



**Organizational Change - Inspirational  
Leadership:  
A Case Study in the Effective Leadership of  
Philippine President Corazon Aquino**

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**Abstract**

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Although change can be a painful process, it is necessary for growth. The success of change greatly depends on how leadership responds to the change and communicates the change to followers. Corazon Aquino, the first female Filipino president, had an arduous task ahead of her after assuming the presidency from former murderous dictator, Ferdinand Marcos. Aquino embraced the challenge to bring change not just politically but personally to her fellow countrymen. Aquino, being personally victimized by Marcos's corruption, as her own husband was assassinated, realized she had to win the hearts of her followers not for selfish motives but to restore hope and trust to the people as their president and as a follower of Christ. Aquino led her country through positive change using her servant leadership style of placing her followers' needs above her own as well as living out her Christian virtues of integrity, honesty, consistency, dependability, transparency, and authenticity, ultimately calling for leaders to consider the spiritual influence they have on followers to produce change that will remain.

Keywords: organizational change, autocratic leadership servant leadership, spiritual leadership, spirituality, martial law

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"The success of a major change will depend to a great extent on how well leaders communicate the reasons why [the] proposed change is necessary and beneficial" (Yukl, 2013, p. 89). This is done by articulating "a vision of a better future that is attractive enough to justify the sacrifices and hardships the change will require" (p. 89). Corazon Aquino recognized the toxic leadership of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos and was even a victim of his murderous regime, yet she remained steady in her values and became a powerful catalyst of change and restoration in her country.

When articulating a vision that promotes change, it should “be simple and idealistic, a picture of a desirable future, not a complex plan with quantitative objectives and detailed action steps ... [that will appeal to the] values, hopes, and ideals of organizational members” (Yukl, 2013, p. 89). Kotter and Cohen (2002) asserted that “successful large-scale change is a complex affair that happens in eight stages: (a) push urgency up, (b) put together a guiding team, (c) create the vision and strategies, (d) effectively communicate the vision and strategies, (e) remove barriers to action, (f) accomplish short-term wins, (g) keep pushing for wave after wave of change until the work is done, and (h) create a new culture to make new behaviors stick” (p. 2). Aquino knew that Marcos’s autocratic form of leadership instilled fear in her fellow countrymen, so she intentionally approached her leadership style with her faith as the basis for her decisions and actions, ultimately leading with love and causing the national skepticism of leaders, power, and politics to be redefined.

“The central challenge is not strategy, not systems, not culture ... but the core problem without question is behavior – what people do, and the need for significant shifts in what people do” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 2). “Changing behavior is less a matter of giving people analysis to influence their thoughts than helping them to see a truth to influence their feelings ... [because] the heart of change is in the emotions” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 2). Rather than attempt to change the way people think to change their behavior, Kotter and Cohen (2002) explained that successful organizational change provokes “responses that reduce feelings that slow and stifle needed change, and they enhance feelings that motivate useful action ... that provides the energy that propels people to push along the change process, no matter how great the difficulties” (p. 8). Effective leaders make an effort to understand and tap into the needs and motives of followers to simultaneously reach organizational goals as well as follower goals (Fry, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to conduct a case study of a leader, Corazon Aquino, who initiated not just organizational change but national change, winning the hearts of her people through her servant leadership style by bridging her public life, the secular, and her private life, the sacred.

### **Organizational Problem: Autocratic Leadership**

In 1972, upon political unrest and instability, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared national martial law, asserting himself as the supreme power under the guise of a national emergency to protect the country from a communist takeover and supposedly to initiate reform. Although the Philippines operated under a hierarchical, authoritarian form of government, Marcos feared the loss of power and wanted to eliminate all rivals, depoliticize certain societal structures promoting change, and alleviate world state economic pressures by calling for martial law that would cripple the Philippine people and nation as a whole (Brillantes, 1986). Instituting martial law allowed Marcos to shut down Congress, assume all governmental power himself,

suspend citizens' constitutional rights including disarming citizens of their firearms, dissolve the political party system, impose a curfew, censor all media outlets, and prohibit protests, rallies, and demonstrations (Reyes, 2018); thus began Marcos's evolution from president to dictator. The Philippine military began its campaign of repression by arresting opposing political members, journalists, intellectuals, constitutional delegates, labor organizers, and student leaders totaling 30,000 detained within one year. Despite high unemployment and economic struggles, Marcos continued to borrow money from international financial institutions to erect lavish urban projects for his wife, only leasing land to farmers and withholding the option to purchase.

Caiden (1985) asserted that the bureaucratic virtues of specialization, hierarchy, rules and regulations, administrative management, impersonality, and careerism can become vices if overindulged, and "over-bureaucratized organizations are not pleasant to deal with or comfortable to work in, and can result in dysfunction" (p. 22). German sociologist Max Weber coined the term *bureaucracy* where an organization similar to societal hierarchies demands strict obedience of its followers, allowing unquestionable dominance to leadership, policies, and structures put into place, such as Marcos implemented in the Philippines under his rule. Organizational employees or citizens under bureaucratic rule can feel burnt out, sabotaged, and manipulated, making them uninterested, unwilling, indifferent, unproductive, detached, and uncommitted to the organization or government. Marcos lifted martial law in 1981 due to his growing unpopularity and being accused of 8,000 wrongful executions and 50,000 arrests of suspected communist subversives, but Marcos maintained legislative power.

Marcos's form of capitalism that plundered both private and state-related businesses brought great economic loss to the sugar and coconut industries. Additionally, oil prices rose, sparking inflation and causing the country's recession which led to increased deficit spending. When Corazon Aquino's husband, Benigno Aquino, Jr., returned to the Philippines after being exiled in 1983, Marcos had him assassinated, which ironically was aired on live television, sparking a crisis of confidence among other nations' leadership and international banks which refused to continue business with Marcos, leading to great opposition against his dictatorship (Reyes, 2018). In Marcos's attempt to regain support, he called for a surprise presidential election where he ran against Aquino's widow, Corazon Aquino, and lost. Despite lacking funds and being terrorized by Marcos's supporters, Aquino was sworn into office. Marcos refused to concede and ordered his re-election, but to no avail, leaving him no choice but to flee with his family and close associates once he discovered his military regime was plotting a coup against him.

Narcissism is a powerful personality disorder and "takes the form of a grandiose sense of self-importance, a preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, or love,

and an exhibitionist orientation ... [where] narcissistic individuals act as if they are entitled to receive the service of others and tend toward exploitative and manipulative behavior" (Sankowsky, 1995, p. 64), such as Marcos exhibited during his reign. Khoo and Burch (2008) also posited that "narcissistic personality is typically described in relation to charismatic leadership in the leadership literature" (p. 88). Sankowsky (1995) explained how many followers deem charismatic "leaders as parent figures ... [and the leaders'] abuse of this power can insidiously and significantly undermine the followers' psychological well-being" (p. 57). This explains why the new president, Corazon Aquino, consistently followed through with her proposals and was intentional with her actions to win the approval and trust of the Filipino people.

Ferdinand Marcos died in Hawaii in 1989 from heart, lung, and kidney ailments (Reyes, 2018). To grasp a full understanding of the oppressive national climate and gross representation of a charismatic leader turned murderous, authoritarian dictator, McCoy (2009) noted that under Marcos's dictatorship, 3,257 people died, an estimated 35,000 people were tortured, and some 70,000 people were arrested (McCoy, 2009, p. 403).

### **Organizational Solution: Servant Leadership**

Upon winning the presidential election, the Aquino government set out to restore the rule of law in the Philippines and the country's democratic institutions. Aquino, being a mere housewife and grieving widow of a murdered political leader, became a rallying symbol of freedom and democracy for the Filipino people who were disgusted with their former dictators' rule and unlawful crimes against humanity.

Aquino sought to rehabilitate the economy and renew her countrymen's trust following the severe abuse of power presented by Marcos. Aquino's government freed political detainees, launched investigations of human rights abuses on the part of the military, and restored the constitution to limit the president's term and re-establish the governmental legislature and judiciary (Reyes, 2018). Although "change is clearly the best choice, there may be fear, anxiety, and resistance" that is being triggered by changes in routine, patterns, and habits that include (a) the threat of loss of position, power, status, quality of life, and authority; (b) economic security; (c) human fear of the unknown; (d) feelings of inadequacy; and (e) the possible alteration of social friendships and interactivity (Konopaske et al., 2018, p. 476). Oddly, there was a backlash to some of the changes Aquino proposed; nevertheless, the country's economic status and people's faith in the governmental leadership needed restoration. Displaying the courage to resist political corruption and personal gain, Aquino was able to win over the people by showing how her character was able to ward off the political trap of power. Udani and Lorenzo-Molo (2013) further asserted that Aquino was truthful, stemming from her integrity and authenticity which enabled her followers to trust her much unlike their previous leader. Aquino's leadership through service identified her as a servant leader

whose effectiveness lies in placing the needs of followers above her own, exemplifying selfless service. Leaders can have a transforming effect on organizations as well as on individuals by defining the need for change, creating new visions, and mobilizing commitment to these visions (Den Hartog et al., 1999). Aquino had a long road ahead of her to bring change to her torn country, but she embraced the challenge and led with her heart.

Aquino's life as a servant of Christ spilled over into her political and public life. She did not use servant leadership as a means to an end, but she acted as a servant leader because that is who and what she was – a servant who became a leader. Jesus Christ was a leader who humbled himself and became a servant, making no sense to those in search of their Messiah. Rather than rule with an iron fist and destroy all opposing governments, Jesus was an agent of change where he inspired people with kingdom principles, rather than imposing those principles, while giving a voice to the underserved and oppressed (McCabe, 2008). Jesus washing his disciples' feet went completely against the identity of a prince; however, Jesus demonstrated what a true leader is and does by washing his disciples' feet, which was one of the most demeaning tasks reserved for the lowest house servants.

Not only did Aquino acquire and inspire a mass following but she also is revered as an icon, with her trademark qualities of spirituality, selflessness, and others-centeredness, and certain unique values and virtues which proved to be a firm foundation in her life and leadership style that are significant to those who want to truly lead and emulate Aquino's leadership and not just manage organizations and businesses.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) postulated the following five characteristics of an exemplary leader attempting to get extraordinary things done in an organization: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart. As my husband and I venture forward into leading change despite resistance, we will continue building people and building relationships that inspire, motivate, challenge, and build trust because "people follow first the person, then the plan" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 16). Aquino led with integrity – the foundation of earning followers' trust – and truly transformed herself which caused her followers to identify with her and desire transformation themselves. Sendjaya et al. (2008) posited that "the authenticity of servant leaders significantly shapes and affects their relationships to others" (p. 407). Aquino was an authentic leader who stayed true to her word, avoided corruption by always keeping her personal finances separate from governmental finances, and never tried to influence public policy or laws. Her executive secretary, Oscar Orbos, admitted that "she never gave special instructions to favor anyone or to bend the rules to accommodate certain business interests ... [and] did not exempt herself from the rules" (Udani & Lorenzo-Molo, 2013, p. 379). As a true servant

leader, Aquino avoided all public displays of arrogance or power, making her Filipino followers proud of her integrity, honesty, and transparency (Calica & Macairan, 2009).

### **Organizational Difference: Spiritual Leadership**

The term *Christian leadership* connotes the act of leadership as lived and acted out by Christians rather than specific leadership theories designated for Christians. As believers, we have been given spiritual giftings, and “spiritual gifts given to individuals [are] for the sake of the whole community” (Hooker, 2017, p. 352). Christians do not have the luxury of acting and reacting as the flesh dictates. “Christians have died with Christ to the old life ... so that we might conduct ourselves as those who have set out on a new life” (Hooker, 2017, p. 352). Because people are searching for meaning, purpose, and value, “there is an emerging and accelerating call for spirituality in the workplace” (Fry, 2003, p. 702) that has the potential to produce “personal outcomes such as increased joy, peace, serenity, job satisfaction, and commitment but that they also deliver improved productivity and reduce absenteeism and turnover” (Fry, 2003, p. 721). With this new emergence of workplace spirituality, the need for Christians to let their lights shine has never been more needed “that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (*New King James Version Bible*, 1979/1982, Matt. 5:16). Our light should shine in every aspect of our lives including in our leadership methods bringing glory to God the Father just as Jesus did.

Aquino recognized her responsibility not only politically but spiritually as well and led by the Spirit. Udani and Lorenzo-Molo (2013) showed how Corazon Aquino, Asia’s first woman president, “successfully bridged the gap between the sacred and secular” (p. 21) by studying the “values and virtues of a leader who happened to be religious and whose religiosity spilled over into her life, work, and character as a person and leader of a recovering nation” (p. 22). Udani and Lorenzo-Molo interviewed 14 people who knew Aquino as a friend, acquaintance, or through her work, and asked them about her character, leadership style, behavior, work relationships, and influence on others. When asked how she struggles and deals with challenges, Aquino replied, “I pray with all my heart, I work with all my might,” or “I’ll do my best, and God will do the rest” (Udani & Lorenzo-Molo, 2013, p. 29). Her deep religiosity and faith in God “permeated both her public and private life, she did it in a way that did not intrude but instead bridged the gap between the sacred and secular” (Udani & Lorenzo-Molo, 2013, p. 29) just as mentioned earlier how Jesus did not impose but rather influenced toward change.

Just as Aquino’s faith permeated both her private and public life, the Apostle Paul admits he made himself a servant of all including both Jews and Gentiles. He declared “I have become all things to all people, that by all means, I might save some” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2016, 1 Cor. 9:22). Paul’s life was reflective of God himself who became all things to all men by humbling himself, taking on the form of a man and

walking amongst us showing us how to live this life united with the Father, pointing men's hearts toward eternity. As we accept the challenge to bring glory to our heavenly Father and attempt to bring change to our churches, homes, workplaces, and communities, may the world know us by our love because of the love we have been so freely given! One of Aquino's cabinet members, Teresita Ang See, admitted that she learned through Aquino's leadership that "you can be a leader and yet remain humble and honest and not be corrupted by power" (Udani & Lorenzo-Molo, 2017, p. 387). Other staff members admitted that they also began questioning how they could lead by serving others. Aquino certainly made her mark on her country, and not one person can say her faith and spirituality did not bring change and influence the Philippines. What a testimony!

## Discussion

A global force exists among organizations calling for a more holistic leadership approach that incorporates the body, mind, soul, and spirit. Man is on a quest for fulfillment in every aspect of his life including the workplace, and "spiritual leadership is necessary for the transformation and continued success of a learning organization" (Fry, 2003, p. 694). Udani and Lorenzo-Molo (2017) postulated that "spiritual leadership is integrating all arenas of human existence that no longer views the humanistic, spiritual, and natural as separate and independent domains" (p. 23). Aquino just lived her life as a Christian believer and made a difference in her followers and her country as a whole from the overflow of her relationship with God and Christian virtues.

Fry (2003) explained that "a spiritual leader is someone who walks in front of one when one needs someone to follow, behind one when one needs encouragement, and beside one when one needs a friend" (p. 720). Jesus took his place as a leader and as a friend among his disciples and those who followed, and is considered "the most effective leader and change agent the world has ever known" (McCabe, 2008, p. 33) because of his "commitment to a life-bringing mission" (Fryar, 2007, p. 158) to reconcile man to God and display God's glory amidst a fallen world and accomplished his mission by fulfilling his followers' needs as well as fulfilling his kingdom mission. Aquino also took her place as an elected leader as Philippine president and immediately enacted much-needed change and restoration, winning the hearts and trust of the people as she instilled a vision, purpose, hope, and life into an otherwise dying country. She gave the power back to the people and fulfilled her political promises and is an icon among Filipino leaders to emulate.

## Conclusion

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) posited that a "transformational leader treats each follower as an individual and provides coaching, mentoring, and growth opportunities ... [and

are] concerned about developing their followers into leaders” (p. 189) because people need a “sense of transcendence – of having a calling through one’s work or being called” (Fry, 2003, p. 703). Aquino modeled servant leadership through her own personal example, “empowering others, and trust were the dominant causes of her transformational influence ... [not just moving people, but] she succeeded in calling them to action and even adopting certain aspects” (Udani & Lorenzo-Molo, 2013, p. 387). Yukl (2013) asserted that “powerful leaders can have a substantial impact on the lives of followers and the fate of an organization” (p. 340). Aquino certainly influenced her country through her servant leadership lifestyle and made an impact “through visioning, modeling through personal example in visible and tangible ways, mentoring and empowering others, and trust” (Yukl, 2013, p. 387), which Aquino accomplished by serving her subordinates and fellow countrymen.

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### About the Author

Michelle Gonzalez Segundo is a fourth-year Ph.D. student at Regent University, School of Business and Leadership, majoring in organizational leadership with a concentration in ecclesial leadership. Michelle’s passion is people. Whether she’s discipling others to realize their identity in Christ, calling, or leadership potential or serving the marginalized, she takes a “hands-on, boots-on-the-ground” approach to leading teams in engaging the community and connecting resources for sharing the gospel, particularly with the poor and homeless, disaster relief victims, families in need, at-risk youth, and foster children. Michelle currently serves as an intern with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) providing research for the Combating Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) division for the Eastern Southern Caribbean (ESC) region to safeguard children, empower women, engage stakeholders, governmental and NGOs, and develop sustainable policies that will help to eliminate human trafficking in the ESC.

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