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5 Ethical Culture Lessons for CEOs from Pope Francis

The Compliance Strategist

By Donna Boehme [All Articles](#)
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Pope Francis I
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Donna Boehme

Compliance and ethics professionals agree that role-modeling by senior executives, starting with the CEO, is the beachhead of any ethical leadership culture in an organization. That's because employees have an uncanny ability to detect hypocrisy in their leaders. They are adept at reading between the lines of internal announcements and closely observing what their leaders say and do. When what leaders say doesn't match up with what they do—ethical culture takes a hit. The most powerful role models lead more by action than words. This is a lesson leaders and managers could learn just by watching the biggest, baddest new CEO on the planet, Pope Francis I.

Pope Francis began to signal that he was a different kind of leader even as he stood on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica moments after the white smoke had cleared (literally), wearing a white cassock instead of the traditional red, ermine-trimmed "mozzetta" used by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. That night, the new pope took the bus home rather than the papal limousine. When he was reported to be taking taxis around Rome, nervous Cardinals in the Vatican **began to follow suit**, taking regular cabs instead of the large fleet of luxury sedan cars at their disposal. Self reform and culture change, the Italian journalists giddily reported, had begun.

What's more, it seems there is a "humble pope" story reported almost every week since Pope Francis's election. Last week media reports surfaced that he had chosen to live in a simple two-room apartment, rather than the luxurious digs of the Vatican penthouse.

Apparently, he makes his own telephone calls too—to the dentist to cancel an appointment, and to the newsstand to suspend a home delivery subscription. He made the phone calls himself, you see, to save the Vatican the cost of the long-distance calls. And if that's not enough role-modeling for the month of March, the newest Catholic CEO just washed the feet of 12 inmates, **two of them women**. All of this has taken place without being prefaced by a single big speech, memo, or video.

I don't think there is a compliance officer today who wouldn't give their eyeteeth for a CEO like Pope Francis. Yes, I know, it's incredibly unfair to compare a mere mortal CEO to His Holy Father. A CEO has real-world things to worry about: business strategy, revenues, cost-cutting, employees, customers, business partners, competitors, compliance, culture, and reputation. Wait . . . so does the Pope (not to mention that one of his

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competitors is reportedly very powerful and lives in Hell).

Having been inside a wide spectrum of organizations in three capacities—in-house lawyer, compliance officer, and independent consultant—I've had a bird's eye view of a variety of CEOs and the different cultures they have driven. And my observation is this: the most enduring, most powerful ethical cultures have at their core some simple, well-worn CEO stories that go something like:

- "He drove himself to the meeting."
- "The corporate jet was the first thing to go."
- "He walked the floor and spoke with employees."
- "At the meeting, he thanked a manager for speaking up."
- "He made a surprise safety tour of the plant."
- "He was the first one to complete the ethics training."
- "He shook hands with everyone."

Pope Francis's CEO stories are just beginning, but so far they are the very stuff corporate compliance officers dream about.

So what lessons can CEOs learn from Pope Francis? So far, quite a lot:

1. SPEAK SOFTLY, BUT WALK LOUDLY

Rather than talk about what you're "gonna" do, just do. Your line management will take even more notice of what you do because you'll surprise them. Don't worry, it will get around, and fast.

2. SOMETIMES SMALL GESTURES HAVE BIG IMPACT

Ordinary acts can have big impact because they are relatable to employees. A CEO who is seen consulting and talking about the company code of conduct always gets a big bang for the buck. (For extra bonus points, invite your chief compliance officer to lunch in the cafeteria.)

3. LIVE THE RULES YOU WANT OTHERS TO FOLLOW

Nothing destroys the credibility of a compliance program like acts of hypocrisy from leadership. Just once, when someone in senior management screws up, I'd like to see senior management take ethics training instead of the proverbial mailroom. In other words, if you want your people to take taxis, take a taxi.

4. SYMBOLISM MATTERS

Pope Francis greeted his Cardinals immediately after his election while standing, rather than seated in the papal throne. His chosen name, after St. Francis of Assisi, has deep meaning—here is a fellow who understands symbolism. CEOs should never underestimate the value of symbolism (e.g., does that senior management meeting really need to be in Boca?) to further articulate the values of the company.

5. BE CONSISTENT, AND BE MINDFUL OF BEING WATCHED

Being a CEO is like being a movie star, and your employees are the paparazzi: They see everything. Be consistent, because your people will compare notes—including on social media. And make sure your top managers on down are consistent and thoughtful in their behavior, too.

Of course, it's early days and Pope Francis is still setting the tone for his organization. The next big tests for the Catholic Church's Role-Model-in-Chief will be his key leadership appointments and how he manages his two great inherited challenges: culture and corruption issues in the Vatican, and the child sex abuse scandals. (In a **recent survey**, 70 percent of U.S. Catholics said the latter should be his first priority.) But the practical, down-to-earth, clear-eyed approach to the job he has already displayed in his first several weeks may be just what the doctor ordered.

*Donna Boehme is an internationally recognized authority and practitioner in the field of organizational compliance and ethics, designing and managing compliance and ethics solutions within the U.S. and worldwide. As principal of **Compliance Strategists LLC**, Boehme is the former group compliance and ethics officer for two leading multinationals and currently advises a wide spectrum of private, public, governmental, academic, and nonprofit entities through her NJ-based consulting firm. She was named by ComplianceX to its list of "**Who Compliance Professionals Should Follow on Twitter in 2013**," so follow her on Twitter @DonnaCBoehme.*