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## The Catholic school principal: A transcendent leader?

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# Journal of Catholic School Studies

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# The Catholic School Principal: A Transcendent Leader?

*Shane Lavery*

## Abstract

In the early 1990s Sergiovanni (1993) pointed out, with a touch of cynicism, that despite the multitude of leadership studies over many years “we still do not understand what distinguishes leaders from non leaders, effective leaders from ineffective leaders, and effective organisations from ineffective organisations” (p. 1). He argued that one of the reasons for this confusion was an overemphasis on what he called “bureaucratic, psychological and technical-rational authority” (p. 1), while neglecting professional and moral authority. As an antidote to this situation, Sergiovanni (1993) argued that the moral dimension of leadership must be moved “from the periphery to the centre of inquiry, discussion and practice” (p. 2). One way of placing the moral dimension of leadership squarely at centre stage is to view leadership through the transcendental lens of service and spirituality. This article explores the notion of transcendental leadership and the appropriateness of this leadership model for principals in Catholic schools. As a prelude, transactional and transformational leadership models are reviewed. The point is that while elements of these models are still valuable, Catholic school principals are called on to exercise leadership beyond organisational expertise and a collegial understanding of the leader’s vision. Transcendental leadership is then examined from the dual positions of service and spirituality. The notion of service permeates all actions of a transcendental leader. In particular, the transcendental leader is constantly concerned for the needs of those with whom he or she collaborates. The essential understanding of the spiritual component of transcendental leadership is that the leader acts from the entirety of who he or she is as a person. Finally, the article posits a range of implications of this model for principals in Catholic schools. These implications include: Catholic school principals are called to be servant leaders in the spirit of Jesus (Mt 10:45; Mt 23:11; Lk 22:26; Jn 13); their leadership is based on deep reflection; they practise the Catholic social doctrine of subsidiarity to ensure genuine decision-making opportunities for all members within the school community; and the spiritual standard by which they act is grounded in the wider notion of Catholic social doctrine.

## About the author

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## Introduction

The role, responsibilities and duties of Catholic school principals are extensive. Under the authority of the diocesan bishop, they are accountable for every aspect of the Catholic school's ethos, life and curriculum. They have the task of leading and developing their school as a community of faith. They are responsible for the school's effectiveness as a community of evangelisation. As school leaders they are called to embody the values and vision of the Catholic school through personal witness (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009). In addition, external pressures have added significantly to the demands of the role. The first decade of the new millennium saw rapid and sizeable change across all educational systems within Australia. This momentum for change has not abated. School effectiveness dominates professional discussion. Increasing pressure has been placed on school principals through Federal and State Government demands for improved educational outcomes. This situation has been exacerbated by public expectations of school performance. Learning technologies have expanded. Economic and social pressures have resulted in changing family contexts and the altered nature of the educational workforce (Sayce & Lavery, 2010). The form of leadership Catholic school principals may need to promote, given the increasing demands they face, is the focus of this article.

## Towards a new understanding of leadership

Since the mid-1970s various theories of leadership have explored the relationship between leader and follower (Cardona, 2000; Hogg, Martin & Weeden, 2003; Rost, 1993). For example, Rost (1993) defined leadership as "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (p. 102). His definition includes what he termed, "four essential elements" (p. 104), all of which he believed must be present before the relationship is to be called leadership. These elements are: the relationship is based on influence; the people in the relationship are the leaders and followers; real change is intended; and leaders and followers develop mutual purposes. Two exemplars of this relational understanding of leadership are the transactional and transformational leadership models.

Transactional leadership is concerned with the everyday transactions involved in the running of an organisation. It is a leadership model characterised by an economically based exchange relationship. That is, the leader promotes uniformity by providing extrinsic rewards to the followers (Cardona, 2000). It is an hierarchically driven model (Gardiner, 2006), the leadership of the administrator who sees to the everyday management of the system, listens to the complaints and concerns of participants, arbitrates disputes fairly, holds people accountable to their job targets, and provides appropriate resources for goal achievement (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993). The strength of this leadership model is that clear managerial structures are detailed whereby people know exactly their roles and responsibilities (Lavery, 2011).

Transformational leadership is founded on a work-based relationship where the leader promotes affiliation by providing fair extrinsic rewards and by appealing to the intrinsic motivation of the followers (Cardona, 2000). Transformational leaders' interactions with followers are characterised by "idealised behavior (sic), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized (sic) consideration, which motivate followers to work for group goals that transcend immediate self-interest" (Hogg, Martin & Weeden, 2003, p. 19). Such leaders tend to be more collaborative than transactional leaders (Gardiner, 2006), focus on communication of vision (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008), aim to build community (Telford, 1996) and attempt to develop followers into leaders (Carey, 1991).

The dual concepts of transactional and transformational leadership have provided valuable insight into the way leaders and followers interact, particularly from an educational perspective. Schools benefit significantly from high-quality organisation and clear lines of communication, which are hallmarks of good transactional leadership (Lavery, 2011). Moreover, transformational leadership has frequently been proposed as an appropriate form of leadership for school principals (Crowther, Ferguson & Hann, 2009). In fact, it has been argued that the best leaders are both transformational and transactional in that transformational approaches can augment transactional behaviours (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008). However, such understandings of leadership, while still useful, may no longer suffice for

Catholic school principals. The significant faith demands inherent in Catholic schools, coupled with the educational milieu of the twenty-first century, require Catholic school principals to exercise a leadership that goes beyond effective organisation based on collaborative, collegial work relationships.

### Transcendental leadership—service and spirituality

One leadership model that provides a blueprint for the way Catholic school principals might lead their schools is that of transcendental leadership. Transcendental leadership is a metaphor, which, increasingly, is being used in organisational development theory to describe a genre of leadership that is founded on trust, inclusivity and participation (Okomo-Okello, 2011). Like transactional and transformational leadership to which it has links, transcendental leadership is relationship-centred and can be defined by “a contribution-based exchange relationship” (Cardona, 2000, p. 203). In this relationship, leaders promote unity by providing equitable exchange rewards, appealing to the intrinsic motivation of associates with whom they work, and by developing their transcendent motivation – that is, the motivation to do things for others (Cardona). At the core of transcendental leadership are a sense of service and the notion of spirituality (Rebore & Walmsley, 2009).

The concept of service or servant leadership is not new. Greenleaf (1977), who is often attributed with the concept, argued that servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*” (p. 13). Greenleaf stressed that at the heart of such leadership is the wish “to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (p. 13). He concluded that the best test of servant leadership is: “Do those being served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (p. 13). Moreover, he asked: “What is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?” (p. 14). Cardona (2000) noted that this concept of service means that the transcendental leader always looks after the interests of those he or she is collaborating with. He argued, furthermore that “this genuine interest of the leader for the collaborator creates, out of reciprocity, a sense of responsibility in the collaborator which is what we call unity” (p. 205). In this way, those with whom the transcendental leader works are also called to serve. For the school principal, such people include teacher-colleagues, students, parents and various members of the community (Rebore & Walmsley, 2009).

A notion of spirituality is critical to any understanding of transcendental leadership (Liu, 2007; Rebore & Walmsley, 2009; Sanders, Hopkins & Geroy, 2003). The basic premise of spiritual leadership is that leaders act from the totality of who they are as human beings (Rebore & Walmsley, 2009). For Catholic school principals, this totality incorporates their faith, values, witness, and their understanding of service (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009). Rebore and Walmsley (2009, p. 95) articulate six manifestations of the spiritual approach. These include a) utilising a reflection paradigm, b) practising the principles of subsidiarity, c) acting from a political base, d) acting from a sense of duty, e) advocating social justice, and f) formulating professional positions through discourse. What becomes clear when reviewing these manifestations is first, their clear interrelation, and second, the overarching importance of a reflection paradigm.

Spiritual leadership requires principals to constantly reflect on the decision-making process. Leadership cannot be solely a top-down phenomenon. In any decision-making, principals need to consider, first, what is happening in their schools (classrooms, corridors, canteen, and playgrounds). Second, they must understand the attitudes, emotions, opinions and values of all stakeholders (parents, students, teachers, administrators and the public at large) (Rebore & Walmsley, 2009). Closely linked with a reflective approach to leadership is the notion of subsidiarity. That is, decisions are made at the lowest possible level of an organisation. The application of this principle empowers teachers and other staff, while allowing the principal, where appropriate, to become a mentor and consultant (Rebore & Walmsley, 2009).

Principals who act from a political base attempt to manage the impact that their decisions and actions will have on the decisions and actions of others and on institutions. In this respect, Rebore and Walmsley (2009) discuss the role, function and responsibility of state and federal governments; the rights of key stakeholders such as students,

parents and teachers; the rights of the general public, and the rights of those on society's margins. Fundamental to this "manifestation" are the rights of the least powerful. For principals who act from a sense of duty, one of the most important implications is the empowerment of key stakeholders: parents, students, teachers, and other staff members. Such empowerment is based on principals developing a school culture that promotes teacher initiative and which has "an intense focus on students, flexibility, and resourcefulness, risk-taking and experimentation" (Rebore & Walmsley, 2009, p. 101).

Advocating a sense of social justice is a key element of transcendental leadership. Rebore and Walmsley (2009) argue that social justice is "the spiritual guide that regulates how people live out their lives as members of a given society" (p. 101). Principals acting from a position of social justice would champion equal rights, equal opportunity and a preferable option for the disadvantaged (Rebore & Walmsley, 2009). Lastly, transcendental spiritual leadership requires school principals to formulate professional positions through discourse. That is, principals develop procedures where school stakeholders can argue issues that will impact on them. Such discussion is grounded on reason and fairness. It is not a matter of developing consensus, but rather developing a reasoned response to a given discourse (Rebore & Walmsley, 2009).

### Implications for Catholic School Principals

Transcendental leadership adds a compelling dimension to the prevalent view of the transactional-transformational continuum. This view posits that transactional and transformational leadership are distinct, but not mutually exclusive processes (Gardiner, 2003). Furthermore, transformational leadership does not stand as a substitute for transactional leadership (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008). That is, transactional and transformational leadership comprise complementary, as distinct from polar, constructs (Liu, 2007). A leader could, where appropriate, use both types of leadership at different times in different situations (Gardiner). Transcendental leadership may be considered as the highest level on the continuum (Neidhart & Carlin, 2011; Sanders, Hopkins & Geroy, 2003). There is also no suggestion that transcendental leadership replaces either transactional or transformational leadership (Sanders, Hopkins & Geroy, 2003). To the contrary, the three forms of leadership are located in a "nested hierarchy" (Liu, 2007, p. 4) where transcendental leadership incorporates and extends both transactional and transformational leadership. What transcendental leadership adds to the continuum is the internal motivation of the leader to serve, linked with an overarching appreciation of the importance of spiritual reflection and action.

The concept of service is unreservedly applicable to principals in Catholic schools who are called to lead in the spirit of Jesus (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009). The Gospel tradition plainly indicates that the most distinctive aspect of Jesus' teaching on leadership is His emphasis that a leader is essentially a servant. All four Gospels demonstrate Jesus' understanding of leadership as one of service. In Mark's Gospel Jesus indicates that the only leadership allowed within His community is servant leadership, modelled on Jesus "who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life for a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Similarly, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus remarks: "the greatest among you must be your servant" (Mt 23:11). At the Last Supper Luke documents how Jesus tells the disciples: "the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves" (Lk 22:26). Chapter 13 of John's Gospel records the manner in which Jesus moved from the status position as head of the table, knelt down, and washed His disciples' feet as a sign of servant leadership. For principals in Catholic schools, this Gospel appreciation of service can constitute a major motivation fuelling their desire to be the leader in their school community (Lavery, 2011).

The spiritual nature of transcendental leadership encourages principals in Catholic schools to reflect on who they are and who they serve. Duignan (2006) argued that reflection forms an important component in the development of "authentic educational leaders" (p. 142). He highlighted the value of personal reflection on such considerations as leadership experience and achievement, capabilities required for effective leadership, experience of best practice, and priorities for personal and professional leadership development. Given the multitude of demands on school principals,

when might such reflection occur? One possibility is to temporarily withdraw; an action, which might be valuable on occasion. However, Badaracco (2006) recommended that for leaders, “sound reflection is not a matter of time out; it actually involves the quality of their ‘time in’” (p. 164). He suggested that good reflection is essentially a distinctive way of working. Badaracco (2006) posited that such reflection, especially for leaders, “is the equivalent of sitting in the middle of a spider’s web and vigilantly sensing what is happening along many different dimensions of a situation” (p. 176). While such an approach does not guarantee right answers, Badaracco (2006) proposed that leaders are much more likely to make superior decisions “after an extended period of messy, all-in deliberation” (p. 176).

The concept of subsidiarity is an important social doctrine of the Catholic Church. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2004) explained it thus: “it is an injustice and at the same time a great evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations (sic) can do” (p. 94). Duignan (2008) discussed what he calls “positive subsidiarity” (p. 242), a concept which demands that institutions and organisations create the necessary conditions for the development of the human person and provide appropriate processes and structures to empower small-group and individual action. Within education, Duignan (2008) argued that positive subsidiarity requires greater participation of schools in “making key decisions related to teaching and learning, and, within schools, the greater involvement of teachers and community stakeholders in decisions focusing on the transformation of learners and learning” (p. 242). Such an approach towards leadership provides principals in Catholic schools with the motivation, sense of duty and authority to actively involve all parties within the school community in genuine decision-making opportunities.

The wider notion of social justice, intrinsic to transcendental leadership, is an attitude that resonates well with the Catholic school principalship. The Catholic Church’s social doctrine stems from Pope Leo XIII’s ground breaking 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The doctrine promotes a vision of a just society based on Gospel values as exemplified in the life and teaching of Jesus (Ferguson, Kearins, & Brennan, 2011). At the heart of this doctrine is Jesus’ commandment of love of God and neighbour (Mt 22:37–40) which endorses “an appreciation of the ultimate destiny of humanity, the sanctity of life and the fundamental dignity to be accorded to each individual because we are all created in the image and likeness of God” (Ferguson, Kearins, & Brennan, 2011, p. 5). The Catholic Church’s doctrine on social justice highlights for principals in Catholic schools the “importance of moral values, founded on the natural law written on every human conscience” (Sodano, 2004, p. xv). As such, the doctrine provides Catholic school principals with a spiritual standard by which to judge their decision-making processes, their interactions with all members of their school community, and their dealings within the wider community. There is no official canon of principles or documents. However, Cornish (n.d.) from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, expounded six key themes: Human Dignity and the Unity of the Human Family; Solidarity; The Common Good; Universal Destination of Goods; Participation; and Subsidiarity.

What might the transcendental Catholic school principalship look like? For a start, these principals would have completed postgraduate studies in leadership and theology where they would have gained an academic appreciation of leadership from a variety of positions, but most importantly, from a Christian perspective. As the leaders of their schools, they would take a personal interest in all involved within their school communities. These principals, while taking responsibility for the overall vision and direction of their school, would encourage decision-making on educational issues to be made at the lowest appropriate level. They would be cognisant of the principles of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, and in the spirit of Gustavo Gutierrez, exercise a “preferential option for the poor” (Dear, 2011). Theirs would not be a weak leadership. As Culver (2009) observed, it takes substantial confidence in one’s leadership skills to know how to empower others to assume leadership. It takes commitment to place the interest of the organisation above one’s own. It takes personal strength to repeatedly seek out and remove barriers to the optimal performance of others. Indeed, as she noted, “the weakest form of leadership can be that which relies solely on power brokerage” (p. 123). The leadership of the transcendental Catholic school principal is one of service based on spiritual reflection!

## Conclusion

Transcendental leadership emphatically embeds the notion of service as a key component of leadership. Of equal importance, it highlights the value and place of spirituality within the leadership agenda. For leaders in Catholic schools this dual framework moves the understanding of leadership beyond the transactional and transformational concepts of organisational efficiency and the call to a leader's vision through collegial processes. The notion of service demands that one give of one's best to others. Catholic school principals, motivated by a desire to serve, fundamentally give of their best to the students placed in their care, to the parents of these students, to their work colleagues, and to the system authorities to which they are responsible. As spiritual leaders, Catholic school principals reflect on their actions in the light of the Gospel, particularly on how their actions impact on those they serve.

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (2004) exhorted the Catholic school community to be "an irreplaceable source of service, not only to the pupils and its other members, but also to society" (p. 34). Such service begins and is exemplified by those who lead the Catholic school community. Cardona (2000) noted, moreover, that the best way of creating transcendental leaders is by example. In this regard, he believed a critical competence of transcendental leaders was the capacity to self-sacrifice in the service of those with whom they collaborated, along with their sense of integrity. Integrity is directly linked with the transcendental leader's spirituality – the capacity to act from the totality of one's personality. For Catholic school principals such actions are modelled on the example of Jesus. In particular, Jesus' concern for those on the margins of society is replicated in the spiritual side of transcendental leadership through the key notion of social justice. In clarifying the mission of the school, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (2004) noted:

The school must be concerned with constant and careful attention to cultivating in students the intellectual, creative and aesthetic faculties of the human person; to develop in them the correct use of their judgement, will and affectivity; to promote in them a virtue of values; to encourage justice attitudes and prudent behaviour; to introduce them to the cultural patrimony handed down from previous generations; to prepare them for professional life; and to encourage the friendly interchange among students of diverse cultures and backgrounds that will lead to mutual understanding. (p. 110)

Principals in Catholic schools who cultivate a transcendental understanding of leadership place themselves in a strong position to negotiate the present challenges of Catholic school leadership and so guide their schools now and into the future.

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