

White Paper



Follow the Leader

Understanding the Role of Followership in Increasing Organizational Effectiveness at Colleges and Universities

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SUBJECT HIGHLIGHTS:

We recognize the need for strong leaders, but do we also understand the need for strong followers? This white paper will explore the relationship between leaders and their exceptional followers in higher education. It will then examine the qualities leaders value most in exceptional followers and outline a series of strategies for nurturing followership in our colleges and universities.

If you want one year of prosperity, grow grain
If you want 10 years of prosperity, grow trees
If you want 100 years of prosperity, grow people
—Chinese proverb

Introduction

I remember as if it were yesterday. I was in the middle of a two-day visit to a client institution in the Pacific Northwest. Immediately prior to my arrival, the president had resigned. A board member suggested that we hold an all-campus meeting to discuss the characteristics and qualities the university should seek in its new president.

The meeting began poorly and went downhill. "What we need," said the faculty president, "is leadership!" Others concurred, and the focus of the meeting quickly became the quality of the existing leadership.

For about half an hour, the current president sat . . . and listened. Finally, red-faced and white-knuckled, he stood. "Leadership," he said. "You don't want leadership. None of you want to work with a leader. You don't care about anything but yourselves.

"No leader in their right mind would come to this campus. You assassinate your leaders. You sue them. You stall and pretend you're discussing. You are not really interested in leadership because none of you are interested in following."

When the president was done, he walked out of the room. The response was quick. "What does he know?" someone said. "He's no leader."



I have thought about that day dozens of times over the past year. And I have been reminded of that incident countless other times when, during visits to campuses and association meetings, someone mentions the acute need for leadership. Many, even most, of the people with whom I speak seem very inclined to blame almost all the problems facing colleges and universities on leadership.

At the same time, these people are much less interested in examining their own role in the leadership-follower-ship relationship.

It is this issue—a larger understanding of the role of followers and the symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers—that forms the bedrock of this paper.

Reluctant followers

Of course, we are all followers. Presidents follow the leadership of boards. Vice presidents follow presidents. And associate and assistant VPs and directors all follow their vice presidents. In a hierarchy—and higher education certainly falls into this category—this is the natural order of things.

While this is the theory and the history of followership, it is not necessarily its future. Things have become more complicated because in our day and age, any discussion of followership opens up a can of worms that includes issues of self-worth, political correctness, autonomy, accountability, and, most certainly, ego.

At many levels, there seems to exist the deepest discomfort with the term *follower*. Ira Chaleff, writing in *The Courageous Follower*, notes that the term *follower* “conjures up images of docility, conformity, weakness, and failure to excel.” Chaleff goes on to say, “Often, none of this is the least bit true. The sooner we move beyond these images and get comfortable with the idea of powerful followers supporting powerful leaders, the sooner we can fully develop and test models for dynamic, self-responsible, synergistic relationships in our organizations.”

Recently I was at a college in the Midwest, and I asked a group of administrators who the leader was. They all agreed that the president was the leader. I then asked if they were followers. Almost to a person, they voiced concern about the label *follower*. “We are members of the same team,” one administrator voiced. “We are colleagues,” said another. Another liked to call herself a “collaborator.” Even when they later agreed that an important part of their individual jobs was to enable the vision and policies of the president, they still had difficulty identifying themselves as followers. “We are,” as one administrator noted, “very reluctant followers.”

Types of followers

Based on my experience working in and for organizations, and on the reading and interviews I completed for this article, I believe there are five types of followers that may be displayed on a simple continuum (see below).



Exceptional followers, especially those who work closely with the leader, fulfill the most important tasks of a follower. They actively participate in the decision-making process with the leader and support the decisions that are made. The exceptional follower both challenges—in part by asking the tough questions—and encourages the leader. And finally, the exceptional follower defends the leader.

There is one type of follower that should be mentioned at this point. This is the follower that looks and sounds like an exceptional follower but really is not. During meetings, especially those involving the president, this follower may express enthusiasm and excitement. But away from the meetings, this follower's actions and demeanor change. While this person may appear to be an exceptional follower on the outside, his or her false commitments and hollow smiles are more the trademark of the follower at the other end of the continuum: the saboteur.

Active-passive followers are much more situational in their relationship to the leader. If they like a particular decision, they are likely to be active supporters. If they do not like a particular decision, they are likely to be passive supporters. These followers owe their allegiance not to the leader, but to whether or not they like the leader's decisions.

The alienated follower has largely withdrawn from the leadership-follower-ship relationship and contributes neither to the decision-making process nor to supporting the resulting decision and/or the leader. At the end of the continuum, the saboteur actively seeks to undermine the leader.

Reluctant-resistive followers are beginning to actually oppose the leader and his or her decisions. At their most extreme, these followers become saboteurs.

Organizations cannot survive with saboteurs. And organizations will seldom thrive with great numbers of followers that are alienated, reluctant-resistive, or active-passive. In fact, for organizations to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, for organizations to flourish, they need exceptional followers.

One president who asked to remain anonymous commented on the need for exceptional followers. "I cannot imagine," he said, "completing my job without exceptional followers. It is their advice, direction, trust, and loyalty that I rely on most." Somewhat jokingly he added, "My one great fear is that my closest followers will someday realize that it is they who are running things, not me."

The leader-follower relationship

Dr. Robert Smith, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tennessee-Martin, reminds us that it is dangerous to think of leaders and followers as separate entities. "Instead," notes Smith, "it is the interplay of leaders and followers that defines the working relationship. And this interplay is dependent not only on the traits of leaders but also on the traits of followers." Exceptional followers must, at least to some degree, be willing to "meld" themselves and their traits around those of the leader. And in an ideal relationship, leaders must be willing to exhibit some flexibility as well.

In many respects, the relationship between a leader and a follower is analogous to a marriage. There will be some give and take, there should be mutual respect and trust, and there should be a common direction. Chances are both leader and follower (like husband and wife) are changed as a result of the relationship. Says Smith, "It is the interplay of leader and followers that is most important in any study of followers or leaders. Is the interplay between a leader and a follower symbiotic and catalytic, or is it debilitating? Is there long-term commitment? Is there a willingness on the part of both the leader and the follower to modify their individual behavior to benefit the relationship? Is there a desire for and even an expectation of personal growth?"

Christopher Johnston, director of development at the University of the Pacific, uses the term "peopleship" to describe the relationship between leaders and followers. Johnston notes, "The success of the leader and his or her

followers is derived from similar qualities: an ongoing evaluation of self and others, the ability to listen to and learn from others more knowledgeable than yourself, and, ultimately, to effectively act together. Relationships, partnerships, and a deep appreciation for people are the keys. Otherwise, each, separately, are merely acting alone."

Smith's and Johnston's emphasis on the relationship between leaders and their followers must not be overlooked even as we begin to explore, in greater detail, the qualities and characteristics that leaders expect from exceptional followers.

Qualities and characteristics leaders expect from exceptional followers

While investigating this topic I asked a number of college and university presidents and vice presidents to describe the qualities and characteristics they most sought and admired in followers. These leaders believed that exceptional followers share the following characteristics:

- High self-esteem
- Intelligence
- Enthusiasm
- Strong communication skills
- Initiative
- Energy
- Courage
- Political astuteness

And the two qualities listed most often by leaders? Cooperation and loyalty.

Smith of the University of Tennessee-Martin writes, "Leaders have expectations from followers. They function best with followers who are cooperative, dependable, and loyal. Cooperation suggests a level of conformity that increases the efficiency and power of the group. Dependability relieves the leader's need to constantly monitor task behaviors and devote more time to meeting the expectations of the followers. Loyalty provides the leader with a measure of risk-taking. The more loyalty, the more the leader can move the group in mutually desirable directions, and the more flexibility the leader has in redirecting the group when things go wrong or they face challenges in the relationship."

Helen Washburn, president of Cottey College, said that the followers she values most express a “belief in the mission and purposes of the institution . . . and the ability to work collaboratively with colleagues.”

Washburn also feels that followers “give praise to others and share recognition with the team” and that they have a “willingness to offer feedback and share information.” She concluded by noting that exceptional followers possess personal integrity.

One other comment is worth noting. While Al Cubbage, vice president for university relations at Northwestern in Evanston, reiterated some of the key themes mentioned by other respondents, he added one other. “Followers,” he said, “need a sense of humor.”

A missing ingredient?

As I read these comments on followers, something dawned on me. None of the presidents and vice presidents I interviewed listed technical skills as “essential” characteristics of exceptional followers. There were no comments about planning, budgeting, or being able to use the computer. As a whole, these leaders did not value acquired skills as much as they valued personal qualities. When queried, one president responded, “The qualities that make exceptional followers cannot be learned from a textbook; they flow from an individual’s character. They are matters of heart.”

Responsibilities of the exceptional follower

The exceptional follower, as noted above, has four important responsibilities:

- Support the leader’s decisions
- Challenge the leader
- Encourage the leader
- Defend the leader

Support the leader’s decisions

Actively supporting a leader’s decisions is the primary responsibility of the exceptional follower. In many instances, this begins with working cooperatively and conscientiously. However, it also means extending the leader’s vision to and through subordinates and perpetuating an atmosphere of trust and support.

One president at a college on the West Coast said, “I depend a great deal on my executive assistant to be my ambassador on campus. I can’t get to every important

Qualities and characteristics followers should expect from leaders

Because followership does not occur in a vacuum but as part of a larger relationship, it is important to digress just a bit to acknowledge what followers need most from their leaders.

While conducting research for their book *Credibility*, Kouzes and Posner asked hundreds of middle managers to list the characteristics they looked for and most admired in their leaders. The five leadership characteristics mentioned most often by managers were:

- Honesty
- Forward-looking
- Inspiring
- Competent
- Fair-minded

And while the five may appear tightly grouped, they were not. The characteristic valued more by followers than any other was honesty.

One follower interviewed for this article who asked not to be identified said, “The most important quality I look for in my leader is honesty. If you can’t trust your leader, then all the other skills and attributes they may have simply don’t matter that much. Honesty is not a core value, it is the core value.”

Asked to describe the most important leadership skills, Al McIvor, vice president of enrollment services at Beloit College, responded with “vision, integrity, and courage.” Dr. Robert Massa, dean of enrollment at Johns Hopkins University, described strong leaders as articulate, visionary, cheerleaders, listeners, compassionate, and predictable. Dr. Richard Crawford, assistant to the president at St. Francis College in Loretto, Pennsylvania, added some additional qualities: risk takers, collaborators, resource bringers, and rapport builders.

Dr. William Hamm, president of Waldorf College, noting that he is also a follower, said that he relishes Stephen Carter’s requirements for a leader: a) discernment of what is right and good, b) acting on that discernment, and c) telling people what you are doing and why. Hamm went on to say that strong leaders have “vision and a sensitivity and commitment to the mission.” He also said that leaders must imbue humility and friendliness what he calls vital human qualities for successful leadership in most organizations. Finally, Hamm mentions that “leaders must possess knowledge of or about what is being led, willingness to share the spotlight and share the glory with others, and willingness to take responsibility for mistakes.”

meeting or respond to every memo and she often acts in my place. She listens. She communicates the rationales for my decisions. She sometimes helps defuse misunderstandings. And she reminds me to get out of my office and wander around campus.”

While there are many strategies that exceptional followers may use to increase support for the leader and his or her decisions, some of the most important include:

- Stress the need for dialogue before important decisions are made
- Develop a realistic time line for decision making
- Refuse to engage in criticism of the leader with subordinates
- Keep communication channels to the leader open
- Remind the leader to spend time among subordinates
- Keep in mind that how a decision is communicated is often as important as the decision itself

Challenge the leader

A second role for exceptional followers is to challenge the leader when they feel that the leader is making a mistake. In fact, most of the leaders with whom I spoke said this quality was one of the followership skills they cherished most. “I have no reason to believe that the decisions I make are always right,” says Dr. Robert Johnson, vice president of enrollment at Albion College, “but I’m paid to make them. If someone that works for me feels that I am making a mistake, it is not just their right to voice their concerns, but their responsibility. One of their jobs is to help me make better decisions.”

Cubbage, of Northwestern, and Jim Sumner, vice president for enrollment at Willamette University, add two important twists. Says Sumner, “Don’t just tell me I’m making a mistake or that my solution is wrong. Suggest some alternatives.” And Cubbage notes, “After someone makes their case, I may still overrule them. I don’t want them to pout and say, ‘I told you so,’ even when it does blow up later.”

Chaleff reminds us that there is little value in standing up and giving leaders feedback they cannot or will not hear. The exceptional follower must find ways leaders can receive the feedback they need. Chaleff’s comments, echoed by a number of exceptional followers that I interviewed, remind us that “we can minimize defensiveness by prefacing our feedback with a defusing statement

that conveys respect and reminds the leader of the value of honesty. Leaders are more likely to pay attention to feedback if we link it to outcomes they desire, to what motivates them.”

Robert Kelly, in *The Power of Followership*, offers three important guidelines for when exceptional followers must disagree with their leaders.

- First, they must talk to the leader privately rather than unloading on him or her in a public forum
- Second, they must pay attention to timing and try not to approach the leader when he or she is dealing with a crisis or a deadline
- Third, when they sit down with the leader, they must try to present the issue as a joint problem that needs to be discussed rather than as the leader’s stupid decision. They state the issue clearly and succinctly from their viewpoint and have the facts straight and at hand

Encourage the leader

The next essential characteristic of the exceptional follower is encouragement. The old saw reminds us that it is lonely at the top, and the statistics support this sometimes brutal truth. Ten years ago, the average tenure of a college president was seven to eight years. Now the average tenure is four years—and dropping.

One president who asked that I not use his name said, “Every time someone calls, schedules a meeting, or even approaches me at a basketball game, I start a mental clock ticking to measure how much time passes before they ask me for something. Everyone has their hand out.” Another president said, “No one ever invites me to a racquetball game or to a casual lunch. Everything is always business. I’m always on stage.”

As basic as it may sound, strategies to encourage the leader may be as simple as a word acknowledging their work, an offer to share a quick lunch, or recommending a book or movie. Encouragement means approaching and recognizing the leader as a human being and not just as the leader. Just as followers enjoy and need to be appreciated and encouraged, leaders do as well.

Defend the leader

The fourth attribute of an exceptional follower is to defend the leader. When I asked leaders to describe the qualities and characteristics of exceptional followers, I

was surprised at how many said loyalty. As I probed this issue, I discovered that loyalty exists on two planes. First is loyalty to the leader as an individual. And second is loyalty to the decisions that the leader makes.

Loyalty to the leader as an individual is an important and reoccurring theme in the notion of followership. Says Chaleff, "It is easy for people inside or outside of the organization to target a leader because the leader is visible and represents the organization and its authority. Sometimes there is a lot of behind-the-back complaining about a leader. While complaints may be legitimate, this form of addressing them is not. It creates an atmosphere of diminished mutual respect, increased alienation,

How leaders undermine followers

Not only must followers support leaders, but leaders must support their followers. At many institutions, leaders make it difficult for followers to support them. While writing this article, I had occasion to interview a number of reluctant and even alienated followers. I asked these disenfranchised followers if there was a consistent failing among leaders that prevented them from being enthusiastic, even exceptional, followers. While their examples and illustrations were many and varied, I consistently noted four leadership failures that seemed to undermine followership.

Leaders who have no sense of vision: "She constantly changes her mind about important issues. There is no consistent vision. Everyone is going in circles and nothing important ever gets accomplished."

Leaders who refuse to listen: "My president believes that he is always right. He simply will not listen. His body language, demeanor, and how he speaks to his staff constantly reinforce the impression that he knows more than anyone. After a while we just give up trying to contribute."

Leaders who cannot make a decision: "We have three strong vice presidents who often have different approaches to solving a problem," said one administrator, "and the president refuses to take charge and make a decision. As a result, we spend all of our time rehashing the same things. He calls it consensus management. We call it a waste of time."

Leaders who have betrayed a trust or were dishonest: "I listened to the president tell a major donor how a gift would be used. Later, after the meeting, the president told me if he had told the donor how he really wanted to use the money, then the donor would have balked."

and lackluster implementation of strategy. When we encounter it, we need to defend our leaders. Followers have a responsibility to serve leaders by defending them from unjust criticism, by assuming additional responsibilities when needed, by presenting options for handling problems, and by assisting in crisis management."

Douglas Hodo, president of Houston Baptist University, noted that while followers possess many characteristics, he particularly values "loyalty to me and the institution." Hodo went on to say that exceptional followers "are truthful even when it hurts" and possess "intrinsic, not situational, integrity." And finally, noted Hodo, exceptional followers understand the need for confidentiality.

Exceptional followers must not only be loyal to the leader, they must be loyal to the leader's decisions. In the leader-follower relationship, leaders have an obligation to listen to the input of followers. In return, followers have an obligation to support the resulting decision. If they cannot support a decision made by the leader, then followers must reassess their role and relationship to the institution and the leader. In some cases, they should leave the organization. At no time should followers be allowed to actively undermine a decision that a leader has made. Says George Keller, writing in *Academic Strategy*, "Most of the key people need to be on board the strategy train when it leaves the station. Participation is imperative. There need not be full consensus. There seldom is. Dissent must be permitted, although sabotage should not be."

If followers are allowed to undermine a leader's decisions, they have moved to the far end of the continuum. They are no longer followers but saboteurs.

Strategies for cultivating exceptional followers

One mark of a great leader is a willingness to nurture the growth of exceptional followers. When asked how to cultivate exceptional followers, the presidents and vice presidents I interviewed responded with the following insights:

- Identify people in the organization who have demonstrated skills and work to increase the variety and complexity of assignments they receive
- Never undermine their authority
- Acknowledge their value both publicly and privately
- Share the credit
- Mentor followers who hope to assume larger leadership roles

- Encourage and enhance dialogue
- Heighten their sense of accountability for the decisions they make
- Keep their confidences
- Empower them

Dr. Michael Ferrari, chancellor of Texas Christian University, agrees on the importance of cultivating exceptional followers. “Exceptional followers are vital to the building of a great university. As chancellor, it is my job to challenge trustees and faculty and staff with a vision and meaningful information on issues facing the University, engaging them openly and vigorously in the planning and decision-making process, seeking their counsel on important topics, and recognizing their role in making exciting things happen at the University.”

John Kellogg, vice president for enrollment and planning at Simpson College, says, “In my experience, good followers become so if they feel important to the effort and, most of all, appreciated and respected. It is very important for the leader to convey this. I try to make my people feel as if they are working with me rather than for me. It is important for leaders who select good followers to just let them do their jobs with little interference. Good leaders respect the expertise of their followers.”

When Robert Kriegel, writing in *Sacred Cows Make the Best Burgers*, asked followers what inspires them at work, they responded with the following:

- To be part of something great
- To do something I have never done before
- To do something I didn’t think I could
- To do something meaningful for people, the community, the world, the environment
- To learn something new and interesting

Empowering followers

Almost all the leaders with whom I spoke mentioned that one of the most important things they can do for followers is to create an atmosphere of empowerment. Elizabeth Ross Kanter reminds us that organizations in which followers are ignored, unappreciated, and overlooked is an organization in deep peril. Adding a sad twist to a well-known comment on power, Kanter notes that “powerlessness corrupts and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely.”

People who feel powerless, noted Kouzes and Posner in *Credibility*, tend to hoard whatever shreds of power they do have. Powerless managers also tend to adopt petty and dictatorial management styles. Powerlessness creates organizational systems where political skills become essential, and “covering” yourself and “passing the buck” become the preferred styles for handling inter-departmental differences.

Kanter cites four principles in which followers might become more powerful:

- Give people important work to do on critical issues
- Give people discretion and autonomy over their tasks and resources
- Give people visibility and provide recognition for their efforts
- Build relationships for your people, connecting them with powerful people and finding them sponsors and mentors

Ferrari of Texas Christian University notes that “Followers will perform at high levels if they are given challenging tasks, encouragement to excel, support in attaining ambitious goals, and recognition and commendation for exceptional performance and results, including inevitable failures along the way. Exceptional followers are created and empowered only by, with, and through exceptional leaders.”

Conclusion

Any discussion of followership must quickly focus on two core responsibilities. First, the responsibility of the exceptional follower to serve the leader and the organization. Indivisible from this first responsibility is a second: the responsibility of the organization to nurture exceptional followers.

There is little likelihood that organizations that do not recognize these twin and entwined responsibilities will attract neither the leaders nor the followers they need to survive and flourish. Says Michael Ferrari, “It is hard to imagine how a college or university can thrive in today’s competitive and changing environment without the shared enthusiasm, energy, and passions of both leaders and their followers. Inspired people working together will be the architects of the great universities of the 21st century.”

Author's notes

I would like to thank the many college and university presidents and vice presidents who so willingly offered their insights on followership. Sadly, I could not include all their comments, and though some individuals were not quoted, their insights were still appreciated.

Also, by way of recognition, I also must acknowledge the contributions and careful criticism of Dr. Robert Smith, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tennessee-Martin. His own thinking and work in the area of leadership and followership—as well as his kind words and direction—were extremely helpful as I wrote this paper. And finally, I would also like to thank the folks at Huntington College in Indiana. Jeff Berggren, Ned Kiser, and John Paff pounced on the notion of followership when we stumbled across it in a discussion. They also pointed me to some initial resources that I would never have found on my own. But more than simply serving as resources, these men embody what it means to be exceptional followers. It is a pleasure to know and work with them.

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