



Reflections on the Caritas Leadership Training

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Our joint mission and the reality of our context

Caritas workers around the world work alongside governments to tackle complex humanitarian, development, and peace issues. In Africa region, the 46 National Caritas organizations implement programs to address various challenges, including water scarcity, human mobility, poverty, underdevelopment, and unconstitutional changes in government. These organizations often lack resources but are guided by the church's mission of serving through charity (diakonia). Caritas aims to convey the message that the church recognizes and cares about human suffering, and is committed to supporting and promoting human dignity in a comprehensive way.

In such contexts, one's leadership style plays a crucial role. For example, in my situation, I hold important positions managing the affairs of the Regional Executive Secretariat and serving as Secretary General of a network of 46 National Catholic Charity organizations. To fulfill the responsibilities of these roles, individuals in similar positions must have the ability to provide direction and vision, motivate and inspire others, and create an environment that encourages communication and collaboration among team members. This is not an easy task, especially in a context of complex institutional challenges. It requires self-awareness so that leaders are aware of their own blind spots and strengths. It requires finding a balance by having an open mind to see the world from others' perspectives, an open heart to accept changes and appreciate differences, and open hands to embrace strangers who don't fit into our comfort zones.

With funding support from Caritas Denmark, alongside 6 Caritas leaders, I attended a discernment and leadership training in Rome, Italy from April 28 to May 3, 2024. We learnt from consultants (*The Way Over*¹), from church leaders and from each other. In this piece, I share my reflections on what I took away from the training to help me navigate the journey of leadership and being human.

Leadership creates new realities

Leaders collaborate with teams that come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives. Together, we strive to establish new realities, whether it involves comprehensive system changes or transforming institutions. To illustrate, when I initially assumed this role, I worked with the team to revamp the regional secretariat office. This was a crucial step towards creating new realities. Currently, we are in the process of reevaluating our human resource management systems, acknowledging the significant progress we have made in enhancing our financial management systems. Throughout this journey, we must recognize that change affects individuals differently, and it is essential to have the support of our team to ensure that our shared performance improves. Achieving this requires dedicating ourselves to evaluating the quality of our inner selves. As we advocate for change, we need to ask ourselves, "*What story are we telling?*" The essence of leadership lies in the ability of a system, in which everyone is involved, to perceive and influence the future, and to be connected with what is seeking to emerge from

¹ The way over: <https://thewayover.com/index.html>



our work in Caritas, and then take action for the benefit of the mission entrusted to us accordingly.

The quality of interiority; How are you?

People working with us and participate in meetings bring their unique inner selves to these places. Effective leadership requires acknowledging and understanding this dimension in each space. Leaders should recognize that the individuals working for Caritas are also human, and therefore, they may experience fear or other emotions. Some of them excel at multitasking, while others prefer to focus on one task at a time. Some thrive in structured systems with clear guidelines, while others prefer flexibility. We should always strive to find a balance and leverage the strengths of each individual for the organization's mission. Sometimes, we may attend meetings with sadness or anger because someone did not meet our desired expectations. However, it is crucial to realize that the quality of our inner selves influences how we perceive others. When reading a document, we may think "*my way of doing things is better,*" and this bias can affect the feedback we provide to our colleagues. It is advisable that we take the time to ask ourselves the important question "*how are you?*" and then ask our teams this question and we will be surprised by the positive dimensions that this will bring into our work places.

Polarities? finding the "WE" in a diverse and multicultural context

A polarity is a problem that presents to us seemingly contrasting ideas. We often find ourselves faced with dilemmas, such as the choice between high skills and loyalty, change and stability, prioritizing performance over individual needs, or balancing an organization's interests with those of its employees. Caritas Leaders have the difficult task of managing the positive and negative aspects of each side of a polarity. Leaders may have to recognize this dimension in conflict management: "*is this a problem to be solved or a polarity to be managed?*" For instance, one team member may argue for purchasing a consultancy service of good quality at a higher price, while another may argue for selecting a consultant who offers a lower price and average services. This difference of opinion can lead to a debate within teams and it may be impossible to completely resolve this challenge. Therefore, when faced with polarities it is advisable to consider the positives of each side and strive for a solution that incorporates both sides of the pole, rather than simply choosing one option over the other.

You are not alone.

As we carry out the mission entrusted to us by the Catholic Church, we should recall that we are not alone. One effective way to realize this is by engaging in an empathy walk with a team member. Take the time to ask a colleague, "*What is it like to work with me?*" and truly listen to their response. Then, allow them to ask you the same question. You will be amazed at how much you can learn from a 40-minute walk. Additionally, it is important to create spaces where you can collectively listen to your team and hear their stories. The insights shared by your team members can help solve complex problems. Remember, we are all human and bound to make mistakes, but we are also destined for success. Embracing vulnerability is the first step towards creating meaningful change. Look around you and acknowledge that there are leaders who possess knowledge that we may not have. The answers do not always have to originate from within ourselves.