

**Executive MBA**

## Why a 16th-century saint is a model of modern management

Nearly 500 years ago, St Ignatius showed how to lead a global enterprise



Inspirational: St Ignatius Loyola's principles created a huge and resilient international organisation © Dreamstime

OCTOBER 16, 2017 by Paul Almeida

When [Pope Francis](#) assumed the papacy in 2013, there were cheers from many around the world. Francis was the first pope from the Americas and the first Jesuit. While his appointment focused new attention on the Jesuit Order, the Society of Jesus has been around since 1540, when it was founded by St Ignatius Loyola.

A saint might seem a surprising source of inspiration for a business school dean, but more than 350 years before the first MBA degree, St Ignatius gave us a model of how to lead a multinational enterprise. Many organisational leaders today would be proud to emulate his principles and approach. His entrepreneurial spirit and management abilities led to the creation of a vast global organisation that has thrived and fulfilled its mission for nearly 500 years. Those principles underlie [McDonough School of Business](#), which is based at Georgetown University, America's oldest Catholic and Jesuit institution of higher learning, founded in 1789.

Every leadership expert stresses the importance of leading by example and of staying in touch in meaningful ways with those outside the top "C-suite" echelons of management and life of privilege. St Ignatius was born into the C-suite. As a member of the nobility he spent his early years in the 16th-century equivalent of a jet-setting life. Yet he surrendered frivolity for devotion to God, to walk with the poor and survive by begging. We now admire the chief executive who lunches in the staff canteen, much as our most compelling images of Pope Francis are those in

which he emerges from his tiny car and stays in touch with the dispossessed around the world by, quite literally, touching them.

St Ignatius understood that shared governance would help to attract and unleash the best talent. Leadership involves not just articulating a vision but also inspiring others to follow and execute it. Take St Francis Xavier, who travelled to Goa, India, in 1542 and established the first Jesuit school. Think of the courage it took to voyage to new lands with little money and no weaponry. He had courage and a commitment to the “company’s” vision of making a positive difference. Such courage is often hard to find today as we face the challenges of business in a more integrated and hospitable world.

The type of humility shown by St Ignatius creates trust. He delegated responsibilities in a time when strict hierarchy prevailed. The trust implicit in the modern practices of shared governance, delegation and employee empowerment are fundamentally rooted in a leader’s humility.

It is widely accepted today that organisations need a strong shared mission and culture to create and execute strategies. St Ignatius understood the importance of this for the Society of Jesus. Through the Spiritual Exercises, prayers and contemplative practices he developed and are still widely practised, he helped the Jesuits to understand who they were and why they were. By the time he died, priests as far away as Brazil and Japan, with no connection to the headquarters in Rome, were guided by a common sense of purpose. Without technology or staff meetings, St Ignatius bound together a global community of shared purpose and values.

### **Priests as far away as Japan, with no connection to ‘headquarters’ in Rome, shared a common purpose**

Structures, systems and processes in many ways define the life of an organisation and what it does well. St Ignatius explained in detail in the Jesuit Constitutions how the Society of Jesus would operate. He outlined everything from rules for those joining the seminary to the role of senior Jesuits, including how to shape the organisation, train

people and give them the flexibility to structure their lives.

St Ignatius emphasised the need for self-reflection and self-knowledge, as today we encourage people to learn about their strengths and weaknesses. He also left much to the discretion of local decision makers, balancing global consistency with local flexibility.

Ignatian principles have inspired generations of religious leaders, educators and students. But I believe St Ignatius is also a management hero. The principles and practices he established have survived for five centuries and lie at the heart of a complex multinational organisation that runs some 360 secondary schools and 175 universities around the world, and is engaged in activities

from healthcare to assisting refugees. Guided by principles established by St Ignatius, the Society of Jesus has a remarkable track record of improving our world.

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