On Followership

Karen M. Schwind
St. John Fisher College

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters

Part of the Education Commons

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Recommended Citation

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations.

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/94 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
On Followership

Abstract
Followers are an essential but underrepresented part of leadership. Without a strong group of followers, leaders cannot possibly be successful. Followers can, and often do, think independently and critically, and are active workers. They do not simply wait to be told what to do. Level followers courageous Instead, there are various followership styles. At the most exemplary provide are fully relationship constructive, competent with leaders although not partners wherein in an they always positive, organization. are able feedback. to They openly Effective maintain disagree leaders a and work with followers, not above them, and empower them to take risks. Organizations should maintain a culture that recognizes the value that followers bring to achieving the overall goals of the organization. This literature review presents several models and theories that focus on followership and offers recommendations to organizations, leaders, and followers that assist stakeholders at all levels of an organization in sustaining a culture of followership.
Running head: FOLLOWERSHIP

On Followership

Human Resource Development

GHRD 590 – Masters Thesis

Karen M. Schwind

St. John Fisher College

2009
Candidate Name: Karen M. Schwind

Paper Title: On Followership

Paper Type: Literature review

The signatures on this page signify successful completion of the GHRD 590 capstone project requirement.

______________________________________
Dr. Seth Silver, Advisor

______________________________________
Dr. Tim Franz, Reader #1

______________________________________
Robert Whipple, Reader #2

______________________________________
Karen M. Schwind
Dedicated to:

Those who have the courage to be exemplary followers.
Abstract

Followers are an essential but underrepresented part of leadership. Without a strong group of followers, leaders cannot possibly be successful. Followers can, and often do, think independently and critically, and are active workers. They do not simply wait to be told what to do. Instead, there are various followership styles. At the most exemplary level followers are fully competent partners in an organization. They maintain a courageous relationship with leaders wherein they are able to openly disagree and provide constructive, although not always positive, feedback. Effective leaders work with followers, not above them, and empower them to take risks. Organizations should maintain a culture that recognizes the value that followers bring to achieving the overall goals of the organization. This literature review presents several models and theories that focus on followership and offers recommendations to organizations, leaders, and followers that assist stakeholders at all levels of an organization in sustaining a culture of followership.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................6

Chapter 1-Introduction..................................................................................................7

Chapter 2 – Followership and Leadership.................................................................11
  What is followership?.................................................................................................11
  How do followers follow?.........................................................................................16
  What is the leadership role in followership?..........................................................28

Chapter 3—Implications, Conclusions and Personal Reflection.............................39
  Implications and Recommendations....................................................................39
    For Organizations.................................................................................................39
    For Leaders..........................................................................................................43
    For Followers.......................................................................................................47
  Conclusion...............................................................................................................51
  Personal Reflections from the Author.................................................................52

References..................................................................................................................56
Acknowledgements:

I wish to acknowledge so many people who have supported me as I have experienced this adventure. Words cannot express my sincere gratitude enough.

Family: there are no words. We may have not have always been on the same wavelength career-wise, but you have still supported me all these years. I’m high-maintenance and you put up with me, and there are very few other people about whom I can say that. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Friends: hopefully you know who you are. Thank you for letting me celebrate small victories. It may have meant nothing to you, but it meant everything to me.

My professors at Fisher: thank you for showing me the value of learning. I never actually thought I would enjoy spending my weekends in class, but it has been a real pleasure. Because of you, I have found excitement in learning and in developing myself both professionally and personally.

Cohort 11: friends, you are my inspiration. I found strength in you and I will always be grateful for that. I have learned so much from each and every one of you and it has been an honor spending the last two years with you. Thank you for being the most awesome group of people with whom I could have shared the enjoyment of learning.
On Followership

CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

There has been a great deal of research surrounding leadership. Upon conducting a book search for “leadership” on Amazon.com, one will find well-over 300,000 results. What people tend to forget is that behind every great leader, there is a follower, yet there is far less research on the subject of followership. An Amazon.com search for “followership” yields less than 2,500 results.

Several researchers have stated that followers are an essential part of the leadership equation. Robert Kelly (1992) does not discount leadership, but explains that without effective followers, little gets done. He states that an effective follower is “the kind of person that no leader or group can succeed without” (p. 25). Yet an effective follower is not just content with simply following. Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, and Morris (2006) state, “Followership plays a vital role at every level of an organization. Furthering the effectiveness of followers requires doing away with the misconception that leaders do all of the thinking and followers merely carry out commands” (p.314). Followers can, and often do, think independently and critically, and they are active workers. They do not simply wait to be told what to do (Kelly, 1988 & 1992).

Leaders must not only recognize these followers, but embrace them. Effective followers are credible, honest, and courageous enough to challenge the status quo (Kelly, 1988). An effective leader should encourage and support this behavior. They do this by giving them a chance to make their own decisions and act on them. This does not imply that less leadership is needed, but rather a different kind. The focus is on
empowerment, which places accountability on individuals. If individuals are held responsible for their own work, they will commit themselves to working harder. This responsibility will develop not only strong followership skills, but also leadership characteristics that will prepare them for higher positions, should they decide to go that route (Follett, 1949).

Problem Statement

There is a need for a literature review that explores the concept of followership. This review focuses on the contributions followers make to organizations. Specifically, it looks at the characteristics of different follower types, including those of exemplary followers, as well as the leader’s role in followership.

Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the role of the follower in organizations. It discusses what constitutes an effective follower, the importance of effective followership, and the role of the leader in fostering exemplary followership.

Review Questions

1. What is followership?

2. How do followers follow?

3. What is the leadership role in followership?
Significance of the Study

All stakeholders in an organization would benefit from the content of this review. Managers at all levels could use this information to assist their direct reports in being their own leaders. They would have more information on how to empower their direct reports to make their own decisions, and develop leadership qualities in these direct reports before they are moved to a higher management position. Additionally, when they are not tied up helping their direct reports, may gain more time to do their own jobs. In the case of many front-line managers, this could allow them to take care of the administrative or more strategic duties they may have.

All employees who report to a manager would benefit from using this information to develop themselves into leaders. They would learn the importance of being able to make decisions on their own without depending on their leaders, and develop leadership characteristics of their own that will allow them to progress into higher-level roles in the organization.

Through the use of HRD professionals, the organization will benefit from this review in two ways: they can use these ideas in leadership development training in helping new leaders learn to empower their direct reports; and they then can use this training to create and promote a culture within the organization that focuses on creating leaders from followers.
Definition of Key Terms:

**Follower**: An individual within an organization or group who is led by an individual in a higher position. It is important to note that this definition is in the simplest form. As will be discussed in this review, the role of “follower” supersedes such a simple definition.

**Exemplary/Effective Follower**: An active follower who is able to think critically and independently (Kelly, 1988 and 1992).

**Leader**: One who leads one or more followers. Like to term follower, the term “leader” may not always be appropriate. The term is used in a context which separates the designated roles of leader and follower.
CHAPTER 2—FOLLOWERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP

There are several reasons why people choose to follow, and there are several different styles of following. It is also important for those in leadership positions to be aware of their role in followership. Chapter 2 of this literature review will answer three questions:

1. What is followership?
2. How do followers follow?
3. What is the leadership role in followership?

What is followership?

According to the Merriam-Webster (2009) dictionary, “followership” is “the capacity or willingness to follow a leader.” In its most basic form, this definition works, but does not do justice to the role of “follower.” The definition almost paints the picture of person who is subordinate to a leader. According to those who have written about followers, the term “follower” is not synonymous with the term “subordinate.” Followership often carries a negative stereotype, even in today’s society. Often, “the very word follower conjures up unfavourable images of passive low status, underlings, unable or unwilling to assume responsibility and unlikely to achieve anything significant” (Brown & Thornborrow, 1996, Introduction, para 1). Kelly (1992) offers a new definition for followership: “(embracing) followers as fully competent and full partners in the organization” (p.34).
People follow for various reasons, contingent upon their motivations. There are several differing “paths” for why people choose to follow. Kelly (1992) presents some of these paths in Figure 1. The following paths are discussed:

- Apprentice
- Disciple
- Mentee
- Comrade
- Loyalist
- Dreamer
- Lifeway
Apprentice: These individuals learn leadership on the basis of being a superior. They develop themselves through mastery of new skills.

Disciple: Disciples learn by emulating his or her leader. They learn to be like their leader and may eventually lead in the same manor.

Mentee: These followers view the leader as a mentor. They form a relationship with the mentor as a means of personal growth.

Comrade: These individuals choose to follow for the purpose of belonging. They enjoy the teamwork that is involved in following.

Loyalist: Simply put, the loyalist follows out of loyalty for his or her leader.

Dreamer: These followers have a personal dream. They are uninterested in the role distinction between follower and leader and focus mainly on their own goals.

Lifeway: Followers who act as a lifeway prefer to serve. Their primary interest is in helping others, including the leader. They work with others to help them get what they want. They prefer to do, as opposed to direct.

Followers may also choose to follow because they experience “enoughness.” Enoughness occurs when one has had his or her fill of something. In the case of followers, they feel complete just by following. Trying to take on a leadership role may involve more time or energy than they have to give. Some may say that this might be a demonstration of laziness, but these followers still very much want to contribute. They see no purpose in competing with the leader or other followers for the leadership role. They work to compliment others (Kelly, 1992).
The Relationship Between Leaders and Followers

Researchers have described followership as a paradox for several reasons: (1) effective leaders make effective followers, while effective followers make effective leaders; (2) a follower may become leader at any time, while the leader becomes a follower, usually based on expertise in a situation; (3) almost any given person, even at the highest level of leadership, is a follower of another leader.

The most important aspect of the follower-leader relationship is that there is a social contract to work toward something together (Dixon & Westbrook, 2003). Chaleff (2003) explains, “Followers and leaders both orbit around the purpose; followers do not orbit around the leader” (p. 13). Both are essential in pursuing a common purpose. Both are also accountable to the actions of one another. In essence, leader and follower are a team.

Figure 2 presents an adapted model, of one created by Townsend and Gebhardt (2003) that demonstrates the continuum between the leadership and followership roles.

![Figure 2. The Leadership-Teamship-Followership Continuum](image)

“Capital Leadership” and “Passive Followership” present the extremes of the continuum. Capital Leadership is at the head of an organization or group, from which
ultimate decision-making takes place. Passive Followership is mindless, emotionless involvement. In the middle are “Small Leadership” and “Active Followership”. Small leadership requires effective people skills to get others to cooperate. It can also be described as “the personal leadership in which a person tries to inspire a finite number of other individuals to come along and do something—right now” (Townsend & Gebhardt, 2003, p. 18). In Active Followership, individuals are involved with the leaders. They may shape decisions by asking questions and offering suggestions (Townsend and Gebhardt, 2003).

A third behavior has been introduced to the follower-leader relationship: teamship. Teamship is where follower and leader meet, and in some ways, overlap (Townsend and Gebhardt, 2003). “Follower” and “leader” are increasingly seen less as separate positions, and more as interactive behavioral roles. It is important to note that while the continuum presents benchmark positions, the distinction between who the follower and leader are at any given time is not always clear, thus contributing to the paradox of followership. The model in Figure 2 demonstrates where the two meet (Townsend & Gebhardt, 2003).

There is a risk in assuming that the official designated leader is the all-knowing person who will single-handedly create and execute change. The relationship is not at all similar to that of a parent and child where the parent is the source of wisdom, on which the follower is dependent. The assumption that expertise and knowledge lies only within the mind of the leader limits ideas to those of just one person; the multiple perspectives that may come from followers may never come forth and the best solution to a problem
may never be found (Chaleff, 2003). On the contrary, it has become quite obvious that leaders cannot act without followers. The informal follower-leader exchange is often based on expertise. When a leader may not be knowledgeable in a situation, he or she will become the follower and allow another individual to assume the leadership role (Townsend & Gebhardt, 2003).

How do followers follow?

Followers have long been stuck with the stereotype that they are simple-minded people who take directions from leaders, and simply do what they are told. Robert Kelly (1988 & 1992) credits followers with a great deal more than that. He explains that they are the most valuable assets an organization can have. One can even argue that it is the work of followers that determines the level of success an organization experiences.

There are different styles of followership, defined by their ability to think critically and act independently (Kelly, 1988 & 1992). Figure 3 is an adapted model from one created by Kelly to show the styles he defines for followership.
There are five different followership styles as defined by Kelly (1988 & 1992): Alienated, Passive, Conformist, Pragmatist, and Exemplary. The following explains each style and how individuals demonstrating each style fit into an organization.

**Alienated Followers**

Alienated followers demonstrate a higher level of independent thinking, are passive and require more direction when completing tasks. Kelly (1988) explains, “Somehow, sometime, something turned them off. Often cynical, they tend to sink gradually into disgruntled acquiescence” (p. 143). These followers frequently begin as talented, exemplary followers, but may have had their ideas or actions ignored or unappreciated. They tend to feel as though they cannot trust their leaders and other followers who act in accordance with them. They will generally take one of two actions: bitterly float thru the motions of their current jobs, gravitating to a more passive role, or leave for another one where they will feel appreciated (Kelly, 1992).

**Passive Followers**

Passive followers, also referred to as “sheep,” are neither independent thinkers, nor are they active in their role. They often rely on the leader to do their thinking and require direction when completing tasks. Many passive followers have not developed their followership skills, “so they basically do nothing” (Kelly, 1992, p. 123). Others may simply shut down when in a follower position, simply because they do not like being that role. Often, this style is a result of the actions of a leader. If a leader takes on all responsibilities and does not recognize or reward original thinking or self-motivation, followers will be highly dependent on the leader.
Conformist Followers

Conformist followers are best-known as “yes-people.” They are active in their role, but lack original ideas. They willingly take orders, but do not question the leader's ideas or decisions. They like having someone above them and work to please. One reason followers may tend toward this style is that they may have a fear of freedom. They prefer structure and knowing the social order. Another cause is that many societies encourage and reward submissive behavior. Often, conformist followers are most successful in many organizations because they are obedient and do not question authority (1992).

Pragmatic Followers

Pragmatic followers are able to adapt their style to their current environment. They tend to “work the system” in order to be successful. This style is influenced by not only personality, but also the organization itself. They are survivalists and are afraid of failure. Because of this, they adopt a “better safe than sorry” attitude. Often, this style is adapted in response to organization politics because, while it is influenced by personality, it is just as much influenced by the leader and the organization. Pragmatists are uneasy about conflict and adapting to different follower styles is a way of coping with an unstable situation (Kelly, 1992).

Exemplary Followers

Exemplary followership, Kelly (1992) says, is the most ideal style in all organizations, as it defines more clearly what an effective follower is.
Followers think independently and are active in their roles. They are an asset to leaders because they are courageous enough to challenge ideas. In fact, rather than undermining the leader, in the most ideal of situations exemplary followers bring out the best in them. Kelly explains, “Exemplary followers give a leader their best thinking, thus complementing the leader’s own strengths” (p.128). In fact, exemplary followers do not even see their leaders as a step up in a hierarchy, but rather as colleagues with whom they can work cooperatively.

In gathering descriptions of exemplary followers through listening to exemplary followers, their coworkers, and their leaders, Kelly (1992) found common themes in the information he was receiving. They demonstrate many skills that bring out qualities such as going above and beyond, and thinking for themselves. These skills can be grouped together into three categories: job skills, organizational skills, and values component. Job skills are those that add value to their role such as focus, competence and initiative. Organizational skills are demonstrated in the relationships created with team members, networks within the organization, and leaders. Value component is the courageous conscious exemplary followers use to guide them in completing job tasks and maintaining organizational relationships.

One word that Kelly (1992) used often to describe exemplary followers was “commitment.” These individuals commit themselves to all aspects of an organization in order to be successful. Commitment starts with concrete goals. Exemplary followers know where they want to go. They look to work for organizations with a clear vision that aligns with their purpose. After all, in order to be an exemplary follower, one must know
what it is he or she is following. Once they understand where the organization is headed, they look for where they fit in; from there they create goals which generate a roadmap for success for themselves. Naturally, if these individuals are successful, the organization will experience some success as well.

Potter, Rosenbach, & Pittman (2001) parallel several of Kelly’s (1988 & 1992) ideas. They too, believe that the follower is an essential asset to an organization. They explain that in effective organizations, the relationship between followers and leaders is more of a partnership in which “the initiatives of followers are just as important as those of their leaders” (p.164). It is the responsibility of both the follower and leader to maintain a quality relationship. In order for the relationship to be successful, both must share the same goals, and must work together to achieve them. Communication between the two is key when a high level of collaboration and coordination is needed. When strong partnerships are created between leaders and followers, the followers often become more independent, which is a result of trust between the two.

Potter et al., (2001) also created a model for different follower styles. Their follower styles are based on two components: performance initiative and relationship initiative. Performance initiative considers the following: (1) the extent to which the follower thinks of ways to get her or his assigned job done; (2) the extent to which the follower treats him or herself as a valuable resource; (3) how well the follower works with coworkers; and (4) what view the follower takes toward organizational and environmental changes (p.166). Relationship initiative considers the following: (1) the degree to which the follower identifies with the leader’s vision; (2) the extent to which
the follower actively works to earn the leader's trust; (3) the willingness to communicate in a courageous fashion with the leader; and (4) the degree to which the follower negotiates differences with the leader.

Figure 4 is the model created by Potter, et al., (2001). The follower styles in this model are Subordinate, Politician, Contributor and Partner. Potter, et al. emphasize that no style is better than any other in every context. All styles have their place in certain organizations, or even in different parts of an organization. These styles are often influenced by personal characteristics, but may even be influenced by the nature of the leader, or the culture of the organization.

Subordinate

Subordinate followers have a low relationship initiative and low performance initiative. Subordinates are stereotypical followers. Potter, et al. (2001) “fear that this is what most people think of when they hear the term ‘follower’” (p. 175). These individuals
simply do what they are told. They may be highly competent at their jobs, but they are not concerned with their relationships with their leaders, nor the level of their performance. Like other follower styles, the subordinate style may be a result of personality traits, but the environment may also have a significant influence. In an organization where rewards are simply based on the completion of a job, or leaders give orders with the expectations that they will be obeyed, a subordinate style will likely emerge. Often, individuals demonstrating a subordinate style are unfulfilled by their work. Similar to the way Kelly’s (1992) alienated followers may become passive “sheep,” this style can also develop from a follower who believes that the organization is not interested in his or her ideas or initiatives.

Politician

Those with a politician style are less concerned with performance initiative and are highly concerned with relationship initiative. They are highly dependent on their leaders, but are sensitive to the relationships they share. They are not afraid to give honest feedback, even if it is unpleasant. They develop a mutual trust with their leaders, which allows the leader to discuss concerns openly. They may also serve as a mediator when conflicts arise between leaders and other followers. Potter, et al. (2001) warn that although this style is beneficial for relationships between the leader and follower, it can also be used to cover deficiencies in performance. Individuals with this style may be able to “work the system” in order to become successful in the organization.
Contributors have a high performance initiative and a low relationship initiative. These individuals focus on doing a job well, working with coworkers, and embracing change. They do not necessarily look to have a positive relationship with their leaders. This style can arise for several reasons. The first is because they may not have the skills, such as courageous communication, or even the interest, to create an effective relationship with their leaders. They may believe the leader has everything under control and believe the leader does not need assistance. Another reason may be that this style is the type that is rewarded in an organization. To an extreme, a leader lacking competence or confidence may discourage or reject any initiative for a positive relationship (Potter, et al. 2001).

Partner

Those who demonstrate a partner style have a high performance and relationship initiative. Potter, et al. (2001) explain that this is the preferred style of many effective organizations. They may either be a leader-in-waiting, or simply want to do whatever they can to make their organization successful. They demonstrate courageous communication when they need to be honest with a leader. Potter, et al. explain that the challenges facing organizations that encourage leading a team of creative and engaged followers are different than those in organizations which succeed with followers simply doing what they are told. With this style “leaders face analogous challenges in understanding the impact of their own behavior on the willingness of employees to participate actively and fully in the life of the organization” (p.164).
One possible misunderstanding about followers is that they are not just individuals at the bottom of the organization. Followers can come from all levels in an organization. Even managers are followers of someone else, and can take on any of the styles.

Being an exemplary follower (Kelly, 1992) or partner (Potter, et al. 2002) comes with responsibility. As noted by Potter, et al., some followers do not prefer this type of responsibility. However, Gabarro & Kotter (1992) explain, “a compatible relationship with your superior is essential to being effective in your job” (p. 150). This idea is related to the partner style discussed by Potter, et al.

Gabarro & Kotter (1993) discuss the follower-leader relationship as a “mutual dependence between two fallible human beings” (p.151). Often, the conflict between followers and leaders is due to personality differences. Just as many would argue that an effective leader takes the time to understand his or her followers, followers must do the same for the leader. Followers should learn to appreciate their leaders’ goals and the pressures they face, as well the leaders’ strengths and weaknesses. Without doing so, conflicts are inevitable. According to Gabarro and Kotter it is not up to the leader to provide this information; effective followers take the time to seek it out. They know when it is appropriate to question their leader by paying attention to the leader's behaviors. They are also aware that what their leader may be concerned with now may not be the same down the road. From their observations, they learn the leader's work style.
Being an effective follower does not only mean understanding and working well with a leader. It is also imperative for followers to understand themselves. Followers should know their own strengths, weaknesses, concerns, and of course, followership style. This allows followers to be more aware of what barriers may exist in relationships with their leaders, and brings awareness on what actions to take to creating effective partnerships Gabarro & Kotter (1993).

A major necessity is checking one’s own impatience. While a partnership between follower and leader may exist, there is still a higher level of dependence of the follower on the leader. When a follower feels constrained, it may be easy for him or her to become angry and frustrated, sometimes leading to resentment toward the leader. Resentment is counterproductive to the relationship, and the follower must control this emotion. Gabarro & Kotter (1993) call this behavior counterdependent. When followers display this behavior, trust issues arise from the leader. The leader may then become closed-off to the follower.

Just as destructive as counterdependent behavior, is overdependence. Overdependent followers keep their anger to themselves and remain compliant with leaders, even when the leader may be gravitating toward a poor decision. There may be situations where the leader may be looking for disagreement, and may even be willing to change his or her decision, but yet the followers still sit idly by and say nothing. These followers see the leader as all-knowing beings who make sure the followers know what they need to know, and make sure they are protected from bad things in the organization (Gabarro & Kotter, 1993). While some can argue that there is a small
amount of responsibility for leaders to do these things, followers cannot depend on their leaders to accomplish them.

Often, maintaining a workable relationship may involve some level of risk to followers. Chaleff (2003) explains, “Courage is a great balance of power in relationships. An individual who is not afraid to speak and act the truth as she perceives it...is a force to be reckoned with” (p.20). Having the courage to speak up may lead to the disintegration of a relationship; however, it also has the potential to strengthen it. If a follower is not willing to risk the relationship he or she has formed with the leader by giving honest, constructive feedback, the follower risks the very relationship that he or she has worked with the leader to build. Chaleff presents five dimensions of courageous followership, which followers use to operate within a group.

The Courage to Assume Responsibility

Courageous followers have a responsibility for both themselves and the organization. They do not expect to be taken care of by the organization nor the leader. They maximize their value to an organization by finding opportunities to fulfill their potential. The follower understands and owns the common purpose he or she has with the organization (Chaleff, 2003).

The Courage to Serve

There is a degree to which followers are serving the leader. Courageous followers realize the hard work that may be required to serve a leader, but do not shy away from it. They may take on extra responsibilities to lift some burden off the leader, as they do
realize that the leader is also a follower in another sense. They look for ways in which their strengths compliment the leader, but they also will stand up for the leader for the benefit of the organization. They share passion with the leader for the common purpose of serving the organization (Chaleff, 2003).

*The Courage to Challenge*

Courageous followers, in a sense, keep the leader and group in check. They know when something does not feel right with them and will voice their discomfort. They value harmony within the group, organization, and in the relationship with their leader, but they will not compromise their integrity to keep the peace. They are willing to risk rejection if they do what they believe is best for achieving the common purpose (Chaleff, 2003).

*The Courage to Participate in Transformation*

Courageous followers recognize the need for change when behavior that compromises the common purpose remains unchanged. They may lead the change and will continue to work with the leader and the group as they struggle together to deal with the difficulty of change. They also recognize their own need to change and become fully involved in the change process (Chaleff, 2003).

*The Courage to Take Moral Action*

Recognizing that they are answering to a higher set of values, the courageous follower is willing to take a stand against the leader, if necessary. This may involve direct disobedience, escalating their concern to the next level of authority, or even resignation.
This involves personal risk, but courageous followers know that in the end, their actions were justified (Chaleff, 2003).

What is the Leadership Role in Followership?

Sims & Manz (1996) present four different types of leaders and the types of followers that may either emerge from or compliment them. Looking at leadership, they explain, “Typically, the spotlight is on the leader, with the follower a forgotten part of the leadership equation—usually taken for granted” (p. 15). They note that each of the leadership styles they present is still widely practiced.

*The Strongman*

The Strongman leads using power and status. Sims & Manz (1996) coined the term “Boss-Rex” to describe the Strongman leader as one who mobilizes people through coercion and intimidation. If followers are not compliant, threats and punishment ensue. Few people like the Boss-Rex, but will superficially respect this individual. The Strongman is highly authoritative and is seen as the all-knowing source of wisdom. Sims & Manz state, “Sometimes the Strongman seems to be a self-proclaimed king or queen bent on dominating followers as though pawns on a life-sized chess board” (p. 29). This type of leader assigns goals based on his or her own objectives, and doesn’t expect a great amount of thinking to come from followers. Followers who do not accomplish the goals of the leader are often punished.

This individual exhibits behaviors that create subordinate followers, “yes” people who are constantly working to please the boss. They spend a significant amount of time
guessing what the boss wants, and focus less on creativity or innovation. They do not look for opportunities for improvement, but rather work to maintain the status quo. They lack the courage to challenge the boss, even when he or she is wrong.

*The Transactor*

Opposite of the Strongman, the Transactor is one who relies on the power of rewards to encourage followers. This individual focuses on the “what’s in it for me?” mentality of followers. Rewards are contingent on the performance of followers, which can include anything from a simple “Atta-boy” to bonuses and promotions. Performance level is based off of interactive goal-setting between the leader and followers. These goals often serve as guidelines for expected performance. Sims & Manz (1996) state, that although interactive, goals often reflect the aspirations of the leader, more so than those of the follower. Rewards are based only on performance; the employees are not expected to believe in the job or the work they do. Just the same as high-level performance being rewarded, low performance is reprimanded.

Followers of the Transactor become very sensitive to rewards and their performance is driven by them. Their focus on rewards supersedes their focus on personal growth and improvement. Sims & Manz (1996) state the followers of the Transactor are calculators who often are compliant and work as minimally as possible to receive their desired reward.
The Visionary Hero

According to Sims & Manz (1996), “The Visionary Hero creates follower excitement and emotional involvement” (p. 43). This type of leader is appropriate for organizational change, as he or she will establish follower commitment to a common purpose. He or she controls from within by creating and communicating a vision that followers can pursue, often through “You can do it!” speeches. While the emphasis is on the leader’s values, the Visionary Hero can create intense attraction and energy to followers using inspirational persuasion. This leader is not concerned with development, but simply getting the job done.

Followers of the Visionary Hero are eager to go above and beyond to serve the leader. However, Sims & Manz (1996) call these followers “enthusiastic sheep.” Their enthusiasm is dependent on the leader. This dependency creates a problem if the leader leaves, because his or her values leave too. Also, overdependence on the leader cheats followers of the opportunity to become heroes themselves.

SuperLeader

The SuperLeader is one whose focus is on followers more so than on him- or herself. This leader is “super” because he or she possesses the “strength and wisdom of many persons—by helping to unleash the abilities of the ‘followers’” (Sims & Manz, 1996, p.24). The SuperLeader develops followers into self-leaders who possess skills to influence their own behavior and thinking. They themselves are self-leaders who are highly focused on personal development. As visible figures of influence, the SuperLeader demonstrates this behavior as a way of transitioning followers from being dependent on
their leader for direction to being independent and focusing on their own personal development.

At the heart of self-leadership are empowerment and teamwork. Empowerment and teamwork enhance the capability and confidence of followers to make their own decisions, be innovative and act independently. Throughout the process, goals, feedback and rewards are essential. Challenging, but achievable goals give followers a direction for their personal development. Preferably, they should be defined and “owned” by the follower, as they become more powerful. Feedback and rewards throughout the process provide information along the way so followers are aware of their progress. SuperLeaders facilitate teamwork by encouraging team members to be high-performing units (Sims & Manz, 1996).

Sims & Manz (1996) created a model as depicted by Figure 5 that implies the external factors under which each of the leadership types may best fit. The situational elements used are follower involvement, compliance against commitment, and the degree of urgency, low or high.
When followers are simply expected to do what is necessary and compliance is required, the Transactor and Strongman styles are best. In a highly urgent situation, the commanding Strongman will likely be a more appropriate style than the rewards-focused Transactor. If commitment to going above and beyond is necessary, the SuperLeader and Visionary Hero styles are more likely to fit. However, Visionary Hero leadership is more suitable when there is a need for commitment to an immediate cause. Sims & Manz (1996) explain, “SuperLeadership reflects a long-term view with an intent to develop empowered and committed team-oriented followers” (p.55).

While Sims & Manz (1996) see leadership as a way of encouraging certain styles of followership, Kelley (1992) argues the opposite. He believes that committed followers are required for the leader’s success. The irony is little attention is often paid to how followers may interpret a decision or action. According to Kelly, “Followers are only
taken into account seriously when a decision is so radical that it invites a mutiny” (p. 200).

Even more ironic, Kelly (1992) found in his research that many followers are relatively dissatisfied with the quality of leadership in this country. Often studies of leadership suggest that followers are malleable beings who require transformation. Speaking of exemplary followers in particular, Kelly states that followers are insulted by the idea that they require transformation and empowerment. In reality, Kelly sees followers as being similar to consumers who look to “buy” a higher quality of leadership. Their “purchase” is based on comparisons of different leaders and they actually choose their leaders, to the extent possible.

Exemplary followers want leaders who act as partners, not ones who decide followers’ work. Most important in this partnership is communication. Partners are accountable for each other’s actions so they rely on each other to share information. Often, leaders withhold information because they believe it is within their right to do so. This can cause resentment and suspicion in those from whom the information is withheld. When information is out in the open, partners know where they stand. They know how their performance affects their partner, and they are self-motivated. However, feedback is always important, and in a partnership it is a two-way street. It is the responsibility of all parties to provide feedback when appropriate. When information is not provided, people will make it up on their own (Kelly, 1992).

Also important in the leader-follower partnership, according to Kelly (1992), is the sharing of risks and rewards. Both leader and follower should be willing to put
themselves on the line. Quoting Admiral James Stockdale, Kelly states, “leaders should only issue orders that ‘the issuer is willing to carry out by him- or herself in order to set an example’” (p. 209). Then, if all goes well, all enjoy the rewards; if not, they share the defeat. The unfortunate truth, Kelly explains, is that leaders often profit at the followers’ expense when efforts are successful. When there are problems, followers are the first to feel the effects of them. This can cause resentment in followers. Exemplary followers prefer leaders who are standing alongside them in the face of adversity. They feel encouraged to work harder for the good of the team when they know their leader is with them, not above them.

Kelly (1992), like Sims & Manz (1996), states that true leaders make heroes of their followers. They do this by creating an environment in which exemplary followers flourish. They remove any barriers that may hinder the performance of followers and keep away bureaucracy and minute administrative tasks that may interfere with the real work at hand. Often, leaders may even leave their followers alone. Constant interruption can also impede productivity. Leaders must trust that their followers will get the job done, and allow them to take credit when successful. Kelly states, “To the extent that you help further their personal dreams, you are a hero maker” (p. 222).

Bjugstad, et al. (2006) use an adaptation to the well-known Situational Leadership model created by Hersey & Blanchard (1982) to show how leadership styles would compliment certain follower styles. Hersey & Blanchard’s model argues that leadership style should be selected based on follower readiness. Figure 6 features a two-
dimensional model illustrating leadership styles that should be used based on the degree of the relationship- and task-oriented behavior necessary for a situation.

The four leadership styles are:

*Telling*: appropriate when high task-oriented behavior and low relationship-oriented behavior are necessary. This style works when followers do not have the knowledge, desire, or confidence to complete a task.

*Selling*: appropriate when both high task-and relationship-oriented behavior are required. This style works best when followers are not able to complete a task, but are confident and willing.
**Participating**: appropriate in situations high relationship- and low task-oriented behavior are needed. This style can be used to boost the confidence and motivation in followers who have the knowledge to complete a task.

**Delegating**: appropriate when low relationship- and task-orientated behavior is needed. This style is more hands-off, as followers are knowledgeable and confident enough to complete a task.

To take Hersey & Blanchard’s (1982) model one step further, Bjugstad, et al. (2006) parallel it with Kelly’s (1992) model to show how leader and follower styles can be combined (Figure 7). Bjugstad, et al. explain that by effectively combining the right leadership style with the followership style they encounter, leaders can maximize the strengths of the follower-leader relationship, while minimizing the weaknesses.
The participating style best fits with the alienated follower, who has the knowledge he or she needs to complete a task, but feel less involved. The alienated follower requires more of a “push” to act. The selling style works well with the passive follower who requires both knowledge and encouragement. The telling style compliments the conformist follower by focusing on followers who know how to complete a task, but are dependent on the leader for motivation. The delegating style works well with the exemplary follower who is able to complete a task without depending on the leader for knowledge or motivation (Bjugstad, et al., 2006).

Kouzes & Posner (2007) share Practices of Exemplary Leadership that demonstrate what they believe are the best methods for encouraging followers, and can also be practiced by exemplary followers themselves. They focus on leaders taking care of their followers, because if leaders take care of their followers, the followers will reciprocate. That is not to say that they need to be coddled, as exemplary followers do not wish to be (Kelly, 1992), but leaders must be aware that their followers may determine the reputation of an organization—especially if they are front-line employees.

One practice states that leaders should model the way for followers. A leader cannot simply voice his or her values, he or she must also practice them. The leader can also expect that followers will do the same. People follow the person first, not the plan. Values should be shared with followers and agreed upon by the team. An exemplary follower should already be aware of certain values through common sense, but it would be difficult to trust and follow a leader who does not practice what he or she preaches (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).
Also important, Kouzes & Posner (2007) explain, is that leaders should inspire a shared vision. They must have a desire to make things happen and share this desire with their followers. However, to avoid simply becoming a Visionary Hero (Sims & Manz, 1996), this means communication through dialogue, not monologue. They and their followers should partner together to create a collective vision for everyone to reach for. If everyone owns the vision they are more likely to keep with it.

Challenging the process is also crucial to the leader-follower relationship. Exemplary leaders do not aim to maintain the status quo. They drive innovation and change through experimentation and risk-taking. They look at failure as an opportunity to get up and try to do better next time. They understand that change cannot happen without thinking outside of the box. Exemplary followers are the same. They do not simply accept what leaders say at face value. They question things and try to think of ways to complete tasks in a way that may be better (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Leaders must encourage followers to do this. After all, followers often have more expertise than a leader (Kelly, 1992).
CHAPTER 3—IMPLIEDATIONS, CONCLUSION AND PERSONAL REFLECTION

Implications and Recommendations

Followership should be understood at all levels in an organization. From the top-down, followers should be acknowledged; from the bottom-up followers should know how they fit in and contribute to the organization. In this chapter, implications and recommendations are offered for each level of any given organization.

For Organizations

Organizations must be conscious of how they treat their followers. People are the greatest asset an organization can have, and are essential to carrying out organization strategy (Williams, 2002). As stated previously, each employee is a follower in the organization. Often it is leadership that is credited for great success, but “The ultimate test of leaders is the quality of the followers” (Kelly, 1992, p. 229). Organizations need to do the same for their followers, the ones who actually do the work, to know that they are a valuable asset. They should know that, while striving for leadership positions is always encouraged, they should focus on being exemplary followers along the way, and even after they assume a leadership role.

First, and foremost, organizations should practice a culture which embraces exemplary followership. Being a part of the culture, it becomes an expectation that all members of the organization will be exemplary followers. Followership should be clearly communicated as a value of the organization and can be worked into performance initiatives (Brown & Thornborrow, 1996).
Also, a culture which embraces exemplary followership will appreciate employees who actively speak up on behalf of the organization and offer new ideas. Followers will be encouraged to share their practical ideas if the threat of punishment or losing their jobs is nonexistent as a result of their candor. This will not only open the doors to a myriad of ideas that could contribute to an organization’s success, but it will keep leaders in check.

In addition to new ideas, teamwork will emerge. The author of this paper has observed that when several employees are trying to show that they can be leaders, competition can often arise and become destructive to the group, and possibly the organization. They are working for themselves, rather than for the group. When employees are working to demonstrate that they can be exemplary followers, they can work as a team with each other for a common cause, rather than against each other with selfish agendas.

In order to enhance followership in organizations the author recommends the following three suggestions:

1. Create and uphold a culture that encourages and embraces exemplary followership

2. Consider followership when looking at potential employees

3. Offer training programs for leaders to learn skills that foster exemplary followership behavior
1. *Create and uphold a culture that encourages and embraces exemplary followership.* There are multiple ways in which organizations can build exemplary followership into the culture of the organization. Kelly (1992) provides several different ways this can be accomplished. Creating and maintaining a followership-embraced culture can be done through:

- Orientation programs that stress the importance of exemplary followership
- Training programs that teach and hone the skills of exemplary followers
- Performance evaluation systems that rate how the individual carries out the followership role
- Reward systems that underscore the importance of exemplary followership and teamwork
- Rotational programs whereby people move back and forth between followership and leadership roles
- Role modeling wherein the leader assumes the followership role and demonstrates exemplary followership skills
- Leadership activities that specifically encourage exemplary followership, such as team-building, removing roadblocks to a follower's productivity, or being a synergy catalyst (p. 220)

2. *Consider followership when looking at potential employees.* Having established it as a part of the culture, organizations should consider exemplary
followership at the outset when looking at potential employees. Potential employees should be hired based on how the HR department or manager(s) perceive the individual will follow. They should be screened for their ability to think independently on top of their ability to simply do the job (Lundin & Lancaster, 1990). Members of the HR Department and Management should look for cues in interviews and in other aspects of the hiring process that demonstrate the type of follower they may be hiring.

3. Offer training programs for leaders to learn skills that foster exemplary followership behavior. Kelly (1992) recommends training that teaches the skills of exemplary followers, leaders should have training for developing and sharpening those skills while on the job (Lundin & Lancaster, 1990). They would learn the importance of recognizing and rewarding their followers appropriately. Also, they should learn and understand their followership style, leaders could learn their leadership style and how it plays in line with the different followership styles.

While Kelly (1992) suggests followership training, he does not offer ways of going about it. Followers should learn empowering skills such as problem solving, interpersonal communication, dealing with change, and conflict management (Lundin & Lancaster, 1990). For inspiration, the training department may consider observing or experiencing different types of leadership trainings, seeing as how followership and leadership have similar qualities about them. One suggestion may be to have participants take a followership assessment such as the one Kelly (1992) uses in his book, or a more in-depth assessment, such the Performance and Relationship Questionnaire (PRQ) offered by www.leadingandfollowing.com (Rosenbach, 2008) to
determine different follower styles. Activities can demonstrate the roles that each style plays in the organization along with the contribution that exemplary followers make. The training should revolve around the organization itself so that organizational values can be reinforced through the training.

For Leaders

Leaders have direct contact with followers, so their influence is relatively significant to the followership role. It may arguably be the most difficult, as they themselves must develop and display characteristics of an exemplary follower and foster the skills of those who follow them. They must also remain humble when success arises, recognizing that it could not have been achieved without a strong set of followers.

In order for leaders to enhance followership the author recommends the following seven suggestions:

1. Leaders develop themselves as both leader and follower
2. Listen to followers
3. Encourage teamwork
4. Reward exemplary behavior
5. Give feedback often
6. Show followers that they are valuable
7. Be conscious of the environment
1. *Leaders develop themselves as both leader and follower.* Leaders should continue to develop their skills as both a leader and follower. They should attend trainings, as they are provided, to better themselves at developing exemplary followers and being exemplary followers. If trainings are not available in their organizations, they should either advocate for it, or look for workshops available outside the organization that they can attend. They should look at models such as those presented by Sims and Manz (1996) and Bjugstad (2006) to become familiar with the follower styles they might expect to encounter and how their leadership style may or may not work with them. They should also know their follower styles so that they can be exemplary for their leaders. For their own development, they should consider using learning journals to document their progress (Comparetta, 2006).

2. *Listen to followers.* When leaders are fortunate to have exemplary followers reporting to them, they must to listen to these individuals. Their followers should be empowered to be honest with their leaders without fear that they will not be listened to, or that what they have to say will result in potential punishment. Followers are closest to the work at hand, and they need to feel comfortable with reporting progress, whether it is good news or bad, to the leader (Kelly, 1992). By not listening, leaders may witness a potentially exemplary follower becoming alienated.

3. *Encourage teamwork.* Leaders need to encourage teamwork among their followers. They can delegate tasks and roles, but they need to allow the team to execute. They must keep lines of communication between themselves and followers open, and encourage team members to the same for each other to create a high level of trust.
Leaders also need to ensure that the team as a whole celebrates in the success, or works together to fix any problems. The leader cannot take some, but not all the credit when all goes well, but should be prepared to assume some responsibility when the team falls short. They must remember that the success was a result of the team, not just the leadership.

They can strengthen and enhance teamwork skills through teambuilding activities. A suggested activity might be setting aside a day dedicated to a learning style assessment such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Briggs & Myers, 1998). Participants can take the assessment and then complete activities that demonstrate the different learning styles and how they interact.

4. Reward exemplary behavior. When followers demonstrate exemplary behavior, leaders should reward them. Large rewards and bonuses can be handled by the organization, and are not necessary all the time, but leaders should thank followers for a job well done, or show their appreciation for a follower who has gone above and beyond to complete a project. Recognitions should happen immediately following the action. If a supervisor waits until he or she is reviewing a performance appraisal with an employee, the employee may have forgotten about what he or she did. Also, by not acknowledging the behavior immediately, leaders give the impression that the followers have gone unnoticed (Lundin & Lancaster, 1990). Multiple occurrences could drive a typically exemplary follower into the alienated category.

5. Give feedback often. Feedback is crucial, and in the follower-leader relationship, it flows in both directions. Leaders should not only recognize exemplary
followership behavior, they should try to coach those along who appear to be struggling. When the alienated follower or sheep is underperforming, the leader must make him or her aware of it. Harsh punishment is not the answer, but the leader and follower must work together to enhance the follower’s performance. Leaders should know that they themselves cannot motivate followers, but rather they can find out what does and work with that (Kelly, 1992).

Tough empathy may also be necessary (Goffee & Jones, 2006). Leaders cannot coddle struggling followers and expect results. It may possibly even worsen the situation. They may need to come down hard on followers who are not performing. The challenge is making sure that, no matter how tough leaders get, they make sure that followers know it is for the betterment of the organization, and not as part of a personal agenda for the leaders.

6. Show followers that they are valuable. Leaders must reinforce the importance of their followers. When the work is monotonous, employees can feel as though they are simply part of a machine. Their loyalty dwindles because they feel as though anybody can complete the job and may feel more inclined to leave an organization. Leaders should challenge their followers (Kotter, 1990). By changing tasks around or introducing new projects, leaders show that they trust the knowledge and skills of followers and that they can contribute in more ways than one. Challenges also enhance personal development. If employees believe they are developing themselves and contributing to an organization, they will be more likely to remain with the organization (Bjugstad, et. al, 2006).
7. Be conscious of the environment. Leaders need to know their environment. They should know how followers are feeling without having to ask, especially since, no matter how open the lines of communication are, followers may not always be honest. Leaders should not only pay attention to team dynamics and individual performance, but Brown (2003) suggests possibly even using online sources. Checking blogs, which are often anonymous, may give honest clues as to how the work environment is functioning.

For Followers (at all levels)

The follower has the most important role in his or her development. Followers are self-leaders, which means that they motivate themselves and empower themselves to be courageous (Sims & Manz, 1996). While they can look to their leaders for some guidance, they cannot depend on them; followers are responsible for their own contributions to an organization and personal development.

In order for followers to be exemplary the author offers the following five suggestions:

1. Know your follower style and how it affects your work
2. Have the courage to speak up
3. Be a team player
4. Have integrity
5. Know and love your organization
1. **Know your follower style and how it affects your work.** Followers should, of course, be aware of their followership styles. They could take an assessment such as the one offered by Kelly (1992) or one that is more in-depth as a guide to their understanding. They should try to attend followership training, should the opportunity arise. If that option is not available, leadership training can provide them with many of the skills they can use to be exemplary followers. Like leaders, followers should also keep a learning journal to enhance their awareness and learn from their behavior (Comparetta, 2006). They should also seek feedback from peers and leaders periodically, not just wait for their performance evaluations. They should initiate conversations with their leaders to dialogue about their progress as followers.

2. **Have the courage to speak up.** Followers should be able to give constructive feedback to their peers and leaders. If they see areas for improvement, they must be courageous enough to speak up. It is possible that their courage may not make them any friends in the organization, but the bottom line is to do what is best for the organization. Speaking up is a risk that followers need to take; an exemplary follower knows this (Chaleff, 2003).

3. **Be a team player.** Teamwork is critical for the exemplary follower (Sims & Manz, 1996). When working in a team, exemplary followers work well with others and rely on themselves and other members of the team, not the leader, to collectively get a job done. As the leadership role will change hands often in a team situation, usually dependent on the expertise of team members, exemplary followers must be versatile. They must also ensure that the workload is equitable among team members and be sure
that they are reliable team members themselves (Kelly, 1992). Courage will be necessary
at times, as there may be times when a devil’s advocate is needed to prevent potential
groupthink situations.

Being a team player also means supporting the leader. After all, the follower-
leader relationship is essentially a team effort. Exemplary followers should recognize the
skills of great leaders and learn from them (Cavell, 2007).

4. **Have Integrity.** Followers must also act with integrity. This creates trust
between them and their leaders and teammates. If a follower wants to move up the
ladder to a new leadership position, he or she needs to demonstrate his or her skills as
an exemplary follower. In an organization that embraces followership, the individual
will stand out just by being an exemplary follower. The author of this paper firmly
believes that a cohesive team full of exemplary followers will likely realize success more
often than a team full of people competing to be the leader. Followers should work *with*
the team, not above, and they certainly cannot work behind the backs of other team
members. They must stay in communication with their team members, and definitely
their leader as well.

5. **Know and love your organization.** Followers need to know their organization
and how they fit into it. Perhaps love is a strong word, but they must also believe in the
organization. It is difficult for anyone to work for something for which they have little or
no passion. Sheep and conformists are not usually passionate about an organization.
Exemplary and alienated followers often are. The difference between the exemplary and
alienated followers is that exemplary followers share values with their organizations.
One should learn about the organization prior to employment. Kelly (1992) explains that exemplary followers seek to work at organizations whose values are in alignment with the followers’. If within an organization, followers begin to find themselves to be alienated, they should evaluate why this might be. If they find that it is because they do not agree with the values or goals of an organization, they should consider employment elsewhere...otherwise, the organization could make that decision for them.

Suggestions for Future Study

There is a lot of useful research on followership. However there are some areas in which the research is lacking. The area of followership could benefit from some expanded areas of study. The author offers three suggestions for future study to enhance the area of followership.

*No longer should leadership be studied in isolation*

Those who have studied followership have maintained that leaders need strong followers in order to succeed. If followership involves a partnership (Potter, et al., 2001) or teamship (Townsend & Gebhardt, 2003) with leaders, leadership is not mutually exclusive (Goffee & Jones, 2006)

*Go global*

Kelly (1992) did touch on followership in other countries such as Japan, but he confined it to only a few sentences. There is a deficit of research on followership in other cultures. With globalization so common with organizations, it is clear that an understanding of different cultures is imperative. Followership is no exception. What
western culture considers exemplary followership may not be the same in other parts of the world.

*Explore followership qualitatively*

There does not appear to be qualitative research on followership. The researchers have advocated for organizations to practice followership and use case studies to demonstrate how organizations have succeeded by embracing a followership culture or failed for not doing so. Research which involves evaluation of employee morale, engagement, or productivity before, and after, developing a followership culture in several organizations would only make a stronger case for what has been demonstrated. It would take time to achieve conclusive results, but just as change as an organization takes time and patience, so does valuable research.

**Conclusion**

Research on followership has created a compelling argument for why followers deserve far more attention in organizations. Kelly (1988 & 1992) and Potter, et al. (2001) have come up with different followership styles based on different variables that followers and leaders alike can use to better their performance. The basis of exemplary followership is courage (Chaleff, 2003) and it is up to leaders to empower them to have that courage (Sims & Manz, 1996). While leadership is important, and should not be ignored, understanding followership and the relationship between followers and leaders could greatly benefit followers, leaders, and ultimately, the organization.
Followers can do far more than just carry out orders, and there are various styles of followership. Exemplary followers know how to work as a member of a team with the common goal of generating success for an organization. They view a leader as someone with whom they can ideally partner to work as a team. The leader is not on a pedestal so high that a follower cannot be so bold as to give both favorable and unfavorable information.

Followership deserves more attention than it has been given. As researchers insist that leaders cannot be successful without exemplary followers, organizations should consider giving more attention to followership and follower behavior. Followers should not require coddling—after all, most are adults—but they do deserve to know their value in an organization. The greatest successes are often a result of teamwork and if organizations allow followers to contribute to the success and enjoy it just the same, they may have a full team of heroes.

Personal Reflections from the Author

Before writing this literature review, I found that I was often trying to determine an answer the following question: who is the better leader, the one who deals with change as it comes and becomes a role model for others to follow by going along with it and encouraging others to do the same? Or is it the one who asks if such a change is appropriate—is it the right kind of change? Is it the right time for change? Is it being executed properly?

First of all, I had it all wrong. The very person to whom I am referring in this question, regardless of the action taken, is not a leader. This person, who is dealing with
change from the bottom-up, rather than creating it, is actually a follower. So, who is the better follower? It was this very question that led me to research the topic of followership.

Thank goodness for people like Kelly (1988 & 1992) and the several others who have offered so much research on the topic. I had previously, although briefly, learned of Kelly’s model; however up until that point, it had never occurred to me that there were actually differing styles of following. Whatever model they choose to refer to, if people want to be successful, as leaders or followers, I believe that they really should be aware of the different styles.

What amazes me even more about the topic is how universal it is. Even though the context of this literature review is more for the workplace, it is prevalent in the real world. People lead and follow in their every day lives. I think of friendships, in which the purpose is mainly for one friend to serve another for the purpose of maintaining a positive relationship. When I think of the strongest friendships, it is those where friends are honest with each other. Although the truth may hurt, genuine friends are brave enough share it with each other if they believe it will strengthen the relationship, or better the other person. Like with successful organizations, best friendships take time to develop and some work of work to maintain.

I believe that people who are taught the skills of exemplary followers at a young age will grow into exemplary followers. I completely agree with Sims & Manz (1996) that different leadership styles will yield respective follower styles. Leaders, and possibly other followers, who understand followership styles, and really take an interest in
developing employees, can change their leadership styles to compliment follower styles, as discussed by Hersey & Blanchard (1982).

What I believe is the worst-case scenario for a follower is to become alienated. It is unproductive, maybe destructive, and nobody benefits from this situation. I see alienated followers as individuals who can, by nature, be exemplary, but have not felt as though they are of value to an organization. Maybe they feel as though they are not listened to; perhaps they were punished the last time they gave unfavorable feedback. Whatever the reason, leaders cannot allow followers to be alienated. At the same time, they should choose their battles wisely. Unfortunately, even alienated followers with the most potential to be exemplary may never get there. It is up to both the leader and follower to recognize when attempts at development are a lost cause and the follower should consider seeking another organization—before the organization does it for them.

The unfortunate truth is that the economy in its current state creates a difficult situation for followers to be able to take the risk of speaking out against an organization. They should just be happy to have jobs, right? True, but if everyone in the organization honestly has the best interest of an organization on their agendas, they must be courageous—courageous enough to share information, to receive information, and to fall down and get right back up again. There is a reason for why successful change takes time and patience. It requires asking the right questions, trying things and failing, and making sure people are ready to carry it out. The real boss is the organization itself. Maintaining meaningful follower-leader relationships will foster commitment from followers to the team and the organization.
So what have I taken away from writing this literature review? Thanks to Kelly (1992) and Potter, et al. (2001), I have learned that, as a follower, I am a pragmatic politician—no, not the ideal style. I recognize that I fit my style to the context of the situation. I do not consider this a total flaw, but I believe it is a matter of gaining courage. I am sure that having courage is the area with the greatest opportunity for most people. My new mission in life is to create a culture of exemplary followership in whatever situation I find myself. I have been inspired and I want to inspire others just the same as Kelly (1988 & 1992), Chaleff (2003), Sims & Manz (1996), and the several others have for me.
References


