

Followers: The Rest of the Leadership Process

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ABSTRACT

For every leader there are many non-leaders—followers—who benefit the organization's competitive position. While leaders seem to dominate management research, management thinking, and management practice, in reality, followers permeate all organizations and make them effective. While the many are ignored, the few receive attention. Chaleff has developed a model describing key behaviors of effective followers in an organizational setting. This paper describes refinement of a survey instrument developed to assess Chaleff's model as a measuring tool for the follower behaviors within organizations. The results indicate that the instrument, The Follower Profile, is robust across populations in discriminating follower behaviors. The paper also recommends some innovative leadership development implications and concludes by introducing a new paradigm for thinking about the leadership process.

INTRODUCTION

Daniels (1) reports that.. "as the affects of globalization become even more profound on the U.S. economy, the pressure for companies to achieve continually higher levels of quality, innovation, productivity and flexibility will increase. Successful organizations will adapt to change and will make the necessary adjustments in their organizations, products and services in time to meet the demands of a hungry global economy."

An understanding of followers moves management beyond traditional definitions of subordinates and introduces an understanding of followers as occupying active, contributing roles (2). Since the first Toyota Corolla crossed the ocean, global pressures have been bringing revisions to political and economic policies and more importantly to organizational cultures for those enterprises most at risk, US manufacturing (3). As organizational cultures ooze towards some new state, the basic fiber of the boss-worker relationship has been bent, twisted, compressed and stretched. Just like an inappropriate material application, the results have not always been satisfactory. Similarly, the organizational leadership dynamic has been impacted. In pre-Toyota Corolla life, organizational cultures moved from the guild paradigm through rational management, to the post

WW2 reign of the autocrats. Piece work met the Corolla at the border along with the not-my-job mentality of the industrial worker. Organizations currently appear to be struggling to emerge from the information juggernaut. Maybe the dawn of the iPod® age is upon industry. Chaleff (4) has introduced an iPod® age adaptable model for the boss-worker relationship that expands the focus of leadership theory to include a role of the follower. This model may provide a key to organizational longevity across future industrial and management cycles. Chaleff suggests that when followers are respected, nurtured and valued, being identified as a follower will result in peak performance levels; i.e., greater expectations for the follower means greater contributions to the organization. As stated by Werther (5), followers are increasingly the source of organizational stability. In reality, there are no leaders without followers (3).

SO WHAT?

So what? A fair question that properly interpreted begs, "What has follower research got to do with improving the state of engineering and engineering management in America?" There is no research supporting a productive leader-only organization (Figure 1), and yet many organizations seem to have a preoccupation with the concept. Like a promotional rite of passage, leadership is a criterion on every employee evaluation, while following the leader is ignored. Senator Sam Rayburn reportedly said, "You cannot be a leader and ask other people to follow you unless you know how to follow, too." Apparently, even politicians know you cannot have leaders without followers.

In reality, followers dominate all organizations, but a preoccupation with leaders seems to hinder objective abilities to consider the nature and importance of the followers and the interrelationship and interdependence required of leaders and followers. For Chaleff (4) and Kelley (6), followers are the stabilizing base for global competitiveness in the market. Wills (7) describes the lack of recognition of the role of followers as a leadership problem.

The study of followers and follower behavior has just begun. The dearth of empirical research heretofore offers opportunity for continued exploration. And yet, as



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a prophet once said, "...few there be that find it." Rost (8) defines leadership as a process involving leaders and followers and, therein is the key to dynamic leadership. Leadership is not focused on leaders only rather leadership considers both leaders and followers. This is a new paradigm for leadership development that has great potential and little exploration.

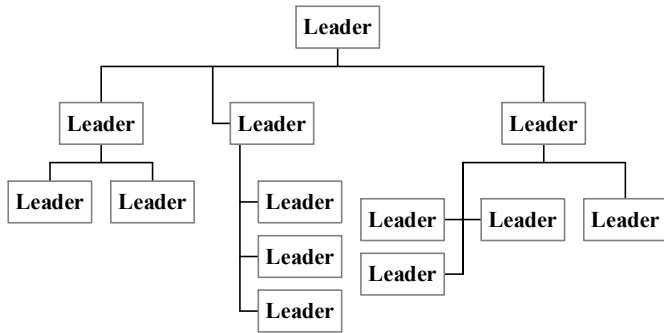


Figure 1: An all leader organization.

Engineering is a service sector and as such, engineers should be service oriented. Engineers are service providers and the service they provide is engineering. A case could be made that engineers are part of the service sector leadership. A key recommendation from this paper is for engineering managers, or leaders, as the case may be, to work to imbue a sense of service within engineers. Service should be provided not only to managers, peers and subordinates but more especially to customers, a 360° approach. A competitive problem-solving engineering environment requires a service oriented, engineering (and engineered) culture.

The engineering workplace is replete with contractual requirements. Savvy engineering managers recognize that adding value without payment is not fiscally sound, yet being of service is essential to strong customer relations. This problem, because of the context described here, is an engineering problem. Engineers are suited to problem solving and as such, engineering managers must initiate the steps required for engineers to be able to demonstrate a culture of service.

Like most things in life, followers are both a matter of degree and an area in which one's basic potential may be greater than one's current assignment requires or permits (9). Similarly, the inverse may also exist, where the development of potential lags the requirements or needs of the current assignment. The perceptive engineering/technical manager who recognizes this should establish accommodative strategies to mitigate the negative effects. Accommodation may take the form of greater guidance and coaching where development lags requirements. Where potential is developed beyond current requirements, the engineering/technical manager may find that encouraging patience may be as important as expanding job requirements. Reassignment may also be a value-added option. This

requires attention to people and engineering managers should give top performers most of their attention (10).

Performance evaluations are one tool that managers use to express expectations. The current related literature offers little recognized support for evaluations of followers as part of personnel performance evaluations. Measures of follower behaviors would make a valuable extension to performance evaluations. Kelley (6) points out that performance evaluations must include a section on followers that includes an evaluation of the evaluatee's ability to shift between leader and follower roles.

The popular conception of leadership does not normally carry a service component. Yes, there are leaders in service industries; however, the idea of leaders serving is not mainstream. It is followers who are expected to serve. Engineers as followers may be a hard sell. In Chaleff's model, followers are courageous. As problem solvers, engineers must be courageous. In solving problems, engineers are providing a service for their employer, their manager and to the greater brotherhood of humanity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For Burns (11), the key to [transformational] leadership is addressing the follower's self-worth. To really understand the self-worth of the members of an organization, the leader and follower must share a common understanding of the concept of following—what is required and what is expected. This concept is arguably lacking in the paradigms of service and organizational structures where leaders are expected to lead, managers are expected to manage and everyone else is expected to toe-the-corporate line. While recent work has led to the development of models of what a leader does to subordinates (12) or what subordinates do to leaders (13), theorists and researchers have, for the most part, provided only leader-focused theories; models and tools for developing an understanding of followers and their contributions to organizations are non-existent.

With the exception of Chaleff (4), Kelley (6) and Heenan and Bennis (14), little follower research has been developed. Business leaders seem to have greater interest in leadership than in those who make leadership possible, a rather self-serving, self-sustaining mindset.

The list of theorists and researchers seeing the follower light is beginning to grow. Barbuto (15) suggests that understanding the follower's perspective will improve the chance of success of the leader. Litzinger and Schaffer (16) recognized that leadership endures only with a spirit of following and, consistent with Senator Rayburn, they consider following to be the school for leading.

Leadership is an important concern in the globally competitive world of business. The pressures of global competition and associated processes of change such

as downsizing, re-engineering, and outsourcing have contributed to an interest in leadership and leadership development programs (17). In leadership research, the vast majority of empirical studies focus on leadership and leadership effects at the lower operating levels of formal organizations as if leadership was a simple dyadic relationship with the next lower organization level (13) (18).

Howell and Shamir (19) report that most theories are leader focused, unidirectional exercises that leave followers unexplored. The study of following appears to be an area ripe for continued investigation. Kelley (6) points out that “Without followers, leadership is meaningless and leaders don’t exist.” This statement begs the obvious question, why isn’t more research effort placed on understanding the role of followers in the leadership process? The natural follow-on question would relate to the leaders, followers and the organizational dynamic, to wit, what holds leaders and followers together in the achieving of organizational goals?

FOLLOWERS. Follower theories emanate from two sources for the most part. Kelley (20) provides categories of followers based on traits or attributes. Chaleff (4) describes followers in terms of five behaviors. Both recognize the role of followers in the organizations as powerful contributors that enable, guide and limit leadership as contributors to organizational effectiveness.

For Kelley (20) and Chaleff (4) the role of followers in the leadership process is a proactive state. Where *subordinate*, *employee* and *assistant* are terms normally used to describe a more submissive, dispassionate, and passive role typical of a transactional or *quid pro quo* leadership process, Kelley and Chaleff describe followers proactively. For them, followers are dynamic, proactive, value-adding contributors to an organization. Their followers are emotionally, intellectually, creatively, as well as physically involved in their organizations just like leaders. These followers are the enabling component of leadership in organizations. Dvir and Shamir (13) report limited research based on followers as independent variables in newer leadership models. In demonstrating these behaviors, followers support the leader and the organization as stewards in organizational endeavors.

The traditional image of followers (Figure 2) as sheep who unquestioningly and blindly obey the sighted shepherd-leader is not viable in the global market (21) (4). Followers are to be understood and treated as “partners, participants, co-leaders and co-followers in the pursuit of ...productivity in the organization” according to Chaleff (22). Being a follower is condition, not a position (23). In that sense, followers may be found above, below or a peer, of anyone—any leader—in an organization at any time.

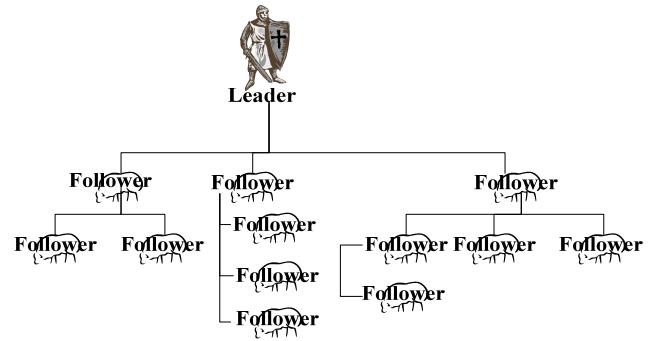


Figure 2: Traditional view of followers.

Considerable management literature from pre- and early post-Corolla eras largely supports a submissive subordinate concept by describing so-called managerial leaders with phraseology implying subordinate manipulation techniques based in some form of contingency theory, equity theory or transactional theory. Early leadership theories considered followers to be dependent variables while more recent theories consider followers to be modifiers (23) (13). Kelley (6), Rost (8), and Chaleff (4) take exception to these approaches. Dvir and Shamir (13) report limited research based on followers as independent variables in newer leadership models.

Chaleff (4) argues that in order to be effective and perform at the highest level, followers must exercise certain behaviors that form a framework of five dimensions or behaviors, exemplifying what he calls “courageous followers.” The five behaviors are courage to assume responsibility, courage to serve, courage to challenge, courage to participate in transformation and courage to leave. The behaviors should be evident in all levels of the organization (8) where followers exist.

COURAGE TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY - Followers take responsibility for themselves and the organization by demonstrating a sense of ownership. In their passion for the purpose and vision for the organization, followers generate new ideas and initiate actions to improve the organization’s external and internal processes. Followers seek solutions and encourage others to behave similarly. Crockett’s (24) parallel construct labels this as self-management and personalizes it for the follower by including self-discipline. For Crockett, self-discipline is born of self-awareness and self-responsibility.

COURAGE TO SERVE - Followers show similar strength of conviction and commitment as does the leader in pursuing the common purpose (5). Kelley (6) describes courage to serve as followers who serve by protecting the organizational “commons.” His research indicates followers are willing to give to the organization in return for what they might take from the organization. Followers are willing to implement directives even when not in agreement, as long as the