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# Lasting greatness

## *Timeless lessons for recognizing and nurturing leadership potential*

by Claudio Fernández-Aráoz

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Ignatius of Loyola lived nearly 500 years ago, yet he still serves as a shining example of how to build an enduring legacy of great leadership in an era of rapid and radical change.

In 1540, Ignatius of Loyola founded The Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits. With virtually no startup capital, the fledgling order rapidly achieved an amazing level of global influence. The Jesuits became confidants to European monarchs, China's Ming emperor, the Japanese shogun, and the Mughal emperor in India. They also built the world's largest higher-education network, managing to get more than thirty colleges up and running within a decade, and seven hundred institutions sprawled across five continents by the late eighteenth century. At one point Jesuits educated 20% of all Europeans pursuing a classical curriculum. One key to the remarkable sustained success of the Jesuits is a mastery of great people decisions. This vital strength was bequeathed to the order by Ignatius himself.

Today's state-of-the-art recommendations for making great people choices include developing and reviewing a checklist of the key competencies you need before you start to assess any candidates. If you're subsequently tempted to tweak your checklist, you should ask yourself: Has the situation changed or am I being swayed by the candidates I'm encountering? Second, consider enlisting the help of a decision advisor, not to help you assess the candidates, but to serve as a sounding board. Discuss your impressions with someone who knows you well and can guide you toward cool detachment. Third, try to bring future perspec-

tive to the situation, perhaps by following Suzy Welch's excellent advice in her book *10-10-10: A Life-Transforming Idea*. How will you feel about your decision ten minutes from now? Ten months from now? Ten years from now? Finally, take some time. People sleep on decisions for a reason. Short-term emotion is a dangerous villain. The good news is that visceral emotions fade very rapidly, often within a day or two.

In his book *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius brilliantly articulates his recommended approach for making key life decisions, and the election of the first leader of the Jesuits showcases most of them. Before casting their votes, the ten Jesuit founders reflected at length, praying for three days. Ignatius had excluded himself, but was unanimously elected. He told his colleagues he was convinced he was not the best choice and urged them to reflect and pray for three more days, after which the ten founders again elected him unanimously. Ignatius urged them to further reflect and pray, and went to discuss the issue with his confessor. After pointedly delineating all his weaknesses, Ignatius asked his confessor to write a letter he might carry to his colleagues, so they might understand why he was not worthy to lead them. But the confessor instead recommended they elect Ignatius, who finally accepted.

While this is quite a dramatic case, it clearly illustrates best practices for avoiding the heat of the moment when making key people decisions: Review your checklist. Speak with the right advisor. Take the long-term view (in Ignatius' case, all the way to imagining yourself reviewing your decision with God). And take some time off to let the decision sit. That was hard work for the ten electors as well as the elected candidate, but that is the way to build lasting greatness. While a mere 16 of the 100 largest American companies of the year 1900 survived long enough to celebrate a centennial, the Society of Jesus has continued to have a major impact in society for well over 450 years.

### *Recognizing and nurturing high potential*

In addition to showcasing the best practices for great people choices, the example above shows how Ignatius himself displayed the first and most important indicator of high potential: the right motive, as evidenced by his paradoxical blend of fierce commitment and deep personal humility. Like the great "Level 5" leaders brilliantly described by Jim Collins, Ignatius showed a singular

devotion to building lasting greatness, and to making the world a better place, for truly selfless reasons.

From the start, Ignatius went out of his way to recruit, educate, train and coach the very best talent. He pursued Saint Francis Xavier for years, then urged him to "Go forth and set the world on fire with the love of God" by spreading the Christian faith in Asia.

Ignatius, a military man until he was seriously wounded in battle and underwent a spiritual conversion while recuperating, understood the imperative to identify exceptional young talents and brilliantly develop them. In the very same vein, General Colin Powell once noted that when the US Army needs a general, it cannot simply hire someone from IBM. Juan Alfonso de Polanco, an influential and important Jesuit, is illustrative of such exceptional talent identification and development. Born of Jewish descent in Burgos, Spain in 1517, Polanco had shown dazzling potential by age 13 and was sent to Paris to study literature and philosophy. Nine years later, having gained an exceptional educational background, he went to Rome, where he became apostolic secretary and, after just two years at age 24, was appointed notary at the Holy See. Ignatius recruited him at that time, spent a year personally coaching and training him, and then immersed Polanco in a best-practice education and job-rotation training that included studying theology in Padua and leading the startup of a school in Tuscany. After five years of development, Polanco became the secretary of the Society of Jesus, where he excelled as an extraordinary key staff for 25 years, brilliantly serving the order's first three global leaders.

### *Profiling the ideal leader*

Ignatius diligently worked to educate others about the best way to choose great potential leaders and tirelessly invested himself in the development and refinement of the governance of the Society he founded, so much so that it took him ten full years to feel reasonably comfortable with the first draft of the "Jesuit Constitutions" adopted



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in 1554, which already incorporated more than 220 corrections and additions. Like today's great leaders, Ignatius believed in the combination of globalization and experimentation, leaving the Constitutions open until confirming they would work well across all cultures and geographies. In fact, the Constitutions were not finalized by his followers until after Ignatius' death, 18 years after he had started writing them.

A key chapter in the Constitutions profiles the ideal candidate for the global leader of the Society of Jesus, which in my 27 years of global executive search practice remains one of the most extraordinary and realistic descriptions I have seen of what a great CEO should look like. In addition to a series of obvious qualifications given the nature of the Society (such as a love of God and a virtuous life), all the modern indicators of high executive potential are clearly highlighted in that profile, starting with the right motivation, noted above. While the Jesuits' top leader should be an example in all human virtues, Ignatius stressed that the clearly displayed combination of love, fierce commitment and humility must be among the most important criteria for election.

His profile of the ideal global leader also explicitly includes all four key leadership assets that indicate a leader's potential to thrive in a much bigger, more complex role: curiosity, insight, engagement and determination.

- Regarding curiosity and insight, Ignatius suggested the ideal candidate would display great intellect and judgment, both for speculative as well as for practical matters – a master at discerning and deciding.
- In terms of engagement, the Jesuit global leader should

be a master at engaging both internally and externally, while balancing severity with love and compassion.

- On determination, Ignatius said a leader should have high aspirations and inner strength so as to be able to support others' weaknesses and imperfections; start great missions in the service of God; and constantly persevere without losing one's soul in contradictions, including the most powerful, to the point of giving one's own life if needed.

The Society of Jesus was launched in an increasingly complex and fast-changing world that, nearly five centuries removed, seems amazingly analogous to our own. New global markets were opening as voyages of discovery established permanent European links to the Americas and Asia. Media technology was radically transformed with Gutenberg's printing press. Traditional belief systems were challenged as Protestant reformers mounted the first widespread and permanent competition to the Roman Catholic Church.

Do you want to build lasting greatness in your company in an era of rapid and radical change? First, consider the Jesuits' extraordinary global success over nearly 500 years. Then, inspired by their example, obsessively search for your highest potentials, and work tirelessly on their development.