

# Followership

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The bottom line is this—a good leader knows how to identify and get the best out of his or her followers.

*I believe that everyone needs to be a follower many times in life. Followers are essentially the drive behind most groups. It is the power of ALL that accomplishes much, but one person can change the direction of that power. Often followers have the clearest sight of all involved.*

—Laura A. Bennett

Effective leadership requires good followers. Followers can be embodied in many ways: employees, constituents, stakeholders, or just individuals who believe in a cause. Leadership cannot occur without the leader-follower relationship; even so, often followers are considered less important. A primary purpose behind this publication is to illustrate how indispensable good followers are to a good leader. To do this we will lay out the basics of followership, introduce the leader-follower loop, confer on why individuals follow and finally discuss two key aspects of good followership—essential qualities and the importance of leader/follower collaboration. The bottom line is this—a good leader knows how to identify and get the best out of his or her followers.

## The Basics of Followership

As with other terms within the English language, often the term “follower” is perceived with a negative connotation. Many individuals feel that being a follower is second best to being a leader, that “playing second fiddle” is not as important as being in a leadership position, or that following means that you aren’t as intelligent or successful as the person in the leadership position. Perceptions can be intensely personal (which means we may not be able to change your mind), but we are here to tell you that being a follower is just as important and necessary as playing a leadership role. Often, those who end up as leaders initially serve in followership positions. This publication is meant to help remove the negative connotation behind being labeled a follower, and to provide the rationale behind the importance of learning to be a good follower.

Fundamentally, **followership** can be defined as the capacity or willingness to follow a leader. As we have discussed in prior publications, leadership is partially defined by being a group phenomenon—which ultimately means a leader cannot lead without followers. Therefore, no matter what a follower is called, followers are just as fundamental to the leadership equation as leaders—they just serve a different purpose.

### ***Reasons to Follow***

But why do individuals decide to follow certain leaders? There are many reasons to follow. Below are five diverse rationales that followers tend to use when deciding to follow a leader. As you read through them, you will note that some are negative and some are positive. Regardless of whether you are a leader seeking to understand followers, or a follower trying to understand oneself, it is a smart practice to understand the why of followership.

#### **FEAR OF RETRIBUTION**

▶ Fear of Retribution—“If I do not follow, I may lose my job!” Following out of fear isn’t as much following as it is using a coercive type of power. The leader in this case only continues being successful (in maintaining followers) as long as the follower sees no other option. Not a tool of effective (and ethical) leaders.

#### **BLIND HOPE**

▶ Blind Hope—“We must do something, and I hope this works!” In this situation, the follower is desperate for some solution and is probably only following due to a lack of alternatives. Leaders should watch out for followers like these, as they are likely to flee and follow others who give them more hope.

#### **FAITH IN LEADER**

▶ Faith in Leader—“What a great person. If anyone knows the answer, they do!” Here, the follower is blind to the solution but follows because they have put faith in the leader. Leaders should also be wary of these individuals, as they believe that by some magic or genius, the leader will provide the answer to the follower’s needs. Disappointment is inevitable, and no leader is perfect.

#### **INTELLECTUAL AGREEMENT**

▶ Intellectual Agreement—“What a good idea, that certainly makes sense!” Logic guides this rationale, and the follower understands the logic of the argument the leader is putting forward. This type of followership is common for educated individuals who need to comprehend why things happen.

#### **BUYING THE VISION**

▶ Buying the Vision—“What a brilliant idea, I don’t care who thought of it!” When followers buy a vision, they are emotionally identifying with a view of the future that appeals to them in some way. They are not just following a leader or logic; they are focused on the idea of moving toward the shared goals of a group or organization. This is a very useful rationale for leaders to work toward, but only if it can be sustained over a period of time.

All leaders may experience these rationales by different individuals and at different times during their period of leadership. The goal is to work toward the desired rationale for the largest number of followers possible; if you notice that things are not working, you can address this using the same components found within the leader-follower loop—*noticing, diagnosing, and adjusting.*

## Followership and Respect

When an individual decides to become a follower, they consider both the leader and the solution the leader is offering. The resulting style of followership can be illustrated through the grid below:

		Respect for the Solution		
		Strong	Weak	Neutral
Respect for the Leader	Strong	Powerful Buy-in	Blind Faith	Wait and See
	Weak	Blind Hope	Outright Opposition	
Neutral		Wait and See		

When the leader is respected, he or she is able to make proposals that followers will take seriously. Even if the follower isn't completely convinced by the arguments the leader is making, with strong respect for the leader the follower will more likely accept the solution being offered (blind faith). If the leader isn't respected, individuals will follow only with no other obvious choices.

When the solution is respected, then respect for the leader is still significant but not as important. It should be noted that if the leader is not respected, the followers may doubt in the ability of the leader to make appropriate choices. Blind hope is what ultimately happens when followers cross their fingers and hope the leader won't make any mistakes. Ideally both the leader and solution are respected, in which case followers will "buy into" the leader and the solution. Alternatively, if followers have no respect for either the leader or the solution, then outright opposition will most likely develop.

## The Leader-Follower Loop

Leaders who want to create true followers do not just stand in front of a group or organization and demand that individuals follow them. They understand the give and take of the leader-follower relationship and know how to work most effectively within this relationship.

Thus, the leader-follower relationship can be effectively illustrated as a loop. Followers notice what their leaders say and do. (This is why no matter under which context you lead, being a strong role model is important.) If the leader does something that concerns the followers, they may not only begin to talk among themselves, but this can ultimately lead to changes in behavior. An effective leader will go through three different steps— noticing, diagnosing, and adjusting. Specifically, once the leader notices followers are not as inclined to follow or act as they once were, he or she will move on to figuring out why (diagnosing the problem). Why has there been a shift in follower behavior, and how has my (the leader's) behavior affected their (the followers') behavior? Finally, once the leader understands what is going on and why it happened, they then adjust their behavior appropriately. This constant interaction between the follower and leader is called the leader-follower loop, and is an ongoing interplay in which each closely monitors the other and responds accordingly.



The Leader-Follower Loop

## Essential Qualities of Good Followers

Like effective leaders, successful followers tend to exhibit specific traits or qualities. The following qualities have been found to be the most significant qualities exhibited by successful followers:

### ► Self management

- Thinking for oneself, especially when working without close supervision. Need to be able to prove you can work well without leadership supervision. Could lead to increased responsibility (perhaps even a future leadership position).
- Exhibiting strong self-efficacy, or feeling confident in being able to successfully execute the tasks you have been assigned.

### ► Commitment

- Illustrating to your leader that you are committed to something beyond yourself—ideally the leader’s or organization’s vision and mission.
- “Buying into” and being motivated to excel in your position. Much of this has to do with how effective your leader is in communicating and providing factors that will ultimately motivate you (his constituent).

### ► Competence and focus

- Building your competence (mastering relevant skills) and focus for maximum impact. Again, this could lead to future increases in assigned responsibilities or, at the very least, effective development of the collaborative relationship between leader and follower.
- Taking a proactive approach to bettering yourself and consistently improving within your position.

### ► Courage

- Acting not as a “yes man” but as an individual who offers independent, critical thinking.
- Having the nerve to fight for what you believe is right, no matter the consequences. This behavior, while at times difficult, is often rewarded in the end.

Overall, each of these qualities are not only important to being a successful follower, but are also salient to effective leadership. Upon consideration, this makes sense. Generally, the more you learn about an organization or situation, the more effective you can be when participating in making leadership decisions. And what better way to gain this experience than serving in a followership capacity within your group or organization?

## The Importance of Collaboration (between Leaders and Followers)

Fortunately, changing opinions on leadership has also meant changing opinions regarding the importance of followership. As the attitude that a variety of leadership styles are important and necessary for effective leadership has emerged (as opposed to the opinion the best leader is a very top-down, directive style of leader) so has the recognition that without constituents, a leader is useless. Even more importantly, leadership is much more about an effective relationship than it is the superior skills or traits of the leader alone. Therefore, it is important that the leader and followers work together to achieve organizational goals—or collaborate for success. At the end of the day, it is necessary for both leaders and followers to be close allies and work together to get things done.

Today’s organizations are evolving into federations of networks, clusters, cross-functional teams...almost anything but pyramids with their obsolete “TOPdown” leadership. The new leader will encourage healthy dissent and values those followers courageous enough to say no.

—Warren Bennis

## STEP OUT & APPLY

Take a moment and bring to mind a group or organization in which you are currently a follower. What is the reason you are a follower within this group? (Consider the *Reasons to Follow* section above.)

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Continue to think of the same group. What do you think is the “reason to follow” for the majority of followers?

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(Assume that you didn’t choose one of the last two reasons—Intellectual Agreement or Buying the Vision.) If you were the leader of this group, what would you do to get followers to “Buy the Vision?”

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Reviewing the *Essential Qualities of Good Followers* section above, what are the top two qualities you feel you exhibit most often? With each quality, provide an example of how you have exhibited this quality in the last six months.

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Are there qualities I can improve on? Choose the quality you feel needs the most improvement, and write below specifics on how you will improve upon it.

Quality: \_\_\_\_\_

Plans for Improvement: \_\_\_\_\_

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## References & Background Reading

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