How to Become a Human Leader Versus Just a Leader in the Era of AI Following the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius

Dr. Michele Vincenti [1]

[1] *University Canada West, Vancouver, Canada. Email: Michele.vincenti@ucanwest.ca*

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Leadership in AI, Ignatian spirituality, ethical leadership, transformational leadership, emotional intelligence.	**Motivation:** The rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI) poses ethical and existential challenges for contemporary leaders. It is undeniable that AI offers transformative potential, but the risks of dehumanizing workplaces and compromising critical thinking and autonomy are very high. This paper explores leaders' need to integrate human-centric approaches from the Ignatian Spiritual exercises to counterbalance these challenges.
	Problem Statement: Unfortunately, many leaders today do not have the framework to evaluate ethical dilemmas and the dehumanizing risks that AI poses. Without purposeful leadership, organizations are exposed to a culture of control, reducing employee autonomy that prioritizes profit over people.
	Approach: The paper uses a multidisciplinary framework in combination with Ignatian Spiritual exercises and leadership theories, such as emotional intelligence and transformational leadership. To promote ethical purpose-driven decision-making, it encourages integrating self-awareness, discernment and detachment into leadership practices.
	Results: The analysis demonstrates that the Ignatian principles offer a practical solution for leaders to balance economic imperatives with ethical governance. It brings transformational leadership to its purest form because of the balanced approach between self and society. Leaders integrating self-awareness and discernment reduce AI bias, increase employee satisfaction, foster human connection, and ultimately improve organizational effectiveness.
	Implications: This paper suggests incorporating ethical principles into leadership training to navigate AI-driven transformations effectively. The practical steps recommend that leaders align organizational goals with human values, ensuring technology is used by humanity rather than controlled. In this way, leaders can remain human leaders.

1. Introduction: Contextualizing Leadership in the AI Era

Human behaviour is motivated by getting along and getting ahead. Hogan (1982) made such a statement because a believer in evolutionary psychology applied to his leadership studies [1].

The theory means that humans, a species at the top of the hierarchy on planet Earth, have control over animals, plants, and land, and they behave by getting along and getting ahead. They are social creatures and, during their interactions, struggle between getting along and getting ahead. The term struggle is undoubtedly correct and expresses the cognitive dissonance in finding a satisfactory equilibrium between the two extremes.

The two extremes mean humans want to coexist with other humans but need hierarchy or leadership. It is immediately evident that the two positions are not easy to achieve. If humans push to get leadership, status will be lost in getting along because they are no longer considered part of the initial group. If humans renounce to lead, they will lose their opportunity to emerge.

Of course, what Hogan (1982) says is not new because Maslow (1954) already identifies getting along with love and belonging and getting ahead with esteem needs [2].

How do you find an acceptable balance between the two without praising the zero-sum game in which one person must lose to allow the other to win?

Finding a balance between getting along and getting ahead is not an insignificant leadership quest.

Evolutionary leadership, fortunately, already gave some guidance when it included the third cardinal certainty in the theory. Humans need meanings.

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In evolutionary psychology, meaning is not only a religious meaning but anything worth living for, anything that gives humans a reason to live. The famous book Man's in Search for Meanings by Viktor Frankl (1946) gave a solid foundation for the need for meanings in evolutionary psychology [3].

This paper, as the title says, wants to provide directions to contemporary leaders who wish to be human and not just leaders, mainly because Artificial Intelligence (AI) advancements seem to be seen by some humans as the depository of the new meanings. This paper explores how Ignatian Spiritual Exercises can help leadership practices, using self-awareness, discernment, and purpose to reduce artificial intelligence's ethical and psychological challenges.

Artificial Intelligence, in all its forms, conversational, predictive analytics, computer vision, Natural Language Processing (NLP) or others, due to the easy access to humans, is more and more taken for granted in its answers, or maybe better saying trusted by humans, with the associate risks that humans might lose the ability to think autonomously and choose their meanings freely. For centuries, humans were masters of their own destinies by identifying the information first and inferring the meaning of the information themselves.

Most companies today do not have an artificial intelligence strategy, yet they use the technology without any policy on when to correctly and productively use the technology; leaders and employees should indeed think about what their work means to others and themselves. Countries and organizations are creating policies and laws intending to control artificial intelligence. If leaders foster a culture of surveillance that cancels privacy, autonomy and trust, there is a serious risk of creating a panopticon with self-censorship and power imbalances.

These risks call to investigate what kind of leaders and leadership humans need to develop to ensure that employees and public and private organizations can learn to use Artificial Intelligence without surrendering the ability to choose their meanings and use technology as a tool, not as the controller of human lives.

Artificial intelligence has many advantages, and as per every discovery, humans must accept that some people will use the latest to harm and gain personal advantage. This is called *destructive leadership* and refers to the negative impact of an organization through unethical behaviour.

Recent studies by the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, say that 70% of the world population resides in countries classified as dictatorships [4]. Without entering the semantic definition of dictatorship, it is undoubtedly concerning that even if the result were only 10%, the 10% would already be too much.

The author of this paper wants to remain optimistic about the future of humanity and that good will prevail over evil. Determining what percentage of humans can be classified as "good" compared to "evil" is undoubtedly a philosophic exercise. Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed humans are born good but corrupted by society [5]. On the other side of the spectrum, Thomas Hobbes (1651) said humans are naturally selfish and require governance to maintain order [6].

Paul Zak's Oxytocin studies said that 95% of people are altruistic [7]. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [8] and to support the positive outlook of the "good" people, the recent global crime rate is less than 5% of the population engages in criminal activities. The statistics seem encouraging!

Let us imagine living in the world described in Philippians 2:3-4 (NIV): *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your interests but each of you to the interests of the others."*

I am sure any "good" reader, regardless of atheism or any other religion (one of the meanings cited in evolutionary psychology), would have nothing to object about the possibility of living such a life.

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Could this be a good balance between getting along and getting ahead, having a peaceful and respectful meaning with leader aware of their responsibilities, and the human species maintaining their control over the machines? The author of this paper thinks it would be a good start, and it will use the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius as an approach.

"In every human being, there are two wolves in a perennial fight. One is fear, and the second is love. Which one wins the battle? Always the one you feed" (p.3) [9].

As 1 John 4:18a [10] states, "*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*"

More than ever, humanity needs human leaders who can combine the economic principles of business while influencing society toward a culture of stewardship and the sharing of prosperity.

2. Theoretical Framework: Spiritual Exercises as a Leadership Model

Saint Ignatius was born in Spain in 1491 and founded the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). After spending his juvenile life in the military after he got injured in a battle, find faith and decided to consecrate his whole life to God.

Self-awareness and reflection, discernment of the spirit, freedom and detachment and purpose and mission are the core themes of his messages [11].

The themes can be compared to find a close similarity with Emotional Intelligence (EI). According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence involves self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Emotional Intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, manage and influence human emotions and the emotions of others [12].

According to the Spiritual Exercises, *Self-awareness and reflection* encourage deep introspection to understand human inner life, motivations, and alignment with God's will. Self-awareness in emotional intelligence recognizes one's emotions, values, and triggers in emotional intelligence.

Discernment of the spirit in the Spiritual Exercises asks to identify inner movements such as consolation and desolation to discern what can take humans to the greater good and spiritual alignment. Emotional Intelligence, through self-regulation, asks to manage emotions to determine the impact on thoughts and actions to foster sound decision-making.

Freedom and detachment in the Spiritual Exercises teach indifference toward material things to enhance spiritual freedom. Emotional Intelligence regulation involves detaching from impulsive reactions to achieve independence from being controlled by emotions.

The purpose and mission of the Spiritual Exercises focus on discovering and committing to a life mission aligned with God's glory and service to others. Emotional Intelligence encourages us to live purposely by pursuing meaningful goals and values-driven aspirations.

As it is easily seen, both frameworks seek to live a well-balanced, self-aware and value-driven life.

We already know that Emotional Intelligence can help leaders navigate the complexity of the ethical dilemmas that Artificial Intelligence is creating due to bias in algorithms and data privacy by integrating empathy and social responsibility in the decision-making process [13].

It has also already been recognized that emotional intelligence counterbalances the dehumanizing effects of artificial intelligence by promoting interpersonal connections and addressing the emotional needs of the employees working in automated workflows [14].

Looking at the challenges of leadership in the age of artificial intelligence, the ethical dilemmas, the dehumanization risks, and the rise of technology-driven decision-making are evident.

It seems that spiritual exercises can provide the meaning humans so desperately miss to achieve the desired balance between getting along and getting along. It represents a transformation within

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transformational leadership, with organizational leaders helping people in their quest to transition from profession to purpose, representing a win-win solution between profitability and employee satisfaction.

Transformational leadership is the leadership style where the leaders inspire and motivate their followers to achieve excellent outcomes by transforming their values, attitudes and behaviours.

Recently, economic volatility, technological advancements, and the overwhelming demand for goods and services on demand have forced organizations to look for innovative ways to cut expenses and increase profit and profitability. Ethical scandals demonstrate that leadership's dark side lurks every step away. Maximizing shareholders' wealth, no matter the cost, can seriously damage organizations in the long term due to loss of market share, public perception, and worker satisfaction [15].

In these scenarios, transformational leaders who craft a compelling vision that inspires and motivates employees to adapt to change and uncertainty help minimize these adverse outcomes. Scholars such as Peters and Waterman (1982/2004), Kouzes and Posner (1987/2023), and Avolio and Bass (2002) have already supported transformational leadership as the style of choice to minimize ethical issues, encourage innovation and empower employees [16][17][18].

The other side of transformational leadership is that it can quickly shift from social reform to pragmatism to attain the task objectives.

A human leader embracing Saint Ignatius' principles can help bring transformational leadership to its purest form because of the balanced approach between self and society.

Rothausen (2017) reminds leaders to restore morality by integrating spirituality and ethics into the leadership framework to promote moral proficiency [19].

3. Ignatian Principles for Human Leadership

Dijkstra, Liebrand, and Timminga (1998) discuss the influence of an expert system and its perceived objectivity compared to humans [20]. The same conclusions are reached by Sundar (2008), calling this notion *machine heuristic* to explain that the more the user anthropomorphizes an interface, the more the user considers the decision and selection objective and unbiased [21].

The findings should worry leaders around the world because we know that the info produced by artificial intelligence is not always objective and unbiased.

To rebalance the decision-making from machines to humans and ensure that financial returns are not the only important parameter, we need to become more self-aware and improve our ability to discern. We need to become more human.

Discernment – noticing 'the movements felt in the heart and weighed by the mind [22]. Self-awareness – the ability to recognize and understand one's emotions to monitor the internal states and identify patterns of thinking and feelings [23].

It seems evident that the Ignatian approach involves more than calculating its benefits and listening carefully to the different motivations at work, which seems to be good practice for leadership worldwide. Suppose leaders embrace the Ignatian approach of diagnosing the internal and external environment to align profit and social good. In that case, this approach becomes the foundation of a deconstructive process in which leaders begin to question their assumptions and beliefs.

The results could bring the decision-making process back to humans where it belongs.

The benefits of the Ignatian benefits should be praised even if the religious background is removed. Recently, the European Union Commission's Joint Research Center, aware of the risks of artificial intelligence, determined the necessity for leaders to exercise discernment and self-awareness when developing artificial intelligence systems. The committee highlights that "Experts are calling on

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everyone's internal moral compass, including policymakers. Look into your dark side through AI." The concern is addressed in the EU AI Act, Article 14, Human Oversight [24].

It is not only Europe that has similar concerns. In the United States in October 2023, President Biden issued an Executive Order asking for the responsible development and use of artificial intelligence. The U.S. Department of State published in July 2024 the Risk Management Profile for Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights to fight the risks and hold ethical standards [25].

The Spiritual Exercises do not ask for superficiality or to not seek knowledge but ask for critical thinking and filter information through the *principle and foundation* where people can align their actions with the ultimate purpose*, detachment or indifference*, to develop inner freedom from undue attachments to outcomes or material things, *discernment of Spirit*, to discover consolation and desolation that influence people, decision making, the *daily review* to reflect, and the *contemplation of actions* ensuring that spiritual insights translate into authentic and purposeful choices.

4. The Principle and Foundation: Purpose-Driven Leadership

Ignatius encourages leaders to build their actions in a sense of higher purpose because the ultimate goal is not personal or organizational profit but achieving the greater good.

Broscombe (2017) reminds the readers that the principles and foundation of Saint Ignatius allow leaders to keep their priorities right and to return to them frequently. Considering that artificial intelligence's imperatives for efficiency are increasingly driving today's world, Ignatius's principles could help guarantee ethical and human-centric approaches [26].

Burns (1978) already defined transformational leadership as the process of social influence by which leaders and followers participate in mutual change and development, elevating each other to higher levels of motivation and morality [27].

The well-structured nature of the Spiritual Exercise written by Saint Ignatius allows the leader to have a transformative experience and achieve what seems complicated without such strong guidance.

More support for making business more human comes from Inge Thulin, president, CEO, and chairman of 3 M, who once said, "An enterprise not focused on sustainability for their products and those of their customers will not exist in 50 years.". Also, EY Beacon Institute research reveals that businesses must embrace a multi-stakeholder, humanistic, and oriented purpose to navigate today's volatile, uncertain economy [28].

According to Fessard (2010), the Spiritual exercise experience, both anthropological and spiritual, represents the path toward *freedom* [29]. Talking about freedom, Father Davide Maria Turoldo, an Italian priest, in his book *I Believe, Therefore I am Free*, pronounced that his faith was a source of freedom [30].

The last statements about believing and freedom stress that having a structured approach to discernment and self-awareness does not limit freedom but allows people to better understand between good and evil, self and others, allowing humans to be free.

5. Detachment and Freedom: Resisting the Allure of Technological Power

If freedom can be achieved by better understanding who we are and what is around us, another important lesson from the Spiritual Exercises is the ability to detach or be indifferent. What Saint Ignatius means about detachment is that it is not to be too uncared for or to look at life superficially but mostly with balance.

He calls for the balance that seems to have shifted toward profit and tasks, leaving little space for the people. A leader incapable of holding this balance is called an incompetent leader. Incompetent not because of missing the technical skills to lead but the inability to care for people and the results.

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Research conducted by Yulk (1989) and Lahmi, Ben-Hador, and Brender-Ilan (2023) suggests that the referent and expert power are transformative to the leader and improve the imbalance between results and people [31][32].

Reverent power derives from personal traits and charisma, representing the ability to influence people. *Expert power* derives from possessing knowledge, skills or expertise valued by others [33].

It seems that the detachment and the freedom humans can achieve through the practice of Saint Ignatius's principles can help to reach the missing balance, using what leads to life, *faith*, and leaving aside, *materialism* that does not lead to life.

In the context of today's advancement of technology, the Ignatian detachment asks leaders to critically assess their relationship with artificial intelligence, resisting the illusion of an unbiased and objective truth technology gives using detachment and focusing on what it means to make choices in freedom and fulfillment.

6. Ignatian Practices for Modern Leadership

Critical thinking is analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information objectively and systematically to make informed decisions. It involves reasoning, problem-solving, and reflection on assumptions and beliefs to achieve a well-supported conclusion [34].

Saint Ignatius calls this practice Examen, and it is the cornerstone of its spirituality, offering a well-structured approach to the leader's continuous improvement and ethical decision-making.

By practising the Examen in daily routines, the leader creates the habit of mindful reflection that will enable the leader to better navigate the complexity of artificial intelligence and, simultaneously, build an organizational culture that prioritizes ethical discernment and responsible innovation.

Following the Ignatian themes, leaders should start the day by reflecting on goals for the day. In the afternoon, find the time to pause to assess alignment with values and decisions made. Finally, in the evening, review the day and consider improvements if necessary.

Discernment helps leaders to critically examine the process, inputs and outcomes of artificial intelligence to identify potential biases. It encourages critical thinking and remaining inquisitive when addressing complex artificial intelligence challenges. Leaders practicing discernment can create inclusive spaces in which different perspectives are welcome.

Creating a purpose-driven organization based not only on pure profit but also fosters trust and loyalty creation among the members. The leader communicating compelling purpose inspires the members to remain engaged in their actions because of their impact on society.

Mujtaba et al. (2019) found that ethical leadership improves organizational innovation by fostering creativity and psychological empowerment among people [35]. Through intrinsic motivation, knowledge sharing and psychological empowerment, those leaders create a culture that improves people and positively impacts the organization's profitability.

The popular motivational speaker Earl Nightingale 1956 delivered his *The Strangest Secret* speech with the central message that *we become what we think about*. He defined success as reaching a wordy idea with the power of the mind. The secret to achieving success is to have a purpose and work toward it [36].

Here you are again; it seems that strengthening the human brain to think and dream requires repetition, persistence, and values, all things humans must keep, and not delegating a machine to make the choices, regardless of the ethicality of the algorithm used. This is why attending any discerning leadership program offers the template to focus on developing self-knowledge and personal development practices.

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Siebert et al. (2021) seek to confirm that human reflection abilities are unsure of human control in the ethical oversight of artificial intelligence systems [37]. This represents another confirmation that humans should practice the examen recommended by the Spiritual Exercises.

The findings suggest that leadership training programs should empower leaders with the skills and the knowledge to control artificial intelligence to allow them to use the time to think about strategic decision-making.

Sposato (2023) suggests that leadership training must include adaptive strategies to navigate the artificial intelligence-driven transformation teaching issues like data privacy, bias limitation and societal implications of adopting artificial intelligence [38].

It seems evident that including the Ignatian principles in leadership development, such as self-awareness, discernment, and a commitment to social justice, is necessary when it is easier to surrender human decision-making to machines.

Self-reflection is a powerful tool to foster self-awareness and mindfulness. Discernment allows leaders to make self-centred decisions for the greater good. Social justice and inclusivity are what leaders should create to achieve a diverse and equitable environment.

Relying too much on artificial intelligence might cause humans to cancel critical thinking, and without human empathy, the results would be catastrophic.

7. Discussion: Becoming a Human Leader versus Just a Leader

Mehra and Srivastava (2024) highlight the critical role empathy plays in enhancing employee satisfaction and driving organizational success, and they continue by saying that "the need for leadership is inseparable from the need to descend to the reality of the world, getting involved in it, and transforming it." (p. 199) [39]

Pavlovich and Krahnke (2012) confirm that improving the empathetic interactions in an organization results in lower costs, improved satisfaction for employees and customers, and ultimately improved profitability [40].

It is important at this point to highlight a simple truth of life, and the truth is that humans tend to create stereotypes about facts, forgetting that it is not the way things are called that holds the truth but what things can do. An example to better explain this concept is given when a salesperson tries to sell life insurance.

It is common to think of life insurance in negative terms, and the moment humans are asked to buy one, a sense of immortality immediately arises to reject the idea. The rejection could be minimized by explaining what life insurance does and giving peace of mind to people who care about their loved ones when they die.

In the same way, religion is, by many, seen as a negative and unreal concept only because there is no physical evidence of any Gods. Many get embarrassed even to admit they believe in God publicly.

When humans cannot explain something, it does not necessarily mean such a thing does not exist. All the discoveries humans have achieved over the centuries are not new creations. They already existed, and humans could not see them. The fact that humans need physical evidence for everything is a false science. We cannot see the oxygen we breathe. It does not mean it does not exist!

If we could see what religion does through its good intentions and beliefs, humans should accept it. As mentioned in this paper, according to evolutionary psychology, humans have a strong desire to get along, get ahead and have a sense of purpose or meaning. All of this is imprinted in human genes regardless of gender or culture.

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Depriving humans of these three principles is equal to not recognizing what makes humans human and different from machines.

Albert Edward Wiggam (1933) talks about only a tiny percentage of people have a clear purpose or goal driving them [41]. Going back to what Earl Nightingale says in the Strangest Secret speech, the opposite of societal courage is not cowardice but conformity [42]. Conformity means that humans generally do things without asking the reasons, with no purpose or meaning.

This reality is scary, and it must be changed; this is why, today, more than ever, because of the risk of artificial intelligence, it is imperative to form leaders who are humans.

In developing artificial intelligence, IBM has already included 2021, an ethical AI framework. They have evident principles that encourage a culture of responsibility and a strong governance structure [43].

Finland created AuroraAI, a national program of artificial intelligence to develop a human-centric and ethically sustainable society [44].

The author does not deny all the significant advantages artificial intelligence provides to humans. All the current advantages and all the future ones are tremendous, and they are welcome. What must be done is to use technology and not be used by it.

If it is true that humans should be tolerant of religion, let us not ostracize what religion says, and let us read and do what it says. Humans should stop being hypocrites, professing they are religious, whatever that religion is, and just try to live the ethical and social life that can bring financial and spiritual prosperity humans desperately need.

8. Conclusion

The Spiritual Exercises, through *Self-awareness*, encourage a profound introspection to understand human inner life, motivations, and alignment with God's will. For a leader, understanding who he or she is through introspection and the ability to correct bad habits is a concrete example of how self-awareness can help to become a better person.

Discernment of the spirit asks to identify inner movements such as consolation and desolation to discern what can take humans to the greater good and spiritual alignment. For a leader, discernment helps understand the difference between right and wrong and focuses on achieving social and not only personal prosperity.

Detachment teaches indifference toward material things to enhance spiritual freedom, which allows the leader to step back from the details and focus on strategic information.

The leader communicating compelling *purpose* inspires the members to remain engaged in their actions because of their impact on society.

Considering how practical the spiritual exercises are, leaders can start writing a reflection journal to evaluate decisions involving artificial intelligence. Leaders can include spiritual and ethical leadership workshops in their executive training to train on discernment and ethical decision-making to balance artificial intelligence's advantages with human supervision. Finally, leaders should be encouraged to form committees to evaluate artificial intelligence using the principles of discernment and detachment.

More studies are needed on how the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises can be included in executive programs and how to measure their impact.

Bishop T.D. In one of his speeches, Jakes asked his audience if they dared to be successful: "It is easier not to be successful; misery will always have company success breeds contempt. If you do not want to make waves, be mediocre, be normal and fit in, and if you are more concerned about people than you are, God then neutralize everything he put in. You just fit in with everybody else, dress like them,

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walk like them, act like them, eat like them, go where they go, think like they think, do what they do, and once you neutralize your uniqueness, you do not need courage" [45].

Do you have the courage?

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