

Leaders and Followers

There is an extraordinarily large and diverse body of work that addresses leadership. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about followership. There is a very small body of work about effective followers and their relationship to leaders. That will need to change if we are going to be able to make the construction of leadership webs a common occurrence.

THE SCARCITY THEORY OF LEADERSHIP & THE UNDERVALUING OF FOLLOWERS

Leaders are still usually portrayed as few in number, significantly different than followers in terms of characteristics and competencies, and separated from followers by some gap, across which communications flows mostly from leaders to followers. Lip service is given to the significance of followers, but they are still almost always portrayed as secondary players and only in relationship to the really important person, the leader. This phenomenon disenfranchises followers and asks too little of them at the same time that it sets up leaders to fail.

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follower for someone else – and they will be relying on us.

Even in the same journey the shift between roles can come in various forms. Some of us will lead early and take more of a follower role later. Others will begin in a follower’s role and take on leadership roles as the journey and its requirements evolve. The key is to have people ready to play both roles and to be clear on the requirements and opportunities to play them.

COMMON GROUND FOR LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS — THE SAME JOURNEY

The heroic journey highlights how much common ground there really is for leaders and followers in terms of the likely experience. Not only will leaders and followers face many of the same challenges, but they will also need to draw upon or develop many of the same characteristics and capabilities. Because of the exceptional requirements of the six leadership roles, it is unlikely that any one person will encompass all that is required. They will need to rely on others for what they do not bring, just as others will rely on them. Such is the nature of the journey.

BOTH LEADER AND FOLLOWER

The other limiting factor is that leaders and followers are usually talked about as though the person is always in one role. He or she is “a leader” or “a follower”. The reality for most of us is that we are sometimes in leadership roles and sometimes in follower roles. In some settings we will be leading and relying on effective followers. In other settings (often at the same time) we will be playing the role of

Profiles of Effective Followers

The actions of followers have a tremendous impact on leaders, particularly as the journey progresses and leaders begin to doubt, wonder, lose some faith and start to question the value



of the effort or the ability to successfully complete it. When followers genuinely “answer the call” and bring their energy and talent to bear on the challenges of the journey, the leadership web can reach the required levels of power, reach and resilience.

The slowly (very slowly) emerging wisdom proposes that the basic characteristics and capabilities of effective

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leaders and effective followers are very similar and what differentiates them is the role they are playing in a particular situation at a particular time. Robert Kelly, Ira Chaleff and Barbara Kellerman all value effective followers and each bring a different, though compatible, profile of what an effective follower looks like. Their work is also compatible with heroic leadership.

Their work is worth studying and, hopefully, others will begin to add to the literature – and we will try to model their characteristics when we are playing followers roles – and call on our followers to do the same when we are in leadership roles.

ROBERT KELLY

Robert Kelly in a Harvard Business Review article titled “In Praise of Followers” (followed by a book) identified four qualities shared by effective or exemplary followers. They could just as easily apply to effective or exemplary leaders.

- They manage themselves well.

- They are committed to the organization and to a purpose, principle, or person beyond themselves.
- They build their competence and focus their efforts for maximum impact.
- They are courageous, honorable, and credible.

IRA CHALEFF

Ira Chaleff in *The Courageous Follower* proposes that there are five dimensions of courageous followership, which fit well with Kelly’s characteristics:

- The courage to assume responsibility – for themselves and their organizations. They look for ways to add value and realize their potential in the process.
- The courage to serve – serving leaders and, with those leaders, serving the purpose of the organization. They understand leaders’ needs and support them.
- The courage to challenge – standing up to (for) leaders when things don’t seem right. They are willing to risk rejection and others’ strong emotions in service of the organization’s well being.
- The courage to participate in transformation - starting with the willingness to join in the call for change followed by the ability to commit and stay involved through the tough patches. They are also willing to look at themselves and change as appropriate.
- The courage to leave – the refusal to collaborate with destructive leadership. They are willing to not only challenge poor leadership, but also risk being terminated or coming to the decision that they must leave.



BARBARA KELLERMAN

Barbara Kellerman, in a Harvard Business Review article entitled “What Every Leader Needs to Know About Followers,” provides a useful way to think about followers using only one metric, which is the level of engagement shown by followers. Kellerman categorizes followers as:

- Isolates – know little and do less. They are detached and care little about their leaders or organizations. They get by doing just enough to escape attention
- Bystanders – are free-riders, who observe, but don’t participate. Unlike isolates, bystanders are aware of their surroundings and consciously opt to stand aside.
- Participants – are engaged, whether in support of leaders or in opposition. They invest themselves to some degree and act on that investment.
- Activists – as with participants, activists care, invest themselves and act on their investment. They bring more commitment and energy and are thus, strong supporters or strong in opposition. While relatively few in number, they can have a major impact on a group.
- Diehards – are rare, but are prepared to go down with their cause, which can be a leaders, an idea, an organization or a combination. They are seen as coming to the fore in situations that are dire and, as with participants and activists, they can be supporters or opponents of leaders.

The attitudes and opinions of isolates and bystanders do not matter a great deal unless they can be changed to help them evolve to partici-

pants. The attitudes and opinions of participants, activists and diehards, however, matter a great deal. It is their attitudes and opinions that provide leaders with leverage and should, therefore, attract most leadership attention.

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Good followers will do something - they will actively support good leaders - they will actively challenge poor leaders. And they will demonstrate the characteristics proposed by Kelly and Chaleff. As Chaleff has framed the challenge, courage is at the foundation of effective followership just as it is for effective leadership.

Contracting among Leaders and Followers

THE LEADER’S PART OF THE BARGAIN

Leaders can prove their worthiness to followers and uphold their part of the bargain through the following actions:

- 1 Answering the call to lead - bringing their best, fully committing themselves and acting with an awareness of their significance.
- 2 Bringing an understanding of the heroic journey and an appreciation of what they are asking of themselves and their followers and teaching that reality to others.

