

## Organizational leadership in service to a charism

# Co-responsibility

**Eva Gullo and Alberto Frassinetti**

*For 15 years, the authors have assisted General and Provincial Councils of Institutes, Congregations and Associations of the faithful to redesign and transform themselves through helping them to be faithful to their respective charisms in more creative ways. They reflect here on the characteristics needed for strong organizational leadership.*

### Organizational culture

Our work is with Organizations at the Service of a Charism (OSC). We begin this commentary by focusing on distinguishing features of leadership within these organizations. The objective of a member of the OSC is to bear witness to its charism and to spreading the Gospel. This is true regardless of the impact or effectiveness of the work, services and activities that a given organization carries out.

At their life-sustaining core, OSCs are composed of people who choose to give their whole lives in witness to a charism that unites them. This choice imbues and authenticates every aspect of their personal life. It also generates a specific organizational culture that is at the basis of those actions and behaviors. A first consequence is that standard organizational tools, charts and instruments developed for other types of organizations cannot be applied in the same way to OSCs.

This is also true of the concept of *leadership*. Management theory uses this term to speak about both people or teams that govern and to describe a person's directorial and persuasive skills relative to others.

Similarly, the term *governance* is another example of the uncritical use in connection with the concept of leadership. In most organizations, governance structures are collegial. Instead for OSCs, service in a role of authority is regulated by the Code of Canon Law.

### Co-responsibility

Before considering a list of leadership characteristics, we should first reflect on *co-responsibility*, despite the fact that both merit deeper discussion that can be provided here in this brief article.

It is preferable for OSCs to make decisions in communion rather than following enlightened or magnetic personalities who fail to develop their ideas in a context of communion. The term *co-responsibility* combines "co" and "responsibility". The "co" refers to doing together in cooperation, sharing, communion and ultimately in relationship with others. The term

"responsibility" derives from the Latin *respònsus* or *respòndere*, meaning the commitment to respond (to oneself or another) for one's actions and the consequences deriving from them. It seems to us that OSCs first need a new awareness and renewed practice of co-responsibility. There is need for greater recognition of the reality that only through communion can hope for the future be built. This requires a personal contribution from each one, as if everything depended on me.

Effective co-responsibility is indispensable for the life and development of a community:

- Co-responsibility generates a sense of belonging.
- Co-responsibility develops a common identity.
- Co-responsibility nourishes the ability to construct together.

Some important aspects of responsibility as part of a community's development need underlining.

A first aspect is that of living one's responsibilities *as a service* performed for someone else. Exercising one's own responsibilities in serving others rather than ourselves is something freely chosen and expressed through tasks or roles assigned with clear and transparent guidelines.

Then other aspects follow from this: Responsibility is *a service that fosters the common good*. Concretely, personal interests should never prevail over the good of another and the common good of the whole organization.

Thus, responsibility requires *building positive relationships*. If the other person is important, then one needs to make the effort to understand their needs and what they are saying to me. This requires establishing a caring relationship. Even before providing answers, taking action, or making decisions, being in a role of responsibility means *being capable of – and cultivating – relationships*.

Cultivating, fostering and being sensitive to relationships means giving dignity to the other. This is not because of their relationship with me in relation to my own role. Rather it is to express a common belonging to the same organization, community, project or shared goals.

This is why organizations must identify times and places for fostering relationships. Relationships are what create possibilities for voluntary, non-compulsory participation. Thus, responsibility is not an assembling of decisions or giving directives. It is creating space for questioning that allows for answers, answers that come from one or another(s) as a fruit of these established relationships. The answer that emerges is reflective of a body.

Those in roles of responsibility are open to communion, to being a gift of self to other(s) and accepting the gift of others as they are. *Communion is the real space in which to generate shared responsibility*. Decisions that are a fruit of this communion can move forward, even with diverse opinions, because these decisions are a reflection of "our" choice.

*Communion is an enacting of the "co" in co-responsibility*. It is being part of a shared dream, a desire to build a project together and a shared passion for the future. Such co-responsibility cannot be improvised. It comes from a patient process of training and personal/collective formation.

## Leadership that generates co-responsibility

Since leadership happens through relationships and communion, it is not a status that one can assign to oneself nor can it simply be given (like a title). Everyone can serve in a leadership capacity at any given time and place. We speak here of a concept of leadership that generates co-responsibility and has the essential features briefly described below:

The first point is to *put a person or persons at the heart of every action and decision* taken by leadership. It is essential for everyone to discover and understand the impact and importance of their actions. This demands that leaders are sensitive to human relational aspects of reciprocity, recognition and the need to love and be loved.

It is also necessary to help each person:

- Recognize their own value and worth.
- Become more aware of the value of their efforts.
- Evaluate and recognize one's own work as positively contributing to shared objectives and the well-being of others.

This all brings greater team spirit as a body. Community is seen and understood as a space for discussion, dialogue and shared decision-making. By building community, we experience a shift *from interaction to interdependence, and finally to integration* among people. Differences, diversity and ongoing deliberative processes are based on clearly shared objectives, roles and modes of action.

It is essential to pay utmost attention to (and offer training in) interpersonal communication as the lifeblood of any community. This consists in listening and authentic, frank sharing in synodality. This is also why it is very important to prepare meetings well in relation to specific aims and goals to achieve.

As persons engage, differences emerge (in gender, age, cultural background, personal and professional training, etc.) and conflicts can arise. *Conflict is physiological* and often generated by the hopes and expectations of each one. This can create roadblocks if ignored, and conflict is not to be rebuffed or denied. Rather it must be managed appropriately through clear communication, constructive criticism and the help of experts, if necessary.

Thus, the figure of the leader as understood here is essentially *relational*, in as much as his or her presence and actions are somehow 'received' and recognized by other(s).

From these premises a form of leadership can arise that we call *service leadership*. It is "a power that serves", becoming authority in the etymological sense of "*augere*" which means to mature, to grow in paying more attention to processes than to results. The "leader who serves" works *with* the group. He or she does not replace the group when it comes to decisions or in overcoming difficulties.

Service leadership must be built! It is an art to be cultivated, trained for and developed. It is a way of looking after the "we" and helping to generate co-responsibility. For the sake of brevity, here a few more requirements characteristic of this kind of leadership:

- The ability to communicate and to listen.
- Knowing how to value the skills and abilities of group or community members, helping each develop their potential (empowerment).
- Valuing organizational diversity and being inclusive.
- Putting others in a position to act by enhancing trust, autonomy and empowerment.

- Those in governance need the ability to create a group and build a collaborative network within this group by using effective delegation.

## Decision-making

To conclude, what approach should service leadership take in decision-making? When decisions are to be made and issues to be addressed, the questions are: '*What*' are we able to do? What are we obligated to do?

Focus is placed on solving problems and formulating decisions based on available facts and the work required. Much time is often spent discussing possible actions for resolution of the problem. It is fitting for an OSC to activate appropriate synodal processes, at least regarding the "what" questions.

Yet no matter how capable and effective service leadership is, this question alone is not enough when considering the most appropriate choice of action among a range of possibilities. Other fundamental questions need to also be answered.

The first is: "Why" are we making this decision? Why this choice?

The heart of this reflection means returning to the motive for a preferred action, the values, and the principles behind a choice. Then, together with this, a further question to ask is: "For whom" are we doing this? We need to have contact with the recipients of our decision and place them at the heart of this reflection to foster synodal listening together.

Thus, for OSCs, the questions of why and *for whom* are fundamental. Choices, focus, implementation and an ultimate decision need to be in function of the charism.

A second question centers around the "how" of arriving at a solution or decision. What processes and instruments need to be used so that participative relationships are generated? How does the process tend towards the common good and represent an experience of communion?

In conclusion, good service leadership poses these questions regarding decision making and problem solving:

*What* can we do?

*Why* --and for whom - do we do it?

*How* do we want to do it?