

## Article

# Franciscan Tradition in Management and Leadership Thinking Today

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**Abstract:** What can we learn from the Franciscan Tradition for the management world today? This research question has led the research at the Philosophical-Theological College of the German Capuchins for many years. In this paper we focus on the 800-year history of the Franciscan family as a learning organization in order to explore the question of transformation as a key concept of Franciscan life resp. Franciscan leadership. To do so we look at the founder of the Order, Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) first. Francis himself stands for a personal, continuous process of transformation in which he chooses the Gospel as a basic orientation for his life. He completely changed his life goals and defines the identity of the entire Franciscan organization. In this context, the core values of the Franciscans, such as evangelical poverty, serving character, and the aspect of brotherhood will be discussed. The Franciscan Community serves as a perfect field of practice for bringing together attitude and action. Finally, practical experiences from the Franciscan tradition, like developing of structural elements (e.g., the annual chapters) are related to the management context. By focusing on the practice and the focus on transformation, the Franciscan example can inspire modern organizations.

**Keywords:** Franciscan spirituality; evangelical poverty; VUCA-World; transformation; leadership

## 1. Introduction

Disruptive challenges for organizations today are more diverse than ever. Often people in various organisations have to cope with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in the so-called VUCA World. (Thompson and Buytaert 2014). These diverse processes and this development, which, above all, is unprecedented at this speed, create new burdens that have an impact on the performance and well-being of people in the working and private world. Traditional professional skills and organizational strategies are no longer sufficient to meet these challenges. New approaches that integrate different levels are particularly necessary for managers. IUNCTUS, the competence centre for Christian spirituality of the Philosophical—Theological College (PTH) at Münster (Germany), has developed a concept that bind together the levels of person, role and system. The reflection of a value-based mindset as a basis for responsible action, taking into account internal and external factors of influence, stands as a context and intention for a successful transfer into practice. The focus is on the combination of attitude and action. A basic concept that has been lived for centuries by Christian orders, such as the Franciscan Order. The Franciscan spirituality plays a formative role in the scientific and practical work of IUNCTUS due to its sponsorship by the German Capuchin Province.

What fascinates about the Franciscan story? Why should the tradition and way of life of St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) and its 800-year-old religious order, which is one of the so-called mendicant orders and has chosen poverty as its essential characteristic, (Stadler 2009) be useful for dynamic processes in modern leadership and organizational structures?

## 2. Research Method

The present paper is based primarily on the long-term research activities at IUNCTUS in the field of spirituality and management. We focus on the conditions of a holistic ability to act which is based on a reflected framework of values. The ultimate question is how spirituality of a reflected value foundation can be transferred into personal action in an organizational context. In its approach, IUNCTUS has selected three areas that combine to create a holistic, value-oriented ability to act.<sup>1</sup>

- Regarding the social, value-oriented ability to act two aspects are in the foreground. On the one hand, the reflection of one's own value-oriented attitude as a precondition for independent action and, on the other, the ability to participate in the development of the organizational community in a self-responsible manner in multipersonal structures (Kailer and Merker 1999). This is especially important for executives, since the primary aim is to shape relationships, to empathize with other people, to perceive the needs of the other person and to consider them in their actions.
- The second aspect is the willingness to act. This is the motivation to work for something with full conviction.
- The third aspect touches the systemic influencing factors that affect the individual's capacity to act. This includes e.g., the ability to take on the formal responsibility of certain processes. (Kriegesmann et al. 2007)

In the context of the whole project "spirituality and management" a specification was made in this process on the Franciscan tradition of leadership, which subsequently serves as an anchor for the development of the two research aspects that are discussed in this paper. It should be pointed out that initially it is only a matter of identifying common themes that makes further scientific discussion meaningful. It is a first attempt to mirror the tradition of the Franciscan movement in a structured way with the challenges of today's management and leadership topics.

The Franciscan leadership philosophy is described as serving, democratic, and fraternal. (Dienberg 2016) The two principles of spiritual poverty—first, meeting each other at eye-level—and second the ideal of communion are crucial for Franciscan leadership and organizational culture. Furthermore, the basis of St. Francis' attitude is to follow and serve the Lord and to ask him "what do you want me to do?" Although it is quite difficult to transfer these issues into daily business, it is important to raise the question what could be an idea for the management world today. It is definitely about the attitude of looking at the human being as a whole and to enhance its hidden potentials in the context of the faith to God. We also have to be aware that in the culture of the 12th century the phrase "discovery of the self" coupled with "discovery of a model for our behaviour" (which for St. Francis is Christ) and "discovery of consciously chosen community". (Walker Bynum 1982)

Against this background, two main aspects arise that will be considered in this paper:

- The personal attitude as the basis of the ability to act; and
- The aspect of transformation as a principle for sustainable organizational ability.

## 3. Structure of the Paper

In a further step, the foundations of the Franciscan tradition are described with an emphasis on the attitude of the person of St. Francis and his role in the community. (Kuster 2009) In order to facilitate the transfer of Franciscan content into the management world, a few tendencies and approaches from the management world are then briefly outlined. Finally, the connection between Franciscan tradition and the management world will be briefly discussed. The paper tries to initiate a dialogue between

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<sup>1</sup> The basis is a descriptive model of competence to act, which was developed in the field of innovation management and in the context of employability (Kriegesmann et al. 2007).

the two areas. Thus, we try to start a discussion after the starting points have been disclosed ensuring a positive input of Franciscan tradition for today's management world.

#### 4. Main Features of Franciscan Tradition

What can be drawn from the Franciscan tradition and from the person of Saint Francis of Assisi for the design of management and leadership processes? In other words, if an organization has existed for 800 years and is still growing today, at least globally, what distinguishes the Franciscan idea? For this purpose, some essential basics are selected and presented below. It should be added that the selected aspects have been used successfully in various leadership workshops and seminars in IUNCTUS. The aim was to make participants aware of their own attitudes and to reflect their attitude and their faith in the context of their own organization (system).

Franciscan spirituality, especially the person of St. Francis, provides many incentives for attitudes toward social relationships and change. This addresses two aspects that also apply to the management world.

So what can we learn from the person of Francis, from his attitude and his experiences to lead a life of deep conversion and transformation? Moreover, where can we find some aspects which describe St. Francis' competence to act in the context of leadership? The idea of the Franciscan leadership concept is anchored in the inner attitude of St. Francis himself, which he consistently has put into practice. It is the cornerstone of his community to the present day (Warode and Gerundt 2014). St. Francis himself represents a radical change in his way of life. Once the son of a wealthy textile entrepreneur born in Assisi and educated for "business life" (Manselli 1984), he embarks on a personal life crisis in search of his personal identity. He finds his vocation in an evangelical life and establishes his identity in the discipleship of Christ (Warode and Gerundt 2015). He leads a life of poverty and preaching the gospel. This new identity shaped by the gospel is a holistic one. It preoccupies the person in all its thoughts and actions, creating a balanced lifestyle. As a result, not everything is emphatically praised or drastically rejected. Consequentially, a balance between stability and flexibility is established. A stable character therefore can withstand tensions. It allows for a break with one's past and is open to new ideas.

On this background, St. Francis establishes his goals of life, i.e., the search for one's own identity and the continuous reflection of one's own path which includes the responsibility for all of creation. (Rotzetter 2016) Thus, with the reflected attitude and ongoing process of transformation, the two objectives formulated above are defined as elementary components of Franciscan philosophy of life. It focuses on the willingness to direct oneself according to the role model, which in case of St. Francis was, of course, Christ himself.

St. Francis is, thus, living an attitude in which he meets every human being at eye level. This defines evangelical poverty that exemplifies Franciscan spirituality. Evangelical poverty is the essential criterion of the Franciscan movement. (Lehmann 2012; Schmies 2012) Poverty means not being tied to things and places but it is about everything that hinders our ability to communicate with each other, about being connected to the (needy) other. This also includes a recognition of boundaries. St. Francis himself withdrew from the leadership of the Order during his lifetime. (Kuster 2002) Thus, his focus always is on people with their needs, worries and habits that need to be considered. This also results in the Franciscan Order's goal of supporting the weak and the sick while not regarding material possessions as a centre of one's life.

Serving man or creation is characteristic of Franciscan leadership philosophy. Francis sees himself as a servant in his community. "I did not come to be served, but to serve," says the Lord, which is the central message of Jesus and also Franciscan leadership culture. (Mk 10:45) In the Franciscan world the managers/leaders are also called ministers (Latin: servant). In addition, the leader of a monastery is titled a guardian, as opposed to abbot.

Another aspect of the Franciscan tradition is its democratic and fraternal character, which is oriented towards the involvement of all members and practically lives the claim of fraternal

communion. All processes decided upon in the Order are discussed democratically. Even if in the last instance the provincial leadership makes the formal decision, the process is based on the democratic vote of all brothers. This applies in particular to the election of the Order's leading body. For example, a single brother is democratically elected into a function by the entire order. The statutes of the order stipulate that the particular executive is initially elected for three years. If the community is satisfied with the "leadership performance", the provincial minister—leader of a province—can be confirmed by the top of the Order for another three years. After a maximum of six years, the Provincial is assigned a new task in the Order. The intention of these regulations points to preventing rigid and not reflected leadership structures. The idea behind a temporary management position is that after a certain period of time, leaders should have the opportunity to reflect on their leadership term within the framework of a time-out. It is to gain distance and to objectively reflect on processes and decisions in order to provide impulses for the development of the community and oneself, how the "Learning Organization" of Franciscan Orders describes itself (Warode 2016). This does not touch a brother's personal progress alone, but also a functioning developing community.

As a structural element and universal and timeless orientation, the Rule of the Order of St. Francis of 1223 is elementary as a framework for the life and understanding of community leadership. The Franciscan Rule with its 12 chapters is a foundation of the spiritual life of the community. It is not a set of rigid rules. In contrast to the Benedictine Rule which describes in great detail and hierarchically the role of the abbot and the provisor (*cellerarius*, economic leader), the Franciscan Rule has a much wider horizon. The rule should guide the brothers in specific situations, at different times and within the respective social context to adapt the content in their own responsibility. i.e., the rule should create an awareness that life is always ahead of all previous experiences and theories. The spiritual foundation (by observing the Gospel and trusting in God) of the Rule provides an orientation and security to move and decide in unknown situations. (Warode 2016) This makes it a resource that can iron out burdens from management relationships and change processes, for example, in an entrepreneurial environment.

Finally, structural processes for reflection and exchange of experience in the Order are dealt with here. In the early years of the Order, the annual Pentecost chapter instituted a meeting to which all brothers were invited in order to talk about their experiences and to exchange views. On the one hand, this has the advantage of reflecting on the common profile in the community and on the other hand of adapting the work of the Order to developments in the world. In addition to this organizational method of a "medieval audit", the hermitage also offered the opportunity for self-reflection. The brothers gathered in retreat to reflect on oneself, on the personal sins, the personal mission, faith and doubts and also on the relation with God. The hermitage is organized in the way that there is still a brother who listens and one who takes care of the physical well-being. In the meantime, the order structure ensures that the tasks of the brothers are taken over by the community. (Rule for Hermitages)

In summary, the Franciscan tradition of leadership is oriented towards the formation of relationships and continuous development. It is important to serve the community on the basis of one's own identity. It is important to see oneself as part of a community and to contribute the whole person and abilities to it. This is based on a clear vision of community: Franciscans live according to the Gospel and work for the poor and the sick. This stands for a living connection of a reflected attitude and actions that are necessary in everyday life.

## 5. What Is Management Thinking about Today?

Current concepts and trends in the management world are increasingly focusing on the interests and needs of employees and other stakeholders as a basis for organizational action. These include approaches to talent or customer management (Evertz and Süß 2017). However, these approaches require new skills to integrate other people's needs into leadership and organizational processes. As described at the beginning of this paper, the competence to act is not just based on hard skills to reach certain business goals. Personal characteristics, the reflected attitude or social competences become more and more important as a part of employability. As part of the management trends we read

a lot about agile organizations or the phenomenon of “New Work-movement”. One problem is, that the deep meaning of all these concepts do not appear in current discussions and publications. When we look seriously on the New Work concept for example, which was developed by F. Bergmann in the 1970s, we are able to lead a valuable dialogue with the challenges in the management world today. The New Work concept originated in the 1970s during the automotive crisis in the USA. Digitization in car production has released work capacity. The idea of the new work was to give employees the opportunity to find their personal vocation in the vacant working hours (Bergmann 2018). This requires new forms of training and leadership and the awareness to offer a lot of time and space for experiments. Moreover, it is about getting involved in an ongoing process, a process that asks you to question yourself again and again. It is the question of a personal development process. There is also no concept that can be transferred to an organization in form of clear and useable instructions. In each organization, a way must be found individually to implement the basic idea of New Work. That requires leadership (Furkel 2018). It is not possible to completely renounce leadership. Many employees want to know what they have to do and not want to be completely free-floating (Bischoff 2018). However, it takes a new form of leadership driven by a holistic perception.

One approach that focuses holistic attention and cooperative relationships in particular is Otto Scharmer’s “Theory U” (Scharmer 2015). The concept of Theory U with the so-called Presencing describes a learning process aimed at discovering and implementing future solutions in the context of organizational tasks and processes. Thus the approach reacts or rather acts exactly to the conditions of VUCA-World with its dynamic and disruptive changes as briefly outlined in the introduction. The learning process in the context of Theory U starts with the inner perception of a manager/an employee and places intuitive thinking in the foreground. Routine and (successfully) tried and tested patterns of thought and judgment must be withheld. Scharmer speaks of a cultivation of attention. This means that something new is not immediately put into familiar thinking pigeonholes and processed structurally. It is primarily a matter of listening empathetically in order to take in new things with a holistic attention and to open up the knowledge in a deeper process calmly and at a distance. They are looking for a deeper source of creativity. The question of self-reflection and the relation to function in an organization plays a central role. Both in terms of the method and the attitude of the method. Within the framework of self-reflection, it is primarily a matter of referring back to one’s own person:

- Who am I?
- Who do I want to be?
- What do I stand for?
- What’s that got to do with me? (Scharmer 2016)

On the basis of this fundamental orientation, connections can also be made to St. Francis’ path or to the management pioneer Peter F. Drucker who says that there’s only one person you can lead, yourself (Drucker 2006). Development processes start with your own person in the attitude to perceive them and to shape them from a deeper perspective. As with Francis, new knowledge must also be put into practice and tried out. Experience involves being active. The connection between attitude and action is emphasized once again here. In Scharmer’s approach, cooperation within an organization is of immense importance. The solution of challenges is seen above all in forms of cooperation. The task of leadership is therefore to bring people together to initiate development processes (Scharmer 2015). The concept of co-creativity should also be mentioned in this context. It is important to create a living culture in the organizations in which people work together and learn from each other across their different functions. The goal must be to design these processes in a future-oriented manner and to anchor them in organizational structures. This is to support an awareness that continuous developments must be an integral part of securing the future. Ultimately, Scharmer’s concept includes the roles and interests of stakeholders in a holistic perspective. This means



that the approach is not merely limited to the personal level but also integrates the levels of function and system, thus safeguarding the link to practice.

## 6. First Steps for the Merger of Franciscan Tradition and Management Needs

In the management world, there are already various approaches which can serve as a model for the specific Franciscan approach. In this respect, the servant-leadership approach of Robert Greenleaf may be worth mentioning.

While servant leadership is a timeless concept, the phrase “servant leadership” was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader*:

The servant-leader is servant first. . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. . . The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. “The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?” A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the “top of the pyramid,” servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. (Greenleaf 2018, 2002)

This approach, which comes very close to the Franciscan concept, is not the only one in management research. In addition to the servant-leadership approach, there are concepts for authentic or even spiritual leadership. This type of management concept, which is linked to ethical principles, is assigned to the light side of leadership as part of leadership research (Nerdinger 2014). Harvard professor Barbara Kellerman characterizes the light side of leadership with the following key sentence: “We presume that to be a leader is to do good and to be good.” (Kellerman 2004, p. 10).

These inputs from contemporary leadership and management concepts provide a good framework in which to reflect on a Franciscan management approach. The target categories described above, attitude as a basis for action and self-responsibility for the continuous development of relationships and processes, are characteristic of the Franciscan leadership tradition. Exactly at this point a transfer can be made to today’s management and leadership processes. The solution to challenges lies in becoming aware of one’s own identity and initiating and shaping new processes at this level. This can be very well illustrated by example of relationships. In this context, it should be noted that St. Francis and the brothers understood themselves as role models and good examples. To live one’s own attitude was ultimately the prerequisite for helping others and supporting them.

The appreciation of another person leads us to expect a sustainable relationship in the context of leadership. Through serious interest in the other person and active listening, it is possible to identify potential and perspectives that can be positive and valuable for the community, both for the development of one’s own attitude and knowledge, as well as to promote and support other people in their development. The core of evangelical poverty is to encounter every person on eye-level. To attain this goal, the aspect of personal and community reflection must be emphasized. To discover one’s own identity and to think about it again and again requires a deeper reflection and time. Only in this way knowledge can be built up and invested in the innovative development of processes. The basic structure of the Franciscan leading is thus highly topical for today’s management processes.

Further on, the aspect of cooperation or participation is to be emphasized independently of functions in an organization. To this end, the organization needs a clear aim and also a common code of conduct. If undiscovered potential is to be tapped, all people must be taken into consideration

and a reliable framework is needed. However, in democratic processes which basically involve the participation of all members the challenge lies in finding the right balance. Can the quality of results be improved or are is it rather counterproductive to have many opinions and a higher expenditure of time? This question ultimately requires the decision and competence of the leader, who has to take into account the individual interests of the community (Warode 2016). However, there must be a culture to actually involve all people working in an organisation on an equal level. It is a matter of clearly distinguishing between person and function.

In summary, it is crucial that action is taken on the basis of an attitude based on a fixed set of values—an attitude that can function as a corrective against resistance and conflict, but also as a motor for developments and innovation in organisations today. This attitude or identity is needed on a personal and organizational level. It forms the basis for the person, its role(s) and a fundamental orientation on how to deal with the organizational influences.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper tried to encourage a dialogue between the realm of Franciscan leadership tradition on one side and the management world on the other. The following questions formed the basis of the explanations: What can be learned from Franciscan leadership tradition for today's management and what trends in management today make the integration of Franciscan ideas seem viable?

By combining the Franciscan tradition of leadership with today's management topics, I want to provide an impulse for alternative solution processes in organizations. It is not about developing another functional and technical approach. In the tradition of St. Francis, it is important to be aware of one's own personal attitude and to put it into practice. It is also important to live out of one's own attitude in the organisational context. The Franciscan approach is characterized by the idea of serving. It is about putting your skills at the service of the whole community and involving other people. Through continuous reflection of attitude, a development process is initiated, which involves a constant self-reflection. A clear moral stance and a willingness for self-development are two components of the Franciscan tradition that can be easily transferred to the management world.

On this basis of drawing first parallels, the concept has to be developed further. In a next step, hypotheses must be developed that legitimize the integration of Franciscan tradition and management and leadership research as a research direction. Thus we might get closer to a truly practical concept based on a broad scientific research focusing on the key elements of leadership and change.

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