality fosters characteristics valued among great leaders.

In the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius tells us that actions are to be preferred to words. Ignatian leadership is an invitation to act in ways that reflect our most deeply held beliefs, affirm our vocation, and serve others, particularly those in need.

Pope Francis urged all Christians to work with God to repair what is broken in our hearts, communities, and environment. In his final encyclical letter, *Dilexit Nos* (24 October 2024), he developed this reparative theme and offered a way to repair past sins and restore what has been lost. He wrote, “Amid the devastation wrought by evil, the heart of Christ desires that we cooperate with him in restoring goodness and beauty to our world.” [14]

To lead well, an Ignatian leader must be humble. According to Sarah Broscombe [15], Ignatian humility is not about anxiously balancing your flaws and strengths, or comparing yourself to others, or self-abnegation (keeping your head down and your mouth shut). It is seeing one's real self, truly and in proportion, in a world that is different because of Jesus's work; “If the gospel is true, then Christ has revealed potentials in the human condition for bringing good out of evil... Moreover, only out of this sin and degradation can the full greatness of the redeemer be displayed. Humility dares to look because it knows it is loved. It also dares to be humbled without believing the core of the self to be diminished by humiliation. False humility attacks a person's sense of dignity and worth. True humility frees us from the pressure of trying to earn worth. When Ignatius describes the third degree of humility in the Spiritual Exercises, he speaks of choosing poverty with Christ, and of insults rather than honours. We choose differently, not because we are addicted to self-sacrifice or self-abasement, nor because we are allergic to power, but because we love Jesus too much and want the journey with him too much to prefer ease, strength, and success.

A leader operating with this humility, this sense of themselves as an utterly loved sinner, will have different relationships. They will see themselves in proportion to their team, their organisation, and the purpose it serves. Ignatian leaders will view power differently; they will handle it carefully but not avoid it.

Humility supports authenticity by removing the pressure to be larger than life. It can help us carry the responsibility of leadership more lightly than leaders of the heroic, charismatic and maverick stamp. Others' brilliance does not threaten Ignatian leaders, because they do not derive their legitimacy from being the best at everything. They can surround themselves with teams of people who exceed their own skill. When this happens, humility is mutually reinforcing among those they lead.

As the first Jesuit pope, Francis was steeped in Ignatian spirituality, particularly Saint Ignatius' teachings on desires. Pope Francis saw in Loyola a unique insight into repair and restoration. Often, our sins are rooted in disordered attachments and desires. If we but “rearrange” our life's goals and desires, we might open the door to true healing. Saint Ignatius of Loyola's classic work, *The Spiritual Exercises*, assumes a firm and heartfelt desire to ‘rearrange’ one's life, a desire that in turn provides the strength and

the wherewithal to achieve that goal.” For Pope Francis, Ignatian spirituality helps us change our hearts and lives so that we might change the world. [16].

In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius gives us ways to recognise the grace of consolation. In our life with God, in the joy of the Fourth Week of the Exercises, we earnestly seek and pray for this gift. Ignatian leaders imagine, even expect, that joy might somehow be present, to the point of becoming a decisive influence. They seek the kingdom of heaven in this world because the resurrection means that sin does not win. Pope Francis chose this emphasis in his address to the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (GC36) in 2016: *In the Exercises, Ignatius asks his companions to contemplate ‘the task of consolation’ as something specific to the Resurrected Christ... Let us never be robbed of that joy, neither through discouragement when faced with the great measure of evil in the world and misunderstandings among those who intend to do good, nor by letting it be replaced with vain joys... Joy is not a decorative ‘add-on’ but a clear indicator of grace: it indicates that love is active, operative, present.*

Ignatian leaders must hold hope, strategise with hope, and attend to ‘the task of consolation’ [17].

Today, we can see Ignatian Leadership embodied by institutions and individuals who live it with radical creativity and courage. The network of Jesuit schools and universities (about 2700 institutions) forms more than 2 million students to become men and women for others, serving the common good and fighting the injustices; the Jesuit Refugee Service, present in more than 50 countries, accompanies and advocates for forcibly displaced people through education and psychosocial support [18] In Los Angeles, Homeboy Industries—founded by Jesuit Greg Boyle—transforms the lives of former gang members through meaningful work, a strong sense of community, and deep compassion [19] At the highest levels of the Church, Pope Francis has projected Ignatian Leadership globally by advancing the reform of the Roman Curia in a more synodal, austere, and missionary direction, and by addressing cases of abuse with decisive action and a willingness to see them through to their ultimate consequences [20].

Throughout history, we find the same spirit in figures like Saint Francis Xavier, who crossed continents and cultures to bring the Gospel to Asia. He preached in ports, hospitals, and remote villages, baptised thousands, and used theatre, music, and illustrated catechisms to evangelise those who could not read [21] Matteo Ricci, in 16th-century China, immersed himself in local culture, adopted Confucian dress, and gained access to the imperial court, building bridges between East and West [22] Saint Alonso Rodríguez, despite holding no public office or external success, became a spiritual reference through his humble, welcoming presence as the porter of a Jesuit college. The Reductions of Paraguay represented an alternative model of society, managed by and for Indigenous communities, in which education, liturgy, economy, and culture were fully integrated into a shared life project [23].

These transformative Ignatian Leadership initiatives have generated significant interest, both as a means for reforming organisations and companies and as a path for personal and spiritual renewal.

With its strong Ignatian identity, broad adaptability, and proven effectiveness in complex environments, Ignatian Leadership emerges as a distinctive model for cultivating new, counter-cultural, and deeply committed forms of leadership in the 21st century—rooted in the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuit organisational tradition.

In contrast to other consolidated models of leadership, it offers a unique integration of inner transformation, deep discernment that orders desires and decisions, and action in service of a greater mission.

- Unlike other contemporary leadership models, such as transformational or servant leadership [24,25], Ignatian Leadership introduces a distinctive integration of deep self-knowledge, spiritual depth, and pedagogical coherence, grounded in a centuries-old tradition of personal and institutional formation. While it shares a focus on personal development and profound change with transformational leadership, it differs by not relying on individual charisma or purely organisational goals, but rather by fostering inner transformation through discernment and a clear orientation toward the greater good [26].
- Similarly, although it aligns with servant leadership in its commitment to service, the Ignatian approach places special emphasis on self-awareness, the purification of motivations, and a discerning engagement with a transcendent mission.
- Compared to ethical or authentic leadership, which seeks consistency between values and actions, Ignatian Leadership goes beyond normative alignment by incorporating *Magis* as a guiding principle and employing a concrete decision-making methodology rooted in the *Spiritual Exercises* [27].

4. CONCLUSION

Over the years, the Society of Jesus has successfully integrated its rich spiritual heritage with contemporary management principles. The convergence of Ignatian spirituality and organisational management has revolved around three main objectives:

- to form laypeople in leadership roles with a clear Ignatian identity;
- to professionalise educational governance; and
- to promote a model of leadership rooted in service, love of neighbour, and commitment to the common good.

The transformative convictions that shaped Saint Ignatius's leadership continue to resonate in today's increasingly complex and interconnected world. Our present context is also marked by growing individualism, which often fragments the self and distances it from its social and Christian vocation. However, this renewal requires:

- a reawakening of our shared humanity—one possible path being the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*—and
- a style of leadership inspired by Ignatian principles, moving us toward a freer, more committed, and hope-filled way of life.

Today, Ignatian Leadership is not confined to religious settings; it serves as a tool for forming people who can lead with depth and purpose in any context.

- In schools and universities, it helps educators and students reconnect with their mission and values when making decisions, providing greater direction to everything they do, always seeking to orient their actions from the *Magis* toward the transformation of the world.
- In companies, it offers a way to lead that prioritises people over results through thoughtful, ethically grounded, and attentive decisions that address real human needs.
- In social or civic spaces, it enables leaders to stay rooted, act with clarity amid complexity, and choose not from ego or urgency, but from what truly matters. Its strength lies here: forming leaders who are not only effective, but free—free to choose well, and to choose the greater good.

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