



[🏠](#) > [Ricerca](#) > [Blog](#) > [prof. Carbajo-Núñez M., A...](#)
 > [Civil Economy and Busine...](#)

Civil Economy and Business Leadership



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The document *Vocation of the Business Leader*, published by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development^[1], presents business leadership as a genuine vocation. It calls leaders to serve the common good, respect human dignity, and create sustainable wealth. This kind of leadership can be identified as transformational (or transformative)^[2].

In our efficiency-driven society, however, another model of leadership has largely prevailed. Often identified as transactional, it

is pyramidal, authoritarian, controlling, task-oriented, and focused on short-term goals.

These two forms of leaderships correspond to different economic models. Transformational leadership is linked to a humanistic conception of the economy, commonly referred to as *civil economy* whereas the transactional leadership reflects the capitalist model, which began to take shape at the end of the 16th century and eventually prevailed with the Industrial Revolution.

The Civil Economy

The civil economy is rooted in the contribution of the Franciscans between the 13th and 15th centuries. In this perspective, the main actor is neither the self-interested individual (as in capitalism) nor the paternalistic State (as in collectivism), but civil society itself. The economic system is considered truly efficient when it promotes public happiness, fostering mutual assistance, reciprocal trust, and relational goods.

The *Mounts of Piety*, promoted by the Franciscans, have been considered the «first great institution of civil economy» (G. Piana, 2009). This model gradually lost prominence with the rise of mercantilist individualism (16th-18th centuries) and later with the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). However, in the 18th century, the tradition of civil economy was revived and further developed by the Italian school, especially by Antonio Genovesi (1713–1769).

Today, civil economy has gained renewed attention through contemporary initiatives such as the *Economy of Communion* and the *Economy of Francesco*. In this approach, economic efficiency is inseparable from justice, social inclusion, and sustainability. The firm is understood not merely as a unit of production, but also as a space for civic and ethical formation.

Leadership and Public Happiness

In civil economy, the primary task of the leader is to promote public happiness and to foster relationships of trust, collaboration, and

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civic virtues, and social trust.

Such leaders are not authoritarian but inspiring and inclusive. They seek to ensure that all members play an active role, share the enterprise's civic ideals, and feel respected in their dignity. They motivate through purpose rather than fear, and they do not appeal merely to selfish interest. Work and economic activity are understood not only as means of generating profit, but above all as sources of personal meaning and collective well-being.

Conclusion

The document *Vocation of the Business Leader*, in line with the civil economy tradition, emphasizes leadership as service and envisions the firm as a «community of persons» (CA 35) in which each member is «responsible for all» (SRS 38). «Leaders are not only those with titles, but also those who exercise influence for the good of the other. From company CEOs and members of boards of directors to team leaders to people with informal influence» (*Vat-Leader* 5). Echoing the words of Christ: «Let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant» (Lk 22:26), the Church proposes a model of leadership inspired by the Son of Man, who «did not come to be served but to serve» (Mt 20:28).

[1] Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, *Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection*, 5th ed., [*Vat-Leader*], Vatican City 2018. These paragraphs are taken from our article: M. Carbajo-Núñez, «Artificial intelligence and leadership: A Franciscan Perspective», in *Collectanea Franciscana* 96 (2025) 325-345.

[2] Recently – especially in CST, liberation theology, and social movements – the expression “transformative leadership” has been used to emphasize that the scope is not only to transform people into their best selves (as in transformational leadership), but also to change the systems they live in, moving them toward justice and the common good.

Condividi su



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