

# Mending Impairments to Authority in Religious Congregations

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The Resource Center for Religious Institutes

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# Presentation Outline

- I. What is Authority and Why is it Good?
- II. Authority in Religious Contexts: Examining Possible Impairments
- III. Mending Authority as Gift and Service
- IV. Discussion
- V. Resources

*This presentation draws on the literature related to social systems, in particular the psychodynamics of organizations and leadership. For a reading list or information on available training seminars, see list at end.*

# Your point of view?

- You probably have a specific issue or point of view on the topic of **Authority**.
  - *What associations do you have with that word?*
  - *How do you understand it?*
  - *Why is it sometimes problematic?*



# **I. WHAT IS AUTHORITY, AND WHY IS IT GOOD?**

# Authority is an attribute of systems.

- Authority in an organization refers to **the right to make an ultimate decision that is binding on others** within the domain of that authority.
- Authority inheres in **roles**.
- **All roles** have some appropriate type of authorization associated with them....Board chair / Provincial / Treasurer / Receptionist / Member

# Authority is not the same as power.

- Power is the **ability to act upon others** or the structure.
- It is an **attribute of persons** rather than roles, and can arise from external and internal sources (resources, connections, knowledge, personality, etc.)
- **Perceived** power counts as much or more than actual power.

# Proper exercise of authority supports organizational effectiveness.

- Authority roles provide **point of accountability** and responsibility (for a part or for the whole).
- Authorized persons are able to **represent / speak on behalf of** the organization to external publics.
- Those in authority must **ensure** that **necessary decision-making** occurs, whether they make the decisions or not.
- Designated authority supports **responsible stewardship**.
- Leaders in authority can lift a voice for **vision and the future**.
- Leaders and structures of authority provide **containment** of risk and anxiety ---- unconscious sources of dysfunction.

# “Authorization” is a psycho-social dynamic.

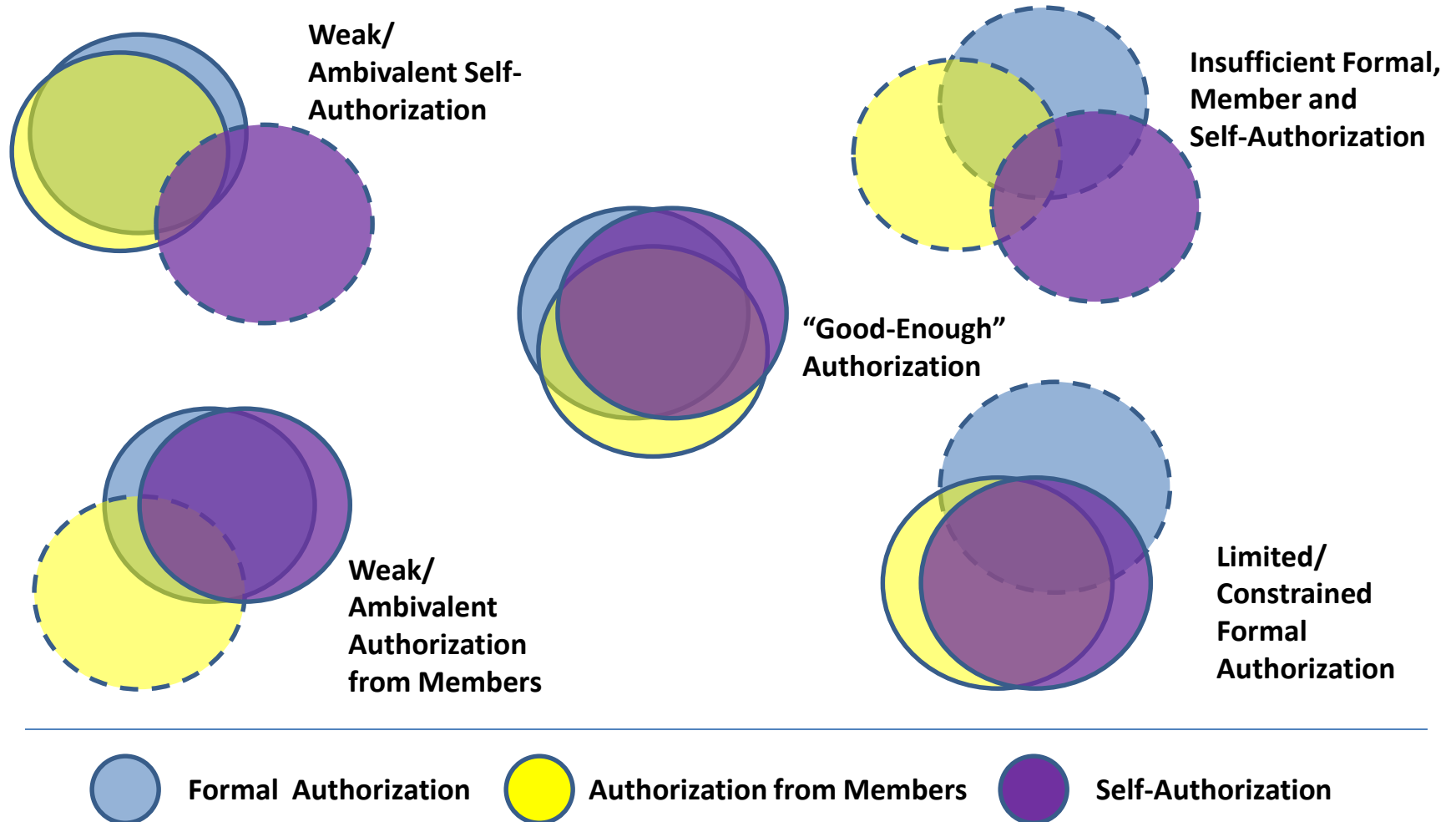
- **Authorization** is the process of **conferring and accepting** the authority of a role
- Roles are important – the **authority of a role exists** even without an incumbent.
- How roles are “**enacted**” in real time has a significant impact on the health or dysfunction of the organization.
- Authorization of a person in a role results from the “*good enough*” **combination of authorization from three sources**: from the institution, from the membership, and from within the person of the leader.



# Three sources of Authorization

1. **INSTITUTION:** Formal authority is **derived from one's role** in a system, exercised on its behalf, defined in its documents and policies.
2. **MEMBERS:** Those who voluntarily join an organization are by definition sanctioning the system. **Members are implicitly delegating** some of their personal authority to those in formal authority. This type of authorization **can also be withheld by individuals.**
3. **SELF:** This vital dimension comes from within the individual holding formal authority. The person in authority **may hold authority well, or may fail to step fully into his or her proper role, or may overstep the bounds** of his or her proper role.

# Degrees of Authorization – Snapshots in dynamic systems



# Recap Part I --- Authorization

- Authority is an attribute of systems, inherent in all roles.
- Proper exercise of authority contributes to effective organizations.
- Authorization is a psycho-social dynamic.
- Three sources of authorization combine to produce good-enough authorization of persons in their roles so that the organization functions effectively.
- It may be useful to reflect on the degree of authorization evident in the system of which you are a part.

# Application Exercise: Authorization

- In a congregation or sponsored work with which you are affiliated:
  1. How do **members** feel, speak about, or behave with respect to their own authority and the authority of their leadership? Why?
  2. How clear are you (and others) about the authority formally encompassed by **the role that you hold**?
  3. **How do you personally hold the authority of your role?** What might others invite you to change about that?

## **II. AUTHORITY IN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS: EXAMINING POSSIBLE IMPAIRMENTS**

# Five Potential Arenas for Impairment

1. Weight of history
2. Challenges of leading in a hybrid (communal and corporate) organization
3. Dynamics of elected leadership systems
4. Cultural biases regarding authority
5. Fractured containment

# 1. Historical Perspectives:

- Ecclesial traditions of hierarchical and absolute authority
- Evolving understandings of the vow of obedience
- Dysfunctional and infantilizing patterns of past authority remain in the memory of current religious members and leaders, causing reaction and rejection of authoritarian leadership.

## 2. Leading “Hybrid” Organizations: On the one hand...

- Authority as held by the elected leadership of the community as a group of vowed persons committed for life is **a distinctive gift for the good of the whole**, *not* the same as organizational authority for fiduciary performance.
  - For example: *“Benedictine authority and obedience are achieved through dialogue between a community member and her prioress in a spirit of co-responsibility.”* - Sr. Christine Vladimiroff OSB



# Leading “Hybrid” Organizations: But on the other hand....

- Authority held by the appointed or ex officio leader of the administrative organization or civil corporation of the community or one of its ministries is **an accountable institutional reality**, although often the one that members experience as “too corporate”.
  - Stewardship of finances and properties, management of staff or fulfillment of legal and moral obligations in a ministry require effective authority and good management practices.

# The Practical Leadership Dilemma = Community + Corporation

- Leaders **must** be sensitive to the requirements of pastoral, relational, canonical authority, and able to relate to members within that frame of reference especially on matters of life, mission, and future.
- Leaders **must also** be willing and able to operate as the chief executive of an organization – small or large – where leadership decision making and prudential management are expected by members and outside publics alike.
- This **dual nature of religious authority** represents a sophisticated challenge to elected congregational leaders.

## 3. Inherent Challenges in Elected Systems:

- Because elected leadership comes from within lifetime community membership, this constrains the available pool of people who are comfortable with and experienced with holding authority.
- Mergers, reconfigurations introduce a great deal of change in authority roles, at the same time as they reduce knowledge of all the members. Adjustment takes time.
- Election cycles generate oscillating levels of authorization across beginnings and endings of terms – later in the term, preparations for Chapter and “lame-duck” dynamics reduce authorization.
- Elected leadership cycles tend to shift “de facto” authority and reliability to longer term staff leaders who don’t change as often.

## 4. Cultural Bias: (A) Tending to Egalitarian

- Communities that highly value communal/feminine/egalitarian organizational patterns are part of the distinctive giftedness of religious life.
- However, such cultures can inadvertently *disempower* members of the community, especially elected and appointed leaders, by subjecting their decisions to the review or approval of many others.
- Inclusion norms taken to the extreme convey the unspoken and unacknowledged message of lack of trust in the capacity of some to exercise good judgment on behalf of the whole. (Not much of a problem in small systems, big problem in big systems.)

# Paradoxes in egalitarian cultures:

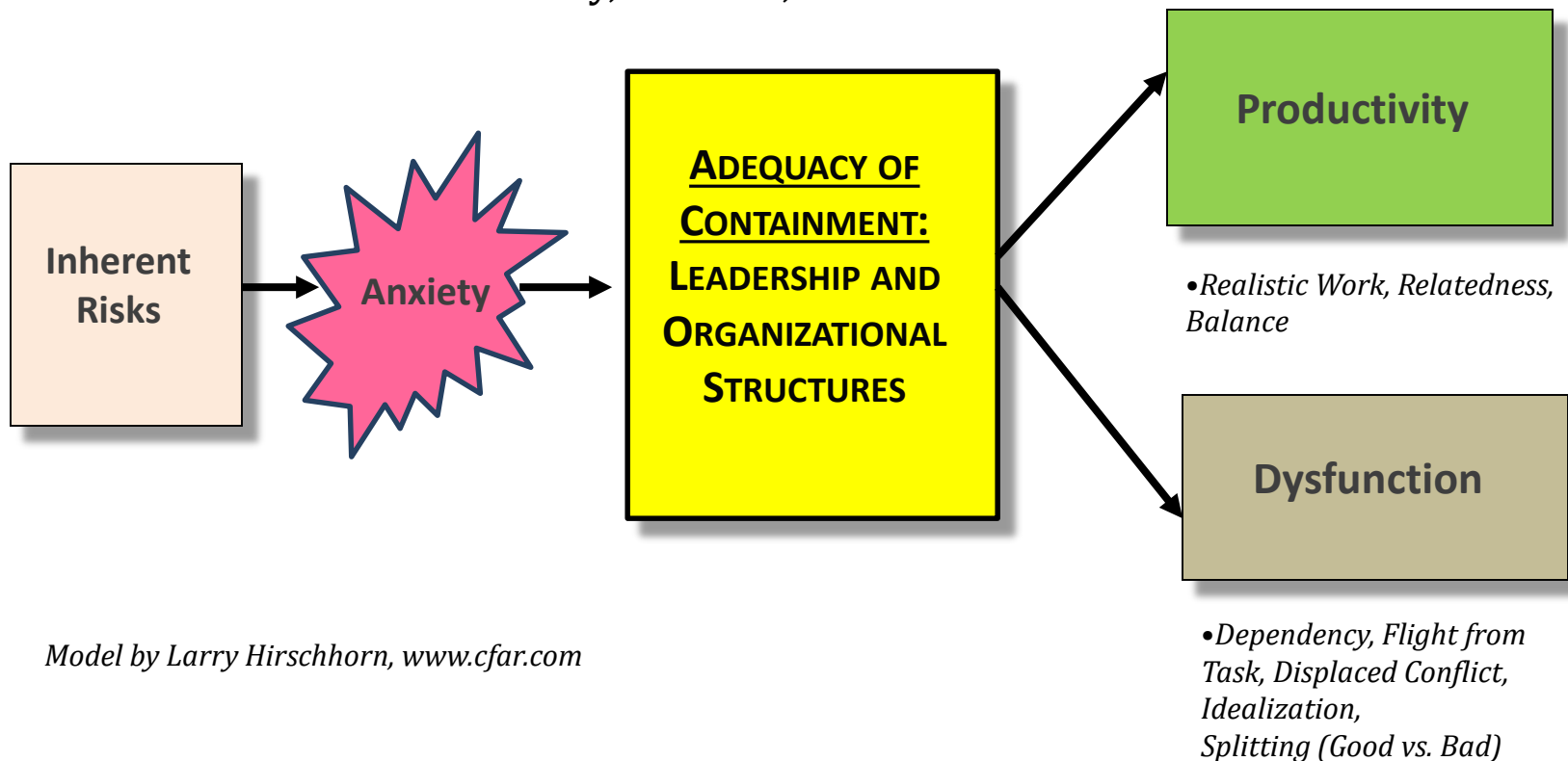
- Cultures biased against the concept of authority are paradoxically vulnerable to the dominance of personalities instead of persons functioning in legitimated roles.
- Unless roles can be clearly differentiated, they cannot be usefully integrated. Gridlock ensues....lack of clarity about where the decision starts and stops.
- The existence of a council, team, or other roles that exist to assist the leader and increase the effectiveness of the leadership can either help or further confuse this situation depending on how clear they are about their roles.

# Cultural Bias: (B) Tending to Authoritarian

- Congregations with cultures emphasizing the primary authority of the elected leader can foster dependency or passivity in members; paternal/maternal dynamics.
- The efforts of leaders in such cultures to engage members on important issues may be mis-read as failure to lead, or manipulation of some kind.
- Persons who are naturally strong leaders often expect and require equally assertive members and co-ministers in order to arrive at collaborative results; if they are met with deference, they come across as authoritarian.

# 5. Fractured “containment”:

Many **dysfunctional dynamics** in organizations arise from unconscious defensive reactions in the face of anxiety, distress, and fear.



Model by Larry Hirschhorn, [www.cfar.com](http://www.cfar.com)

# Impaired Containment of Anxiety

- If containment is fractured or absent through insufficient authorization, and if the organization is facing issues that entail risk and anxiety, the members are likely to regress.
- Regressive and defensive dynamics protect the members from dealing with difficult emotions.
- Defensive dynamics can “look normal” -- for example,
  - Form a committee;
  - Hire a consultant;
  - Scapegoat someone(s);
  - Focus on process to the detriment of action;
  - Avoid mentioning “the elephant in the room” etc.



# Healthy Containment of Anxiety

- The willingness of leaders to accept, to step up to, their authority responsibility provides a measure of security that permits thinking, honest dialogue, and dealing with painful realities. **Competence is not as important as courage.** This willingness provides secure “holding.”
- Good **structures** for addressing issues are also important to effective containment –appropriate consultation processes, planning and review cycles, proper staffing and support, candid but steadying communications.
  - **E.g.:** *“I know this is a very difficult issue for us and we haven’t faced this before, but I am confident we can work it through together.”*

## Recap Part II --- Impairments

- Religious congregations are different from other systems.
- History, tradition, theology, and spirituality have impacted the understanding of authority in religious systems.
- Religious organizations are “hybrids” – communities of relationship, and entities that have fiduciary obligations to perform services. Leaders have both kinds of authority, and must balance them.
- Elective leadership systems pose inherent challenges.
- Cultural bias can impair healthy exercise of authority.
- Impaired authority fails to provide needed containment of risk and anxiety, and enables dysfunctional dynamics.

# **III. MENDING AUTHORITY AS GIFT AND SERVICE**

## Distinctive gifts are associated with religious authority.

- Trust in the providence of God as the largest “container” for risk and anxiety.
- Grace of office.
- Values of respect and mutual support.
- Spiritual maturity / freedom from ego.
- Discernment practices.
- Creativity, courage, entrepreneurial spirit in the exercise of leadership for ministries.

# A Starting Point for “Mending Impairments”

- Pay explicit attention to *authorization*:
  1. How clear is the **formal authorization** of elected or appointed leadership to both leaders and members, especially the right or duty of leaders to make some decisions that bind others? ...Even if rarely invoked.
  2. How well is the **appropriate authority of members** understood, affirmed, and respected? And are the members reminded of **their responsibility to authorize** their elected/appointed leaders?
  3. How are leaders supported and encouraged to **grow** in their own **personal way of holding authority**?  
Becoming more assertive, or becoming more inclusive, whichever is needed.

# Conversations/Study/Chartering

- Engage appropriate groups in a conversation at periodic or meaningful junctures:
  - What do we mean when we speak of authority in our organization?
  - What is the service of authority? How might it best avoid the pitfalls of unhelpful authority?
  - How do you understand the authority of \_\_\_\_? And of \_\_\_\_?  
(Work on each of the relevant roles in the group or organization.)
- Charter individuals, teams, groups, roles with explicit words about the authority they have the right and duty to exercise on behalf of the whole, and communicate this to those with whom they are interdependent.

# Emphasize Service and Gifts

- Affirm the service provided by those who accept authority roles on behalf of the whole.
- If the word “*authority*” is toxic in your environment, use something else but imbue it with the appropriate **legitimacy**.
  - “*Leadership*” might be the next best word; note that “leadership” implies visioning and stewardship of the future in addition to any operational and managerial responsibilities.
- Rehabilitate the idea of authority with insights from theological reflection, prayer, cultural awareness, etc to retrieve it as service and gift, not dominance or oppression.

## Engage members in thoughtful consideration of choices and decisions:

- Sometimes decisions involve choices among options.
- However, significant decisions arrived at through discernment processes often lead not to a choice among options, but to one best or recommended path forward.
- Members may see this as disenfranchisement, but the co-responsibility for the decision has ideally been exercised along the way in an inclusive, communal discernment model.
- A decision is still needed even if there is no choice involved -- that is, the decision to commit to the path ahead, with full responsibility for the implications.



## Recap Part III --- Mending

- Religious communities can rely upon grace and gifts in the exercise of authority and leadership.
- Start to mend impairments by paying attention to the sources of authorization, and enhancing them.
- Make it acceptable and conscientious to be explicit about understandings and expectations of authority in roles.
- Emphasis the narrative of authority as service over the narrative of authority as oppression.
- Be thoughtful about the nature of decision making.
- Engage participation of members at various junctures in the course of discernment and deliberations, even if leadership has the final decision authority.

## **IV. RESOURCES**

## For further education:

- **WORKSHOPS:**  
**Master Seminars on the Psychodynamics of Systems for Leaders and Facilitators in Faith-Based Systems** offered at Cranaleith Spiritual Center, Philadelphia, PA.  
<http://www.cranaleith.org/cranaleith-master-seminars/>  
Detailed brochure and application form can also be downloaded from my website on the resources page.
- **WEBSITE:** <https://guerinconsulting.com>

## General reference:

- Authority in systems – along with insight into roles, boundaries, primary tasks, and unconscious behavior – is the domain of a field known as the psychoanalytic study of organizations, also known as socio-analysis.
- **BOOKS:** A recommended book list in the area of organizational psychodynamics can be accessed from my website on the resources page.
- Conferences, papers, and library can be accessed on the website of the **International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations**, [www.ispsso.org](http://www.ispsso.org)

# Encouragement...

- *Befriend your own authority roles on behalf of the greater good – neither inflate nor diminish them.*
- *Honor the legitimate authority roles of others on behalf of the greater good – neither inflate nor diminish them.*
- *Encompass all authorities – your own and those of others – as gifts and responsibilities ultimately held within God's Providence.*