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The Leader-Follower Partnership: It's a New Day

From the Leadership Actions Newsletter

*"Leaders rarely use their power wisely or effectively over long periods unless they are supported by followers who have the stature to help them do so." -- Ira Chaleff, *The Courageous Follower*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2003*

Organizations are successful or not partly on the basis of how well their leaders lead, but also in great part on the basis of how well their followers follow. Surely, improving the performance of followers should be worthwhile. What is the role of the follower and how does it affect leadership behavior and effectiveness? How can members of the executive team participate more effectively to create a truly dynamic partnership relationship with their leader? The relationship between leader and follower is truly symbiotic - you can't have one without the other.

When there is a crisis, when a company fails or commits some malfeasance, everyone cries out: "How could that have happened here? How come nobody said anything?" Followers have a responsibility to speak up. And the organization, if it wishes to be sustainably successful, has an equal obligation to create the environment for them to safely do so.

No matter how much partnership and empowerment there is, the CEO has ultimate authority and has ultimate responsibility. But what about the responsibilities of the CEO's followers? The most capable team members fail when they gripe about their leader but do not say or do anything to help him or her improve or get back on track. To do this requires both courage and skill.

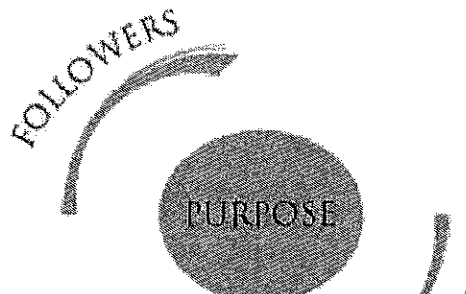
The movement away from command and control leadership has brought new leadership styles that are more democratic and coach-like. The terms "shared leadership," and "servant leader" are used to describe some of these new ways of interacting. There are also new ways of interacting in the follower role. Setting aside possible aversion to the term, the new flatter business organization requires more responsible followers and more follower-friendly leaders.

Managing the Boss

It is difficult to appreciate the pressures on the leader unless you have been in that position. While ego-strength is a quality to be desired in a leader, it can be overly reinforced and transformed into ego-driven. The pressures at the top need to be managed. Courageous followers help leaders stay on track and manage their decision-making processes in the right direction. Responsible and effective followers play a critical role in maintaining the desired partnership dynamics.

Many executive team members do act responsibly, but often they are hesitant to speak up when the leader makes mistakes or press the issue when they meet resistance. Although we have grown beyond an authoritarian leadership model where followers have no accountability, we have not yet developed a model for responsible participation at the follower level for the new leadership styles.

In his book, *The Courageous Follower, Standing Up To and For Our Leaders*, Ira Chaleff points out that the old paradigm of the leader/follower is based on power. The leader has traditionally had the "power" to award or withhold perks, benefits, bonuses, choice assignments, promotions, and the like. This has led to a relationship in which the follower avoids jeopardizing the chances of obtaining these rewards. Hence, followers tend to do what the leader wants and, just as importantly, not offend or create a negative impression of themselves. A relationship based on this kind of power does not serve the organization, the leader, or the follower because it shuts down the open flow of communication and candor leaders need to do their job effectively. After all, who will tell the emperor he has no clothes?





Chaleff envisions a very different kind of relationship between leader and follower. He suggests a relationship wherein the leader and follower have equal power but different roles that orbit around support and fulfillment of the organizations' purpose. When both the leader and follower are focused on the common purpose, a new relationship between them arises. This new relationship is candid, respectful, supportive, and challenging. It is a relationship that honors open communication, honesty, and trust from both parties.

Many in leadership positions bemoan the fact that they are not getting full and candid information from their staffs. Being aware of all the facts is crucial for effective decision making. And yet, in too many situations, followers are reluctant to present negative information for fear of repercussions. Most people do not relish being the bearer of bad news, much less becoming the messenger who gets shot. Case in point: How many organizations have recently had to "restate" or correct their earnings statements after the fact, due to oversights, errors, or even malfeasance? And why, in those situations, did people not step up and voice their misgivings? In an environment where the focus of both leaders and followers is on serving the purpose of the organization, these problems are far less likely to occur. In such an environment, followers are likely to give voice to their concerns and instincts and leaders welcome, value, and pay attention to them.

The Job of Effective Followers

The sooner we recognize and accept the powerful position of followers, the sooner we can fully develop responsible, synergistic relationships in our organizations. According to Chaleff, there are three things we need to understand in order to fully assume responsibility as followers.

Understand our power and how to use it. As followers, we have far more power than we usually acknowledge. We must understand the sources of our power, whom we serve, and the tools we have to achieve the group's mission. We have a unique vantage point as followers or team members, but we have to know that and use it.

Appreciate the value of the leader and the contributions he or she makes to forward the organization's mission. We need to understand the pressures upon the leader that can wear down creativity, good humor, and resolve. We can learn how to minimize these forces and contribute to bringing out the leader's strengths for the good of the group and the common purpose.

Work toward minimizing the pitfalls of power by helping the leader to remain on track for the long-term, common good. We are all witness to how power can corrupt, and it takes courage and skill to speak up. We can learn how to counteract the dark tendency of power. Feedback to the leader is necessary for the new leadership styles to be effective.

The Five Dimensions of Courageous Followership

Chaleff further identifies and defines what is required of followers to become an equal partner with the leader in fulfilling the purpose of the organization.

The Courage to Assume Responsibility. Courageous followers assume responsibility for themselves and the organization. They do not hold a paternalistic image of the leader or organization, nor do they expect either to provide for their security and growth or give them permission to act. They initiate values based action. Their "authority" comes from their understanding and ownership of the common purpose.

The Courage to Serve. Courageous followers are not afraid of hard work and they assume additional responsibilities to unburden the leader and serve the organization. They stand up for the leader and the tough decisions he/she must make. They are as passionate as the leader in pursuit of the common purpose.

The Courage to Challenge. Courageous followers give voice to the discomfort they feel when the behaviors or policies of the leader or group conflict with their sense of what is right. They are willing to stand up, stand out, to risk rejection, and to initiate conflict in order to examine the actions of the leader or group when appropriate.

The Courage to Participate in Transformation. Courageous followers champion the need for change and stay with the leader and group while they mutually struggle with the difficulty of real change. They examine their own need for transformation and become full participants in the change process as appropriate.

The Courage to Take Moral Action. Courageous followers know when it is time to take a stand that is different from the leaders. The stand may involve refusing to obey a direct order, appealing the order to the next level of authority, becoming a whistleblower, or tendering one's resignation. This may involve personal risk but service to the common purpose justifies and sometimes demands such action.

Another View

Robert E. Kelley, in his landmark article in *Harvard Business Review*, "In Praise of Followers" (1988), states: "In an organization of effective followers, a leader tends to be more an overseer of change and progress than a hero. As organizational structures flatten, the quality of those who follow will become more and more important." He sees four essential qualities of effective followers.

They *manage themselves well*: The key to being effective as a follower is paradoxically the ability to think for oneself. Followers also see themselves as equals to the leader they follow. They are ***committed to a higher purpose***: They work towards the purpose of the organization and to certain principles and values outside of themselves. If they see a misalignment with personal values, they may withdraw their support either by changing jobs or by changing leaders. They ***build their strengths***: They have high standards of performance and are continually learning and updating their skills and abilities. They seek out extra work and responsibilities gladly in order to stretch themselves.

They ***take risks***: They are credible, honest and have the courage to speak up. They give credit where due but also admit mistakes. They are insightful and candid, and they are willing to take risks. They can keep leaders and colleagues honest and informed.

In information-age organizations, hundreds of decentralized units process and rapidly act on varied input within the design and purpose of the organization. This requires an entirely different relationship between leaders and followers.

Speaking up to the Boss

Part of the problem in following responsibly and courageously lies in the tendency for people to relate to authority figures as they would to a parent. Early childhood memories are deeply embedded in the subconscious, and old patterns of behavior and emotion are triggered in a nanosecond. These memories are often outside of our awareness, and it does not take much - a look, a tone of voice - to trigger anger or anxiety when confronted by the boss. Developing one's emotional intelligence (Daniel Goleman, *Primal Leadership*, 2002), can help regulate these split second reactions and allow more productive and satisfying interactions.

The danger in the leader-follower relationship is the assumption that the leader's interpretation will prevail. If this assumption exists on the part of either the leader or the follower, both are at risk. The leader's openness will diminish. Followers will easily lose their unique perspective and abandon healthy disagreement. Creativity and the problem-solving processes become stifled.

For their own success, leaders need to create a partnering environment where support and challenge flourish in a healthy and balanced manner. Though it may not be an easy task for followers to speak up and challenge the leader, it is a skill they must learn. Absent these conditions, corporate scandals will continue to occur. Working with a neutral party such as an executive coach can help both leaders and followers develop these abilities and go home at night feeling more productive and worthwhile.

References/Resources for The Leader-Follower Partnership: It's a New Day

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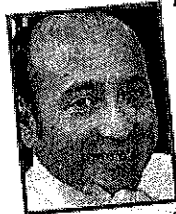
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Follow the Leader

In a world of Dennis Rodmans and Ken Griffey Jr., we tend to forget about the other 11 players on the bench, or the 24 teammates in the dugout. Leaders may be great, but we so easily miss how much of that greatness is due to the assistance and support of people around them. Who speaks for the nameless, faceless follower? Ira Chaleff, for one. The follower,



says Chaleff, president of the Institute for Business Technology, U.S., and author of The Courageous Follower, plays a pivotal role in the leader's performance. Without followers, leaders cannot be challenged.

Why do you think there's been so much emphasis on leadership during the past few decades?

From the '70s and into the '80s, we were saying, "There's something missing in our leadership; the world's changing, and we need to understand more about leadership." And we became kind of obsessed with the idea of making leaders, on a mass scale, with all the training programs, etc. It seemed to play into the idea that the only end of the equation we had to focus on was the leader. I think we're moving away from that now; we're understanding more of the interactive relationship between leaders and followers.

Some leaders can inspire and motivate, but leave little to be desired in follow-up or implementation. How does a follower fight disillusion?

The challenge is to continue to appreciate the great creative strength that leaders bring. Because they're not orderly in answering communications or following through, it's easy to get cynical about them as a whole. Well, our leaders always let us down. They're not perfect. And we're never perfect. There is no such thing as the perfect leader. It's really valuing what it is that they do bring, which is usually extraordinarily precious to the organization. Followers must find effective ways of changing the destructive aspects of leaders' rules, or build a complementary coping mechanism around them, with their consent, to balance out or to fill in for their weaknesses. You have to tailor your team, building around the strengths and compensating for the weaknesses.

Not all followers have access to people at or near the top. What role does being a courageous follower play for them in their work life?

This is where I feel that technology can be of help; the fact that you really can get an e-mail to a senior executive these days is an enormous change. But, with that in mind, followers need to ask themselves some questions, like, "Who am I

to take up this person's time?" and, "Gee, is it politically OK for me to jump over two or three people above me?" and, "If it gets there, will it be read and be appreciated and taken in context?" All too often the senior executives get insulated from what's really happening in the organization; I think they enormously underestimate what it takes for information to get through to them. Followers, therefore, need to (1), not make assumptions that any particular piece of information will get to a leader; and (2), find skillful, graceful, effective ways to get their communications across. And sometimes it involves risk.

Do you think followers—the majority of us—have a real understanding of what it's like to be a leader?

I think in some ways we don't fully appreciate it. Frankly, the pressures on senior leadership are so often political. That takes a lot of energy and time and attention: How do they keep the board happy? How do they keep Wall Street happy? How do they keep key customers happy? Then there's the juggling of the competing needs, perceptions, and priorities of their senior executive staff. All this kind of stuff goes on, and it's very, very difficult for the people down the line to appreciate. We're all too prone to gripe about our leaders; I think we need to be more charitable and supportive.

Are there typical problems that confront most followers?

When I wrote *The Courageous Follower*, it became apparent across the whole range of interaction that being willing to risk is real difficult—for a whole lot of reasons: Either you don't want to be out of a job or there's the emotional feeling of "I can't stand up to this person. He's too intimidating."

Which followers are most destructive to an organization?

There are two ends of the spectrum here. On one end, the heavy cynics who just sit back and say, "What's this and that about? Oh, sure!" I think that's very destructive—it's not giving leadership a chance to succeed at all. On the other end are the followers who implement what they know are unwise policies or orders they have been given that will be destructive to the business, without attempting to help the leader understand the environment and the potential adverse impact of the policy. I think both are equally destructive.

Is it OK to simply be a follower?

Several people have told me with great relief it's great to hear their desire to be a follower! [Leadership] is very much in our cultural myth, and it has very little to do with reality. It's wonderful that Henry Ford built Ford Motor Co., but so did the other 3 million people working with Henry Ford. So, yes, we all greatly need to own our own role as followers. ■



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