

Followers: The Reason for Leaders

by Bill Scott BSW, MBA
& Bob Laliberte PMP
IPI Partners

“The world is moved not only by the mighty shoves of heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.” – Helen Keller

Leadership

Much has been written on the subject of leadership. In fact, a Google search of the term results in 734 million hits as of March 2016. When people are asked to identify the traits of a leader that has inspired them, they identify countless behaviours, values, traits or other distinguishing characteristics. For the most part, they tell you about the ability of leaders to achieve goals, of their ability to influence people. They support the long held notion that effective leaders address both tasks and relationships. And they generally describe leadership positively.

Shortly before his death, Peter Drucker – called by many the father of modern management thought – was asked to distil the essence of leadership gleaned from his more than six decades of experience in the field. Drucker said, “The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths, making our weaknesses irrelevant.” In essence, Drucker was telling us that leaders bear the responsibility of creating the conditions that allow followers to prosper.

And Its Poor Cousin – Followership

In contrast to a search on leadership, a search of the term “followership” resulted in 451,000 hits. In other words, there are more than 1600 entries on the subject of leadership for every entry on the subject of followership. This disparity in emphasis is representative of the attention that the subject of followership has received. In fact, researchers suggest that the subject has only been talked about with any regularity for the last 25 years and minimal research on the qualities of effective followership has been done until recently.

When asked to describe followers, respondents are not likely to offer complementary impressions. They will tell you that followers are passive and dependent, they are powerless and easily influenced, they are submissive and simply obey orders, and they lack ambition and motivation. For the most part, the characterization of followers is stereotypically negative.

The truth is that leaders are primarily responsible for this stereotypical presentation of followers. Command and control bosses long ruled their organizations, teams and projects by asking their subordinates to blindly and unquestioningly follow their orders; input was neither sought nor encouraged. In fact, followers who spoke up when they saw difficulties were often reprimanded. The 1986 Challenger disaster is an often cited example of this phenomenon.

So it is up to leaders to take the lead and actively support followers to play an interactive role that complements the leadership role and is equivalent to it in importance for achieving group as well as organizational performance. They need to create the conditions that allow followers to speak their mind freely, improve product design, enhance organizational efficiency and boost team morale. And this is just a limited list of factors necessary to flourish in today's fast-paced, ever-changing workplaces.

The Paradox of Followership

Effective followers are perceived by many leaders to be those that obediently and unquestioningly carry out the instructions they have been given. Yet this often means that followers will not question their leaders even if they feel the leader is about to make a mistake. In one study, noted managerial scholar, Warren Bennis found that 70% of all followers will not question a leader's point of view under these circumstances. Interestingly, this 70% figure is roughly equivalent to the percentage of the workforce that is said to be not engaged or actively disengaged with their work and the organization's mission and goals.

Dee Hock, founder and former CEO of Visa, noted that when individuals in a working relationship do not have choice, the relationship is one of manager/employee, superior/subordinate, master/servant or owner/slave. When there is no choice, followers are relegated to a subservient position. Consequentially, choice becomes a key element of the conditions leaders must establish to inspire effective followership.

Shifting from Leaders Plus Followers to Leaders AND Followers

Today, many organizations view the follower role as an interactive one that complements the leadership role and is equivalent to it in importance for achieving group and organizational performance. Barbara Kellerman notes that the influence of

leaders is diminishing and the influence of followers is increasing. She, and others in the field, remind us that leaders require followers to lead and leadership is far more effective if followers are willing and able to follow. The “able” portion of the equation requires skills training, but the “willing” aspect requires an attitudinal shift – one where leaders actively demonstrate their commitment to participatory and inclusionary techniques rather than ones that restrict and dictate performance.

The reality is we need to reequip our leaders. Many were trained to make quick decisions so that the team or organization could move nimbly and meet the demands of a changing marketplace. The training presupposed that they would have enough personal knowledge of the subject matter and receive enough information from their subordinates to make informed choices. Today, with knowledge doubling at unprecedented rates – as quickly as every 13 months according to IBM – leaders no longer have all of the knowledge necessary to make informed choices. They must rely on others in the organization – members of senior management, middle management and frontline staff – to step up and lead in their areas of expertise.

The role of leaders is emerging as one that emphasizes being a steward rather than an autocrat. Today’s effective leaders understand that followers possess knowledge and skills that they do not. They understand that input from their staff is integral to the team’s success and so they create the conditions that allow followers to seamlessly take the lead when it is appropriate for them to do so.

For followers, this shift is ripe with benefits. However, there are accompanying responsibilities as well. Less authoritarian leadership will result in an increased need for accountability amongst followers. Effective followers need to be able to critically think and take an active, engaged role in their organization’s mission and goals. In fact, as Robert Kelley suggests, effective followers must be capable of “enthusiastic, intelligent, and self-reliant participation – without star billing – in the pursuit of an organizational goal.”

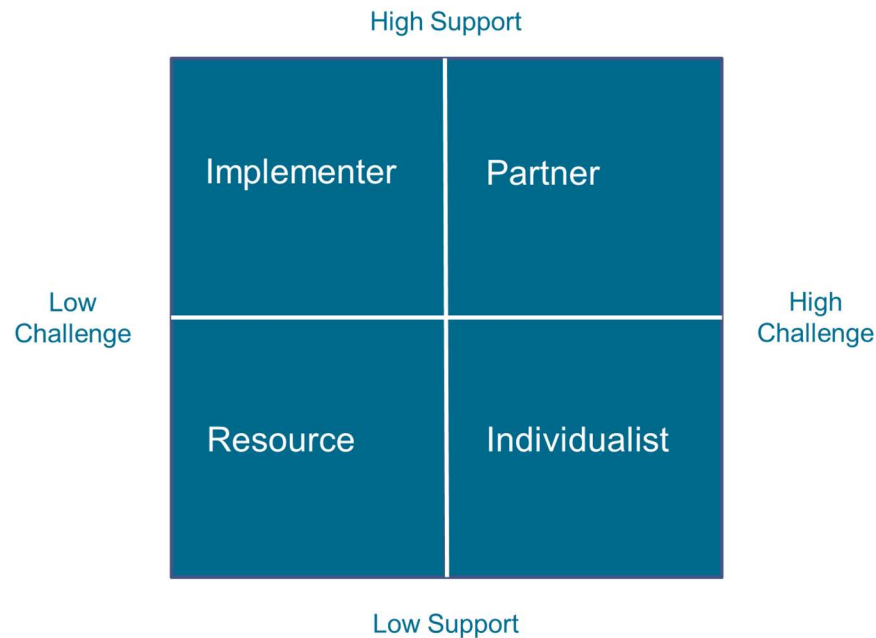
Followers in an Active Role

Ira Chaleff, one of the preeminent scholars in the field of followership, suggests that the time of dominant leaders and subservient followers is over. In his view, organizations that flourish are ones where “leaders and followers form an action circle around a common purpose.” Because it is the organization’s purpose that matters, his belief is that ego has no place in organizational decision making and that it is leaders who need to park their egos in order for followers to participate more actively in the achievement of organizational outcomes.

In his seminal work *In Praise of Followers*, Robert Kelley made the case for leaders and followers to be considered as roles and not people. He reasoned that on any given day, most individuals in an organization take on both leadership and followership roles both

formally and informally. And while leaders are the ones with the most ability to influence this shift in organizational culture, the responsibility does not lie with them alone.

Figure 1: Followership Styles



Source: Chaleff, I (2009). *The courageous follower, 3rd ed.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Followers also have a part to play. They need to take risks and act courageously in service to the organization's purpose. Chaleff suggests that there are two dimensions of what he calls courageous followership – the degree a follower supports the leader and the degree to which the follower challenges the leader's poor behaviour or policies (see Figure 1). These two dimensions combine to provide four styles of followership.

Like most models, there is no one right style of followership; it is dependent on the circumstances and the needs of the circumstances. For example, if a deadline is imminent and the only way to achieve it is to demand that the team work overtime, the leader requires a high level of support without challenge from team members. By contrast, if the team is just beginning a new project, effective followers will supportively challenge leaders on critical path timelines that appear too ambitious.

However, leaders who do not feel threatened are most likely to benefit from Partners and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Individualists. Partners and Individualists both challenge the leader when her behaviour and policies are contrary to organizational purpose and well-being. The difference is that Partners do so while also actively supporting the leader and Individualists tend to show little support and can only be counted on to criticize which ultimately results in them being ostracized from the team.

Effective followers, then, are accountable; they accept that increased responsibility comes with increased autonomy. They look to build positive relationships with their leaders and co-workers. They willingly take on their responsibilities and complete the tasks associated with their assignments. They offer their thoughts and ideas and do so while seeking to enhance both their performance and those of their teammates. They demonstrate independent, critical thinking and actively look for means to further project goals. Most importantly, they step up when they can contribute to the success of the team or project.

The key to providing designated followers with an active role rather than a passive one is for leaders to step back when it is appropriate and perhaps even advisable for a follower to take the lead. They do so by “modelling the way” as James Kouzes and Barry Posner would suggest – fundamentally, walking the talk and not just talking it. Followers will believe in a change of culture that they see in action, not one that is talked about. They will believe that change is occurring when they see leaders following and when they see followers rewarded for leading.

Courageous Followership

Chaleff suggests that followers must possess courage to be effective in fulfilling their role. Specifically, he identifies five dimensions of courageous followership. First, followers must possess the courage to assume responsibility. Effective followers understand their role and assume the responsibilities inherent in it. Second, courageous followers energetically support the leader and the group. They recognize that the leader and the team’s job is a collective one and they do their part to support the accomplishment of the team’s goals. Next, courageous followers constructively challenge the leader and the team when it is appropriate to do so. They raise issues that are of importance to the accomplishment of the team’s purpose, leaving personalities out of the discussion, and do so by offering constructive alternatives to the course of action that has been chosen. Fourth, courageous followers participate in transforming the team searching for and implementing better ways of achieving the team’s or organization’s purpose. They understand that change can only occur when team members stand united and work together. Finally, courageous followers take moral action when necessary. If the only course of action is to jeopardize their standing in the organization so that they can adequately challenge leaders who have lost their way, they do so.

In Summary

It may be trite to say, but without followers, there are no leaders. In addition, the titles of leaders and followers ought to be attached to circumstances and roles, not people. There are times when it is important for the named leader of a team to step back and

allow others to lead – for instance, when they possess expertise and knowledge that the titled leader does not. There are also times when a leader needs to step forward and take charge and ask followers to follow – for example, when there is no clear path to be chosen, no consensus and a choice needs to be made. Leadership and followership, then, are often interchangeable roles that are situationally dependent upon the conditions and needs of those involved. Effective leaders understand this dynamic and explicitly set about to create the conditions that allow effective teams to flourish ... to dance well together and create team and organizational success.

An Abbreviated Reading List

The following is a very short list of books that pertain to the topic of leadership and followership. Interested readers are encouraged to seek other sources and expand their knowledge on the topic.

- Chaleff, I. (2009). *The courageous follower: Standing up to and for our leaders*, 3rd ed. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Cooperrider, D. & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Kellerman, B. (2012). *The end of leadership*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Kelley, R. (1988). In praise of followers. *Harvard Business Review*, 66, 6, 142 – 148.
- Kelley, R. (2008). Rethinking followership. In R. Riggio, I. Chaleff, & J. Lipman-Blumen (Eds.), *The art of followership: How great followers create great leaders and organizations* (pp. 5 – 15). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kouzes, J. & Posner, B. (2012). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations*, 5th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.