

Do “Contemplation” and “Organization” go together?

Leaders of faith-based institutions want their organizations to be effective, efficient and Spirit-led. Unfortunately, the leadership skills that encourage effectiveness and efficiency are seen at odds with the leadership skills that nurture soulfulness. Is it even possible to nurture organizational effectiveness and a contemplative mindset at the same time, or must we favor one over the other?

Exercise: Part 1. Take out a sheet of paper and write down the traits that come to mind when you think about strong organizational leadership? What shows up on your list?

I listed these traits: visionary, strategic, decisive, goal-oriented, purposeful, future-focused, collaborative, engaging, and risk-taking. And I believe that these traits become increasingly important, the larger and more complex that an organization becomes.

An effective organizational leader doesn’t wait for perfect clarity to emerge, but acts decisively as soon as enough information becomes available. She is certain about herself and the organization’s mission. She brings a strong sense of personal vision and acts with conviction to align structure and resources around strategy. Her energy and her passion fuel the work of the whole.

Contemplative leadership, on the other hand, is less concerned with the form and structure of a thing; it cuts through the organization to consider the essence and source of the soul. Contemplation is a state of being that is simultaneously wide-awake and free from preconceptions. It is wonder-filled intuition that nurtures a simple willingness to be open to God’s movement, leading, and invitation.

Exercise: Part 2. Write down the traits that you associate with contemplative leadership?

My list includes: authenticity, present-centered, patient, open, flexible, creative, unknowing, attending, discerning, and compassion. The contemplative leader refuses to act until divine intent reveals itself. He invites discernment over decision making, and

uses mindfulness, prayer, silence and solitude to slow the organization down, to discover its center, and to act from its core.

Can a leader hold all of these ideals in tension at the same time? Can we be future-focused and present-centered at the same time? Is it possible to nurture decisiveness with discernment; contemplation alongside action; unknowing and purposefulness; and solitude in conjunction with collaboration?

I think we can nurture both sets of traits and values, but historically we have not done so.

Most of the leaders that I think of as contemplative are not guiding large institutions. They are seemingly quieter, slower-paced individuals. They are championing movements, smaller congregations, shaping the spiritual formation programs within larger congregations, or avoiding institutional life all together. They adopt the roles of teacher, writer, spiritual director, or coach. It is rare to find the senior leader of a large organization who fits the stereotypical image of a contemplative. Institutional leaders may be personally prayerful, spiritually grounded people, but they generally engage the institution in decision making mode, not with discernment.

If we are going to deal with the tension between contemplation and organization, we need to address two fundamental issues:

1. **Contemplatives are not placed in roles that influence organizational well-being.** Contemplatives are inherently good at nurturing the soulfulness of others, but are rarely given the opportunity to work with the soul or structure of the institution. In fact, they may shy away from such roles. They are often prophetic figures who recognize the gaps between the actions of the institution and the requirements of its soul. They offer their observations from the sidelines, and may be dismissed as impractical or irrelevant in the domain of organizational leadership. They retreat to tending the souls of individuals, and institutional leaders carry on the business of leading the organization. Something gets lost in the separation.
2. **Institutional leaders are not encouraged to develop as contemplatives.** As we develop leaders we are not teaching them to tend to their own souls, or the soul of the institution. We tell them to become prayer people. We expect them to encourage the soul formation of individual

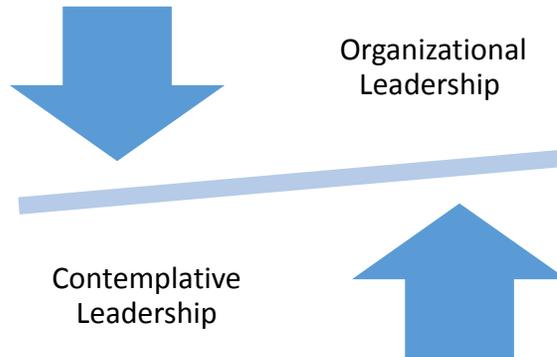
congregants. We teach best practices in organizational leadership. Then we hope that all three elements magically converge. Most leaders can't figure out the connection, and a polarity is created.

Let me offer a practical example. A congregation decides to form a new strategic plan. A strategic planning committee is formed, comprised of spiritually mature, respected leaders in the congregation. The people selected to serve on the planning committee are good strategic thinkers and organizationally savvy individuals. The committee spends a brief time in prayer at the beginning and end of each meeting. Mostly, they invest their energies in good organizational process. They use their best group decision making skills to listen to, and act on behalf of the organization.

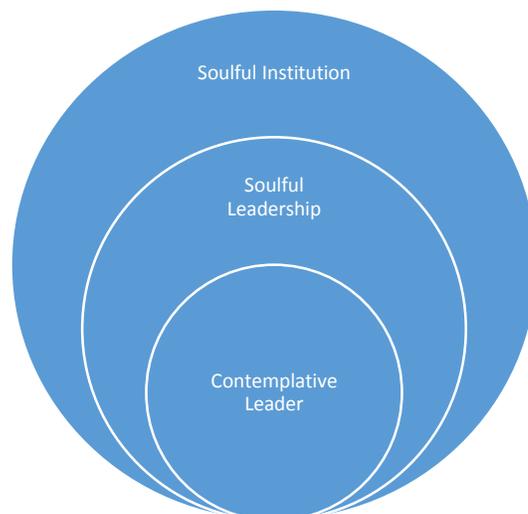
Meanwhile, the pastor forms a group of gifted prayers in the congregation. They are asked to pray for the planning team and on behalf of the planning efforts. These contemplatives often gather at the same time that the planning team is meeting. Sometimes, a member of the prayer team leads the planning team in prayer at the beginning of a meeting, and then they exit the room. The planning team is encouraged by the presence of the prayer team. But, at no time do they stop to ask the prayer team how they see the Spirit moving. Prayer team members are never in the room when critical decision making is taking place. Frankly, they don't want to be. They like being part of a community of prayer and would much rather leave the dryness of organizational leadership to others more suited to that task.

How do we eliminate this divide between contemplation and organizational leadership?

We need to fundamentally re-orient the paradigm that guides our understanding of contemplative leadership and institutional leadership. We need to move away from seeing two competing approaches to leadership, where we move out of one domain to act in the other domain, emphasizing one at the expense of the expense of the other, and hoping that contemplative leadership will somehow inform organizational action.



Instead we should be approaching the practices of contemplative leadership as the core from which all leadership draws its energy. Contemplative leadership practices need to shape the essence of every leader's development. Contemplative leadership is not a temperament or a style; it is a discipline and a set of practices that can be taught and sharpened. Prayer, silence, and mindfulness form a contemplative core, out of which the effective leader tends to the soulfulness of the organization. Contemplative leadership is not a part-time activity engaged by a sub-group of the congregation. It should look something like this:



Let us revisit our earlier planning team example with this alternative paradigm in mind. When the strategic planning team is formed, a key criterion in the selection of team members is a capacity for prayer and discernment, partnered with organizational savvy. The earliest work of the team is focused on nurturing group discernment muscles, and distinguishing between decision making and discernment. The team engages in group exercises that help articulate the authentic soul of the congregation; track the soul's journey over time; and invite congregational soul to speak into decision making.

Out of this mindset, the team begins data gathering with the congregation and community, and leads the larger leadership body in group discernment. The prayer team meets regularly with the planning team, to nurture the prayer life of the planning team and to share their experience of the Spirit's movement.

The planning team is acutely aware that planning must occur within an identifiable time period. They know they must produce a strategy and actionable items for approval by the governing body, with deadlines attached. They are not afraid to act decisively when forward momentum is required. They engage in the best of organizational leadership practices around planning. However, every action begins and ends with an eye toward "presencing" the soul of the institution.

The distinctions may be subtle, but the shift makes all the difference in the vibrancy of the plan. The shift moves us away from being well-managed institutions, seeking to promote a spiritual agenda; towards being soulful institutions that give life to the spiritual yearning of our members. It's the difference between perspiration and inspiration. It's the difference between vitality and stagnation. It is an imperative shift for the success of a faith-based organization.

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