



Follow The Leader: Some Thoughts on Leadership

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Editor's Note: This commentary appeared originally in the Fall 1993 issue of *College and University*. David asked if readers of the *Journal of Leadership Studies* might find it interesting. I thought so. While we don't normally publish a prior-published work, I made an exception in this case.

In nearly every bookstore, articles and books on leadership can be found ranging from Classroom Leadership, Business Leadership, The Science and Art of Leadership to Leadership for the 21st Century. Some universities even award master and doctorate degrees in Educational Leadership.

There is a vast body of current literature written about how to become a leader and the need for bold, new leaders. Business, education, and government agencies each spend millions of dollars training and encouraging potential leaders. Most people, when asked, would concur that our future as a country rests in the hands of powerful leaders yet to come.

But perhaps the emphasis on leadership training is missing the boat in the long run. As Warren Bennis states in *Why Leaders Can't Lead* (1989), the leadership training approach may be a mistake:

... billions of dollars are spent annually by and on would-be leaders, yet we have no leaders, and though many corporations now offer leadership courses to their more promising employees, corporate America has lost its lead in the world market. In fact, to this point, more leaders have been made by accident, circumstances, sheer will than have been made by all the leadership courses (p. 37).

If this is true, then perhaps we should rethink our whole approach to leadership in the United States. Lao-tzu wrote, in the 6th century B.C., "To lead the people, walk behind them." These sage words imply that a good leader knows how to follow. A good leader can feel the pulse and direction of the group, and can elicit and follow the collective wisdom provided. The good leader can focus on the bigger picture and see how each individual contributes to the whole. The ultimate leader is someone perceptive enough to follow the lead of the group and release the potential of individuals. Often, the best leader guides and directs without ever being noticed, like an invisible but powerful force (Rinne & Karl, 1990).

The idea that leaders are actually people who serve others is clearly defined in Robert Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership* (1977) where he states that a leader's power derives from the ultimate ability to serve. People "will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted servants. To the extent that this principle prevails in the future, the only true viable institutions will be those that are predominantly

servant-led" (p. 330). Greenleaf describes good leadership as caring, supporting, and serving to the extent that trust is fostered. If followers trust the leader's ability to satisfy their needs, then they will give the leader influence and power (Adams & Yoder, 1985).

The tenets of good leadership are similar to the characteristics of good followership (Bass, 1960; Kelly, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1990). In fact, the most likely way to become a leader is to become a superb follower. The skills of a follower, honed to perfection, become the natural born traits of a leader who has matured, and has gained a larger vision of the world through age, experience, education, and, possibly, luck.

To breed a new set of leaders, we should hold conferences on "The Art of Followership" or "Followership for the Future" and award degrees in Educational Followership. In the work place, and in the classroom, workers and students are expected to be good followers who use many of the same skills as leaders. The most successful leaders in the world in any profession are surrounded by competent and constructive followers. If people learn how to be great followers, then when, and if, the opportunity for leadership arises, they will be prepared to follow through and serve in that capacity.

By examining the most crucial aspects of leadership as defined by Warren Bennis (1989), we can see how important they are to followership.

1. **INTEGRITY.** The best followers are honest and trustworthy, moral, intelligent, and perceptive. They carry out orders, but use judgment and even offer advice and consultation to the leader (Bass, 1960). They can be trusted to complete an assignment and make appropriate decisions because they believe and understand the objectives of the institution. As independent, critical thinkers, effective followers are insightful, candid, and fearless, forming their own opinions and high standards (Kelly, 1988).

2. **DEDICATION.** All organizations need followers who are faithful and committed to the cause. Indeed, one key to successful leadership is the degree to which the leader can communicate the mission and purpose of the institution and convince followers of its validity, through logic, personal belief, incentives, and association (Bass, 1960). Dedicated followers are more likely to "go the extra mile" and are loyal to the goals of the organization. With true commitment, morale remains high and the leader benefits from the self-correcting nature of the group (Kelly, 1988). Along with commitment, good followers bring competence and focus to the job as well. They seek out learning experiences. They focus on overlooked problems and develop solutions to take to the leader. Their broad-based dedication and competence allow them to view co-workers as colleagues, and not as competitors (Kelly, 1988).

3. **MAGNANIMITY.** If all followers were noble, kind, forgiving, and generous, then imagine the type of cooperative working situation that would exist. Fellow workers would think nothing of helping out and picking up when others needed assistance. A community atmosphere would permeate the institution, highlighted by the elimination of petty squabbles and personality conflicts. These followers would have good self-images and would be easy-going, friendly, and purposeful.

4. **OPENNESS.** The most effective followers are not threatened by change, but adapt to new processes, procedures, policies, and, most importantly, exhibit a willingness to be flexible and positive. These followers also generate new ideas and share them with leaders. This characteristic is certainly a function of personality, but also a function of the kind of work environment created by the leader. Effective followers exercise self-control and initiative and see themselves basically as equal to the leader. They are much more likely to openly disagree with leadership and offer opinions (Kelly, 1988).

5. **CREATIVITY.** The healthiest organization needs followers who are creative and imaginative, in the most positive sense of the words. These are people who still carry with

them a sense of wonder and innocence about the world, and are even idealists. The important work of an organization is usually done by the front-line employees, and so their ability to generate new and creative ideas to assist them in their duties is of utmost significance.

These five basic tenets of leadership are easily transferrable to the concept of followership. The more evident they are in both groups, the more successful and effective the particular office, school, business, or organization will be.

The primary goal of any successful leader is to create a class of followers who are essentially miniature leaders with similar skills and characteristics, people who "no longer require constant and direct supervision by the leader" (Rinne & Karl, 1990, p. 7). The leader accomplishes this by creating a "climate that encourages people to learn and grow, prizes their contributions, and cherishes their independence and autonomy" (Bennis, 1989, p. 146).

Many will contend that true leaders are born, not made (Owens, 1973). But this approach to leadership may be inadvertently misguided. As Robert Kelly (1988) asserts in "In Praise of Followers":

Most organizations assume that leadership has to be taught but that everyone knows how to follow. This assumption is based on three faulty premises: 1) that leaders are more important than followers, 2) that following is simply doing what you are told to do, and 3) that followers inevitably draw their energy and aims, even their talent, from the leader (p. 147).

Our emphasis on training leaders may be creating a class of people interested more in power, money, influence, and status than in serving the best interests of an institution or society. If, however, we focus our efforts on helping people become genuine followers, then not only will we foster a more productive and creative citizenry, but we will be establishing a large set of people who will know first-hand how to serve as leaders, when the opportunity calls, in the future.

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Over the years I've learned a lot about coaching staffs and one piece of advice I would pass on to a young coach-- or a corporation executive or even a bank president-- is this: *Don't make them in your image. Don't even try. My assistants don't look alike, think alike, or have the same personalities. And I sure don't want them all thinking the way I do. You don't strive for sameness, you strive for balance.*

--Bear Bryant