EFFECTIVE FOLLOWERSHIP: LEADERSHIP TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

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The twelve members of a professional association recently met to select a new president. Each member had a hand in pressuring the former president to resign. As a result of a number of minor actions and omissions of actions the members had made the president's task so difficult that he had found it nearly impossible to function as the head of the association. Now, each member was prepared to fight for a preferred candidate for the presidential position. When the group's discussion came to the selection of a new president, one member observed, "Who can we find that will be able to lead us?" Unexpectedly, one clever member replied, "More importantly, who can we find that we will be able to follow?"

This wry reply provides an insight to a much neglected feature of the process of leadership: followership. Traditionally, studies of leadership have focused on leader behaviors and leader attributes. Omitted in these writings is a serious consideration of the impact of followership as a determinant of effective leadership. Yet, the activities of leadership and followership are inextricably related. The concepts are intertwined in Ying-Yang fashion: one concept implies (and, in fact, requires) the other. For example, consider the following propositions developed by Trudy Heller and Jon VanTil [3]:

- The leader must lead, and do it well to retain leadership; the follower must follow, and do it well to retain followership

- Where all seek to lead, or all seek to follow, there can be no leadership or followership.

- Good leadership enhances followers, just as good followership enhances leaders.

- Leadership, and followership, may be an art in which people can become more highly skilled.

A good argument can be made that when we commonly speak of effective leadership, we are really speaking of effective followership. As evidence of this, consider that we typically measure a manager's effectiveness by examining the performance of his or her unit. The performance of a unit, however, is often more a function of the talents and desires of the followers than the leader. A

given level of subordinate talent and motivation can have far more to do with the unit's performance than the leader's efforts.

As an essential element in the development and management of an effective business strategy, the human resources configuration of those units comprising an organization is critical. In this article, the importance and dynamics of effective followership will be explored. In addition, techniques for fostering and maintaining effective followership will be considered.

The Limits of Leadership

In many situations, it can be extremely difficult for a leader to influence, easily or directly, the performance of a unit. Social scientists have recently come to recognize that many factors can serve as "substitutes" for and "neutralizers" of a leader's efforts [5]. Substitutes for leadership include explicit rules and procedures, rigid reward structures which a leader cannot affect, and physical distance between a leader and his subordinates. For example, subordinates who are given explicit goals and rules for performing their jobs, will not need to be given direction by a leader. Characteristics of individuals can serve to neutralize a leader's influence. For example, subordinates who are highly experienced, possess sufficient training and knowledge, and have a high need for independence or a sense of professionalism will not need, or may even resent, a leader who tries to be directive. Task characteristics, such as routineness, frequent feedback, and a high degree of structure can also undercut a leader's potential influence.

What we typically think of as being failures in leadership, may also be rightly characterized as failures in followership. A degree of responsibility for unit performance rests squarely on subordinates. Superiors, where their influence can make a difference, cannot be effective if subordinates do not subscribe to unit goals, or exert sufficient effort. Subordinates have a responsibility to be conscientious, and to expend energies for unit goals. In an enlightened view, both leaders and followers share in the responsibility of being productive and effective.

Leadership and Followership: Some Popular Fictions

The traditional view of leadership assumes that leaders are responsible for motivating subordinates and eliciting their commitment - that subordinates are initially lacking in responsibility and a willingness to commit. Of course, a leader's success at eliciting commitment depends on many factors. It is partly a function of individual differences in subordinates' willingness of predisposition to be committed, loyal, etc. An individual's upbringing can play an important role in determining the degree of his or her willingness to follow [8]. Whether or not, and to what degree, specific values are emphasized in a child's home can influence that individual's attitude toward superiors, as an adult. The emerging findings from the social sciences also suggest that managers are seldom fully in command (as frequently portrayed), and subordinates are rarely as submissive or faceless as is generally assumed.

Much has been made of the need to avoid being deceived by yes-men. A variation of this notion is popularly referred to as group-think, wherein a leader is surrounded by yea-sayers and devotees who contribute to the group's self-deception about its invulnerability [4]. In a unit that is victimized by the group-think phenomenon, the leader may make a disastrous decision because his or her followers have total conviction of the ultimate success of the group's efforts. Such a group will not seriously entertain the possibility of failure. The Bay of Pigs fiasco of the Kennedy Administration and the early escalation of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam by the Johnson Administration have often been attributed to group-think. In both the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam escalation decisions, the respective leaders and their supportive followers unconsciously conspired to create a mindset that inhibited their ability or foresee obstacles to the success to their plans.

The group-think phenomenon is most likely to occur in a highly cohesive work unit where the members are already strongly committed to their leader and the group's objectives. The message portrayed by the group-think examples is largely overstated since, in reality, the preconditions for group-think (i.e., extreme cohesion and total followership) are rare. More typically, managers must wrestle with a situation wherein their subordinates are far less loyal, and far less attracted to other members of the work unit than group-think requires. There is a good deal of *potential* followership held in reserve by subordinates.

Various anecdotal accounts of the group-think phenomenon have made it possible, and popular, to criticize the notion of followership. Similarly, well-publicized accounts of the predisposition of some individuals to blindly submit to authority in experimental settings have contributed to a criticism of followership. One famous study by Stanley Milgram [9] found that a majority of normal adults would administer seemingly painful electric shocks to another participant in a research study, even if the recipient of the shock protested and demanded to be set free. A related study by Phil Zimbardo [12] reported that college students who participated in role playing the job of prison guard would all too readily engage in the more cruel and sadistic activities stereo-typically thought to characterize the treatment of prisoners by prison guards. In addition, the predisposition of some individuals to follow authority has been denigrated by the reports of social scientists in early research on the "obedient personality." Specifically, researchers during World War II sought to better understand the so-called "Nazi personality" and thus attempted to study fascist tendencies via a personality scale [10]. This research on the obedient (or fascist) personality, of course, represents an attempt to understand an aberrant style of behavior. Omitted in these classic studies were attempts to understand followership within normal settings (that is, hospitals, profit-oriented organizations, etc.).

While these studies provide fascinating insights into the more bizarre aspects of human behavior, their results do not have firm implications for life in organizations. Although laboratory experiments can offer insights to employee

behavior, these popular studies often involved the creation of brief, transitory episodes, wherein people were placed in highly ambiguous and tension-charged settings of very short duration. Normal, adult behavior in the ongoing role of employee/subordinate does not readily lend itself to cruelty and blind obedience. The social norms and codes of personal conduct that exist in the real world (and are largely suspended in the temporary setting created in a research laboratory), inhibit tendencies toward excessive cruelty and blind obedience. In addition, most managers do not deliberately seek to be surrounded by blindly obedient and subservient individuals. The traits of good followership (that is, a sense of responsibility, adult-orientation, commitment, openness, and loyalty) are what most managers desire.

Styles of Followership

All managers are familiar with the notion of "styles of leadership." When this expression is used, we typically think of such terms as autocratic, participative, laissez-faire, etc. We can also extend this perspective to include styles of followership. Although a neglected topic, it is useful to consider the major dimensions along which subordinates differ, and to consider how follower styles may be developed and maintained.[1]

Figure 1 displays a framework for conceptualizing styles of followership. The framework incorporates two dimensions: compliance-defiance, and loyalty-hostility. The dimension of compliance-defiance is a behavioral dimension, and reflects the extent to which a follower conforms to the directives of a superior, versus undermines or counters the supervisor's desires. Loyalty-hostility is an attitudinal dimension which represents the degree to which a subordinate is supportive of, versus antagonistic toward, a supervisor and his or her goals. By crossing the two dimensions, we create a set of quadrants, each of which has a unique meaning.

In quadrant I (loyal, compliant), we are dealing with a supportive and conforming individual. Quadrant II refers to a compliant, but hostile individual. This would be the case of a subordinate who is maliciously obedient. Quadrant III is a person who is both hostile and defiant, while quadrant IV is a person who is defiant, but loyal (such as a conscientious objector would be). In the extremes of each quadrant (i.e., outside the circle), we are dealing with a form of mental illness. In their most exaggerated forms, the blindly obedient follower and the extremely hostile subordinate (quadrants I and III) represent forms of illness. An extremely hostile but obedient individual is being logically inconsistent, and is perhaps only compliant because of external constraints (for example, fear of being terminated or having difficulty finding another position). An individual in quadrant III is also, in the extreme, experiencing distress. Such a person (who is simultaneously defiant, but committed to a supervisor's goals) may eventually be called to explain his or her

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[1]One useful framework, which was developed by Zaleznik [11], served as the starting point for developing the present scheme.

actions, perhaps before a disciplinary board or a court. Eventual separation from the unit is the most likely outcome for an individual who is caught in the dilemma of supporting a supervisor, but defying his directives. At the extreme, this may be thought of as a situation which induces a form of mental illness. Finally, it should be noted that although the two dimensions are, in the "real world," likely to be highly correlated (such that loyal employees are likely to be compliant, and so on), there are certainly many occasions wherein attitudes and behaviors are not highly correlated.

Figure I. DIMENSIONS OF FOLLOWERSHIP

COMPLIANCE

LOYALTY

HOSTILITY

I II

IV III

DEFIANCE
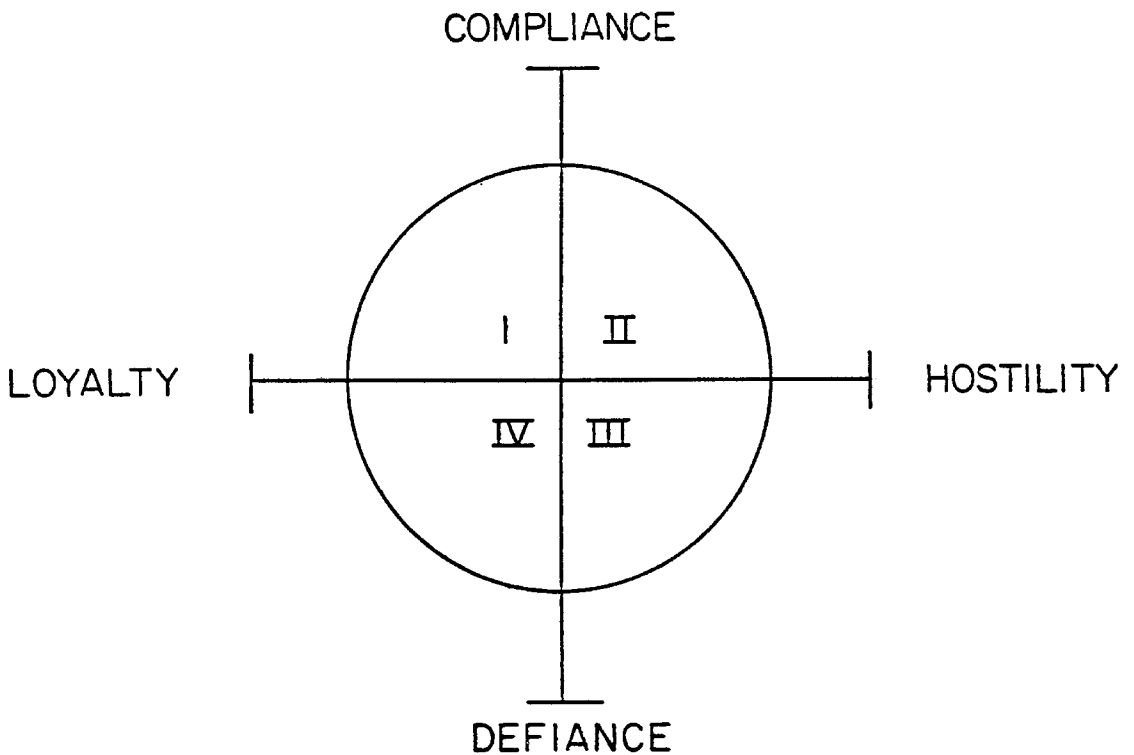
Developing and Maintaining Effective Followership

Managers, of course, have a responsibility for developing and maintaining the followership of their subordinates (Note: being a follower and being a subordinate are not equivalent notions, as being a leader and being a supervisor also are not equivalent terms). The framework displayed in Figure 1 provides a guide for understanding how to approach the task of developing followership. The compliant-defiant (that is, behavioral) aspect of followership can be best attended to by rewarding subordinates for engaging in appropriate action and withholding rewards for inappropriate action. Volumes have been written on the importance and utility of tying rewards more closely to performance [6]. Generally, making rewards contingent on performance tends to enhance productivity. Simple compliance can also be more reliably predicted from contingent rewards. Enhancing the attitudinal aspect of followership (i.e., the dimension of loyalty-hostility) is far more complicated, in terms of the social processes that are involved. Nonetheless, several recommendations can be deduced from the available literature in the social sciences.

The Cost of Admission

Making the expense of attaining group membership more costly to the individual is a powerful means of inducing employee commitment. That is to say, individuals will have a more positive attitude toward group membership if they are compelled to expend more time, money, or effort to attain and maintain membership. A dramatic illustration of this phenomenon comes from a classic social science study by Eliott Aronson and Judson Mills [1]. As part of their research, these investigators had research subjects engage in an unpleasant activity as a prerequisite for admission to a group. Specifically, individual female college students, who were interested in joining a group that discussed topics related to human sexuality, were asked to read a written passage into a tape recorder (ostensibly to test their voice for maturity of reaction). Several groups of subjects were run in the study. One group was given a fairly innocuous passage to read (i.e., a mild initiation experience), while other groups read relatively more explicit and relatively sexually detailed passages in order to gain admission to the group (i.e., more severe initiation experience). All students were then asked to listen to a tape-recording of the group discussion (the group had allegedly already met several times). The discussion was deliberately staged so as to be extremely boring and unattractive (e.g., the members dryly and haltingly discussed the sexual habits of grasshoppers and other insects).

The investigators were primarily interested in how each applicant for group membership would evaluate the group. Intriguingly, the females who were put through the more difficult initiation experience rated the group more highly (i.e., gave higher ratings of the members's attractiveness, and intelligence, based on the tape). In a replication of this study by Gerard and Mathewson, subjects were required to demonstrate their ability to control their emotions

by being given varying degrees of electric shock. The results were identical: the more electric shock a subject received, the more favorably she rated the group [2]. Thus, it appears that the more costly it is to individuals to gain admittance to a group, the more they will value their membership. This form of rationalization can be found in other varieties of group membership. For example, fraternities and sororities require "pledges" for membership to undergo a hazing period, where distasteful initiation experiences are forced on the would-be members. The resulting loyalty of the members of these organizations is well known.

Participation in Decision Making

A second method for inducing loyalty is to involve subordinates in the decision-making process. Participation in decision making increases an individual's sense of involvement and, thereby dedication to the ultimate course of action. If the participation is genuine, participation can lead to a sense of "ownership" for a goal. A manager must be careful not to merely create an illusion of participation by asking for advise and input from subordinates, which he or she does not intend to incorporate into the final decision. Many popular motivational schemes (e.g., MBO and quality circles) incorporate the notion of involving subordinates in planning, goal setting, and suggesting improvements in work methods.

Creating a Sense of Identification

A third device for soliciting loyalty is to create a sense of identity with a group or its leader. Many organizations try to illicit a sense of identity by having group members wear uniforms, or by emblazoning a company logo on paychecks, stationery, and I.D. cards. Beyond these simple techniques, a sense of identity can be fostered by first understanding the value system of employees. If employees value certain notions (such as the importance of being a part of a family, or the importance of self-reliance), a manager can appeal to these notions by frequently relating to and highlighting these values as part of the theme of his or her administration. For example, as part of his election campaigns, President Reagan skillfully managed to identify his administration with the values of a strong defense and self-reliance (themes which were attractive to the American populace, especially at the end of President Carter's term in office). In short, a sense of identity can be achieved by frequent use of symbols (both tangible and verbal).

Accenting the Importance of Followership

Finally, a manager can enhance loyalty by demonstrating to his unit that loyalty and commitment are highly valued. For example, he or she can highlight the history of the organization and what makes for success and failure in the organization; a manager can stress the importance of loyalty and commitment in attaining both personal and corporate success. By their own conduct, managers communicate the extent to which loyalty is likely to be valued in

their own units. If a manager is cynical and critical of superiors, he is more likely to create within his own unit a belief that sarcasm and second-guessing of superiors is an acceptable norm. That is not to say, of course, that a manager should be blindly devoted and praiseworthy of superiors. Rather, a manager should be respectful toward and considerate of the reputation of superiors (and all others) and predisposed to offer support and aid to help the organization achieve its goals.

To be sure, organizations would come to a grinding halt without a minimal degree of followership. Yet, the level of followership in the United States over the past two decades appears to be at an historically low level.[2] Our capacity for greater levels of effective followership is not completely utilized. Perhaps our readiness to follow is at a low ebb because of the level of leadership (as distinct from headship) has not also been maximal. Our country has come through a difficult era for top-level leaders, a period characterized by assassinations and assassination attempts, near-impeachments, and questioning of traditional values. Also, employees are better educated, more outspoken, and more conscious of rights and entitlements than in the past. However, it is still popular to call for more effective leadership. Yet, organizational performance will not be maximal without the necessary condition of responsible followership.

The principle of followership is perhaps best understood at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where leadership is a central focus of the curriculum—the interrelated nature of leadership and followership is acknowledged. As they say at West Point, "(i)f you wish to develop people into leaders, you must begin by teaching them to be followers" [7].

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