

CLD1-5



Followership

Understanding the Basics of Teamwork

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In the discussion of leadership, often the leader is the star. However, one cannot be a leader without followers—and some would argue that followers are just as essential as leaders. To reap the benefits of successful teamwork, we must understand why and how people follow.

Followership Defined

In essence, followership can be defined as *the willingness to go along with a leader*. Leadership is partially defined as a group experience. The leader-follower relationship plays a vital role in the success of the leader, group, or organization. Trust, credibility, confidence—all of these qualities are created and developed within a strong leader-follower relationship. Followers have a wide variety of roles and responsibilities within this relationship. A few of these responsibilities are to:

- Support the leader.
- Hold the leader accountable for his or her actions; challenge when necessary.
- Be willing to take responsibility in required situations.
- Use abilities confidently.
- Provide ideas and suggestions to enhance the group or organization.

Can you think of other roles a follower should play? A relationship is impossible to maintain without at least two people. Put another way, a leader cannot lead without

followers. No matter what followers are called, they are just as important as the leader; they just have different roles and responsibilities.

Essential Qualities of Good Followers

Like effective leaders, successful followers tend to show specific characteristics or qualities. Some of the most significant qualities exhibited by successful followers are:

Self-management

- Working well without supervision
- Thinking independently, especially when working without close supervision

Confidence

- Belief in the ability to successfully complete assigned tasks
- Ability to grow from a follower to a leader
- Commitment to the organization's vision and mission
- Buying into and being motivated to excellence

Knowledge and focus

- Building knowledge, skills and focus for maximum impact
- Using lifelong learning to consistently improve performance



*Alone we can
do so little;
together we can
do so much.*

—Helen Keller

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Courage

- Acting not as a “yes man” but as an individual who offers independent, critical thinking
- Having the moral courage to fight for what you believe is right, no matter the consequences

Reasons to Follow

Why do individuals decide to follow certain leaders? Listed below are five reasons people follow. Some are negative and some are positive. Regardless of whether you are a leader seeking to understand followers or a follower trying to understand following, it is smart to understand the reasons people follow.

- **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 being manipulated by power. The leader in this case only continues being successful (maintaining followers) as long as the followers see no other option. This is not a tool of effective (and ethical) leaders.
- **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 options. Leaders should watch out for followers such as these, as they are likely to flee and follow others who give them more hope.
- **Faith in leader**—“What a great person. If anyone knows the answer, he or she does!” Here the follower is blind to the solution but follows because he/she has 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 their needs. Disappointment is inevitable, and no leader is perfect.

- **Intellectual agreement**—“What a good idea; that certainly makes sense!” Logic guides this option, 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 understand why things happen.
- **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 approach is a very useful option for leaders to work toward, but only if it can be sustained over a period of time.

All leaders may experience these views at different times and from different people. The goal is to work toward following for the right reasons.

Summary

Changing opinions on leadership have also meant changing opinions regarding the importance of followership. Leadership is much more about an effective relationship than it is the superior skills or traits of the leader alone. The leader and followers work together to achieve organizational goals—they collaborate for success. Leaders and followers must be close allies and work together to get things done.

References

Ricketts, K. G. (2009). *Empowering Leaders in Kentucky* (ELK1-205). University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.