



Good followership

Leaders are only as good as the people who follow them, says
Barry Johnson

I would challenge much in what I have read about leadership, mainly because the articles tend to ignore followers.

A leader is a person who has followers who *choose* to follow a leader: somebody who is in charge of a group of people may not be a leader, or may be a leader only to some of

the people under his control. This is the basis of my frustration at calling managers leaders. Articles on leadership and leaders usually list the personality factors and attributes of the people in these roles: these often include similar characteristics and the implication is that the person aspiring to become a leader must acquire these often fairly general characteristics. In

contrast, biographies of 'great leaders' usually imply they are born, not made: the assumption is that a person cannot acquire the characteristics.

I feel a heated debate coming on so I will retire gracefully from the single-path view of leadership and look at followers, but, unlike those articles about leadership that omit followers, I will include leaders in the discussion of followers – how could it be otherwise?

Let me get straight to the core of my contention. The key to a successful organisation is to have effective followers. Everybody in an organisation is a follower, everybody from the very top to the very bottom. Far fewer are leaders, and many of them are not formally recognised as such, and yet they lead their followers in a whole range of different elements of an effective organisation. If you have no followers – who are you leading?

What, then, of followers? If, as some people claim, one can learn to be a leader, surely people can learn to be followers. Similarly, if leaders are born, it is logical to assume that some people are predisposed to be followers and, perhaps, may not be anything else. It also strikes me from the definition above of a leader that some non-leaders will also be non-followers: perhaps these are the awkward squad or perhaps they accept life as it is for them. Perhaps leaders (who, by definition, must have followers) will be good, or even great, leaders if they have good, or perhaps competent, followers. Of course I have now dug myself a hole. What is it that makes a good or competent follower and how does one become a good follower? Perhaps good followers are also good leaders? What does 'good' in this context mean? It is common advice that, when you are in a hole, you must stop digging. That advice I will ignore.

Everybody in an organisation has a responsibility to be a good follower. I believe that this is an absolute and I want to see learning events in followership. Perhaps competent followership enables good leadership. Perhaps those that have learned the art (or is it science?) of followership are those that can progress to be leaders. Perhaps great leaders generate a situation that enables good followership.

In my personal experience, I have been a follower more often than a leader – and even when I was leading I was following some leader!

If you are to be a sound, competent, follower what is it you will or will not do? Let's work out some answers.

Follower as a supporter

As a follower, your job is to support not undermine. Don't blame your boss for an unpopular

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decision. Good leaders make decisions, and some decisions are tough and unpopular. The question that may, or should, arise in your mind about the decision is 'why'; as a good follower you may, or should, think 'I will support him'. You may be blind to the reason and follow because you have trust in your leader.

Oops, what does 'trust' mean? Trust is not about right or wrong. Trust is knowing your boss well enough to know how he does, or will, behave. Those that aspire to be good followers will give their boss the benefit of the doubt and act to support their decisions. What is important is loyalty. Remember that your boss has a broader and further view of things, so ride with it; you may have a strong urge to disagree, don't. Time will be the final arbiter.

It may be that you just cannot accept a decision. What would a good follower do? Go into his boss's office. Sit eyeball to eyeball and tell him. This exchange is private; you will not be expressing your views to others. Undermining your boss is not good followership. Speaking honestly and frankly to your boss *is* good followership. If you have strong reservations about an issue under discussion, you have an obligation to express them. It is not a 'you are wrong' discussion; it is a 'tell me why and what options you have considered' discussion. Only when you have the facts can you legitimately disagree and if you do disagree, alternatives need to be explored.

Being a good follower means ensuring your boss is supported, but only if he is making optimum decisions. To be a 'yes man' is to fail as a follower. You may be the expert in the group in a subject area and this may make you the leader of a subset of skills; you need to use those skills to help your boss and, in doing so, help the people you are leading because they will expect it of you. As a good follower, you won't tell them of your disagreement. They will know anyway; your boss will be enhanced as a leader and so will you.

What if you are not an expert but you disagree over a matter of principle. The question is, whether it is a personal principle or one that may be detrimental to the department's objectives or its relationship with other units. If

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it is the latter, get in there fighting because it is your duty to your boss!

Sometimes, perhaps often in a complex situation, you have no objections but also you don't really approve of the way things are going – that little itch. I suppose that, when this happens, you need to rely on blind faith in your boss. After all, you did choose to follow him. Usually, in this situation, you are not following out of agreement but out of a lack of an alternative.

Your selection of your leader

Is what I have said true? Did you choose to work for the person who is your boss? It is normal in organisations for bosses to choose subordinates. When going for a new job, you may not know the person who will be your boss and the opportunity for you to assess him is usually fairly limited.

Only once in my career did I say that I would not work for a particular person when he was appointed as my boss and only once did I object to continuing to work for somebody who was my boss. On both occasions, action was taken and he or I was moved. I must also say I have worked

for some fantastic people and, as they climbed the slippery organisational pole, they hoisted me up behind them, on one occasion leaving me at a level I never thought I would reach.

I suppose the best leader I had followed a simple leadership process. She gave me good information that included where we were heading, what my role objectives were and regular, observed feedback on what I had done well and asked what I wanted to do differently. She treated me as an adult and supported my decisions (sometimes against her better judgment), but I knew what her reservations were and that I also had her support. That in my view is what good leaders do.

So what must good followers do? Make sure you have good information, use your initiative and make decisions that you will run past your boss. I believe most people are smart enough and mature enough to get the job done without someone hovering around, providing detailed guidance. Unfortunately this is not always true. Leaders read their people and know those that can be given general direction and left to get on with the job, and those that need to be nursed

(nourished, fostered and protected) and nurtured (encouraged, trained and developed).

The question is, if you expect to be nursed and nurtured, can you be a good follower?

Followers free of control

Are you such a poor follower that your leader is being diverted into spending too much time with you? Are you wasting time waiting for specific help or instructions? Do you feel you need to be helped when you could help yourself? You can take the initiative, accomplish the task, and then brief the leader on what you did.

Even the most help-orientated leaders would generally prefer followers to present them with a workable plan and seek ratification. Help out your leader by showing initiative but, and it is an important but, keep him informed and stay within your work boundaries. The better you know your boss, the easier it is to take initiatives or risks by presenting the actions in a logical way with targeted outcomes that are acceptable.

There is sometimes a fine line between seizing the moment to get something done and being a loose cannon. You don't want to gain a reputation for the latter. Remember you are a follower and, as such, you will be aiming for the same outcomes as your boss, not smart ways of you looking good. When you demonstrate you can take initiative and still keep your boss in the picture, trust and understanding will develop between you.

Accountability and responsibility

As a good follower, accept accountability whenever it is presented to you. You now own the job. You know what it is you have to achieve and you, as a competent follower, will achieve it. In attempting to meet your accountabilities, you will have to accept responsibility. Accountability is given to you or sometimes thrust upon you but responsibility you take. Remember that when you take responsibility, your boss is still accountable and, as a good follower, you are not going put him in a position of failing. The team will only flourish, grow and evolve if the boss leads, the followers follow and both boss and followers take risks and are willing to take responsibility.

Have you got what it takes to be a good follower? You don't want to fail or embarrass yourself. You don't want to embarrass your boss. Having said that, you will have to overcome self-doubt or healthy humility that may cause you to hold back when a challenge is offered. Will you measure up when given a new task? That's when leaders come into their own. Leaders cast a ring of certainty around their followers and you, as a

follower, will trust in that certainty. In doing this, as a follower, you are taking leadership of your outputs and contributing to the whole.

Accept accountability, be a risk-taker and take responsibility.

Information, information and communication

In every organisation, information flows upwards and downwards. Leaders attempt to communicate to their followers but that information is only valid if it meets the requirements of the followers. This is also true when communicating the other way.

It is not unusual for people to communicate what they think is true rather than the truth. It's not that people deliberately tell lies – though some do – it's more that people put two and two together and end up with five and a half. Using this information, your leader may make erroneous decisions or communicate false information upwards, creating confusion.

The rule is simple: tell the truth. If it's an impression or you have made assumptions, say so; if you have caveats, state them. The only thing worse than giving misleading information is not passing on valid, important information. So, as a follower, you have an important role, *namely to give people good information.*

My experience in a large international corporation highlighted two problems that challenged this area. The first was people not passing bad news upwards. You know something will miss a deadline and you don't tell your boss or your boss's boss; consequently, actions that may have been taken to obviate problems are not taken. The second is the result of the unfortunate human tendency to hide or cover up mistakes before they are discovered. This may be a simple oversight, such as forgetting to email somebody and saying that you did, but such an apparently mild indiscretion can have two major



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effects. The first is that actions are taken that perhaps should not have been taken; the second is that, if you are discovered, your reputation is now junk. Asked a direct question, there is a temptation to say 'yes' but, even if the answer is 'no', you should face up and be honest. That's what good followers do.

As a follower, you will be asked to solve problems: get on and solve them. It may be that you need to do some research and gain some expertise before you propose a solution. Ask others who know about the thing you are now involved in. Work out how others may be involved and integrate that into your solutions. The aim is to give answers, not to create further problems.

The making of leaders

I suggested above that some managers are leaders of only some people in their care. Some people are appointed managers and they may do a good management job, but they are not leaders. Training these managers in the supposed skills and behaviours of leadership is probably doomed to failure if the values and requirements of those

that are placed in the position of followers have not been analysed. Those findings must be the essential elements of the training.

Leading upwards

I suggested above that good leaders do three main things: give followers good information, treat followers as adults and support followers' decisions. Being a follower is no different. Give your leader good information, treat your leader as an adult – not as a god or an idiot – and support his decisions.

So what is a follower?

A follower is a person who has a leader who he has chosen of his own volition. Do I hear a sharp intake of breath? You did not choose the person who is your boss? If you didn't, are you going to accept him as your leader and, if not, what are you going to do?

It seems to me you have two choices: treat him as a leader and coach upwards so he evolves into one; or move on to work for somebody you have chosen as a leader. My view of a great follower is that he is a leader in training. **TJ**