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Business Behavior and Development Series

Follow the Leader? It's a New Game!

Mike Nordbye is principal of Proven Strategies, a business and management development firm. Recognizing that companies and situations are unique, Mike adapts the best management and leadership strategies to produce measurable results quickly for his clients. Being sensitive to individual situations, Mike skillfully adapts the philosophy and theory of validated growth strategies into practical, easy to implement solutions that have both immediate and sustainable positive impact on the bottom line. His goal always is to see ideas and systems translated into realities.

Mike holds a Ph.D. in Adult Learning Strategies, an MBA and a Masters Degree in Organizational Behavior and Development. For the past 15 years Mike has been working one-on-one and with groups to create meaningful results over a broad range of industries. Clients describe him as being direct with a sense of humor that provides for a light touch combined with an innate ability to inspire and create confidence.

*“Leaders rarely use their power wisely or effectively over long periods unless they are supported by followers who have the stature to help them do so.” – Ira Chaleff, *The Courageous Follower*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2003*

Organizations are successful or not partly on the basis of how well their leaders lead, but also in great part on the basis of how well their followers follow. Surely improving the performance of followers should be worthwhile. What is the role of the follower and how does it affect leadership behavior and effectiveness? How can members of the executive team participate more effectively to create a truly dynamic partnership relationship with their leader?

When there is a crisis, when a company fails or commits some malfeasance, everyone cries out: “How could that have happened here? How come nobody said anything?” Followers have a responsibility to speak up.

No matter how much partnership and empowerment there is, the CEO has ultimate authority and responsibility. But what about the responsibilities of the CEO's followers? The most capable team members fail when they gripe about their leader but do not say or do anything to help him or her improve or get back on track. This requires courage and skill.

What distinguishes an effective follower from an ineffective one is intelligent, responsible and enthusiastic participation in the pursuit of an organizational goal, according to Robert E. Kelly (*Harvard Business Review*, Nov.-Dec. 1988).

The movement away from command and control leadership has brought new leadership styles that are more democratic and coach-like. The terms “shared leadership,” and “servant leader” are used to describe some of these new ways of interacting. There are also new ways of interacting in the follower role. Setting aside possible aversion to the term, the new flatter business organization requires more responsible followers.

Managing the Boss

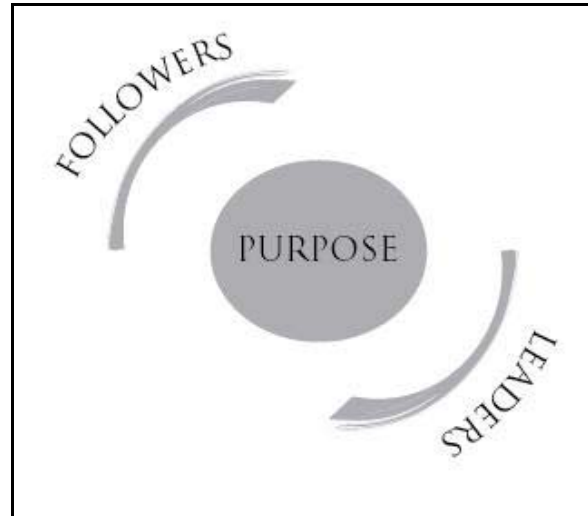
It is difficult to appreciate the pressures on the leader unless you have had that position. While *ego-strength* is a quality to be desired in a leader, it can easily be reinforced and deformed into *ego-driven*. The pressures at the top need to be managed. Responsible followers can help leaders stay on track and manage their decision-making processes in the right direction. Responsible and effective followers have an important role in order to maintain the desired partnering dynamics.

Many executives do some of these things quite naturally. But often the executive team members are hesitant to speak up when the leader makes mistakes, whether they are made from the best of intentions or the worst. After all, “She’s (or he’s) the boss.” Although we’ve grown beyond an authoritarian leadership model where followers have no accountability, we haven’t yet developed a model for responsible participation at the follower level for the new leadership styles.

Teaching is another example in which there is a symbiotic relationship: you can’t have an effective teacher without responsive students. Teachers and students form a learning circle around a body of knowledge or skills. Leaders and followers form an action circle around a common purpose. You can’t have effective leaders without responsive followers.

The Job of Effective Followers

The sooner we recognize and accept our powerful position as followers, the sooner we can fully develop responsible, synergistic



relationships in our organizations. According to Ira Chaleff (*The Courageous Follower*, 2003), there are three things we need to understand in order to fully assume responsibility as followers.

1. **Understand our power** and how to use it. As followers, we have far more power than we usually acknowledge. We must understand the sources of our power, whom we serve and the tools we have to achieve the group’s mission. We have a unique vantage point as follower or team member, but we have to know that and use it.
2. **Appreciate the value of the leader** and the contributions he or she makes to forward the organization’s mission. We need to understand the pressures upon the leader that can wear down creativity, good humor and resolve. We can learn how to minimize these forces and contribute to bringing out the leader’s strengths for the good of the group and the common purpose.
3. **Work toward minimizing the pitfalls of power** by helping the leader to remain on track for the long-term common good. We are all witness to how power can corrupt, and it takes courage and skill to speak up. We can learn how to counteract the dark tendency of power. Feedback to the



leader is necessary for the new leadership styles to be effective.

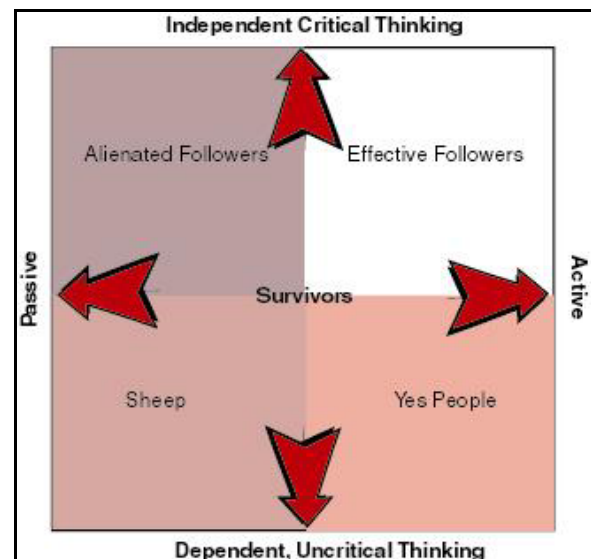
Five Followership Patterns

Robert E. Kelley, in his landmark article for *HBR* "In Praise of Followers" (1988), describes the behaviors that lead to effective followership. He defines two dimensions that underlie effective followership: the degree to which a person exercises independent, critical thinking, and the degree of active or passive participation. He describes five followership patterns.

1. **Sheep**, as Kelley calls them, are passive and uncritical. These followers lack initiative and a sense of responsibility. They perform the required task and then stop.
2. **Yes People** appear livelier but are equally unenterprising. They depend on the leader for inspiration and can be aggressively deferential, even servile. Some leaders like them and can even form alliances with them that can stifle creativity and energy.
3. **Alienated Followers** are critical and independent thinkers but take a passive stance. They are cynical but perform with disgruntled acquiescence. They seldom actively oppose or speak up.
4. **Survivors** are those followers who go along with the leaders, usually because they believe "it is better to be safe than sorry." They are adept at surviving change.
5. **Effective Followers** perform with energy and assertiveness. They are critical, independent thinkers and will proactively challenge decisions. They are risk-takers and problem solvers. They can usually work without strong leadership.

According to Kelley, "In an organization of effective followers, a leader tends to be more an overseer of change and progress than a

hero. As organizational structures flatten, the quality of those who follow will become more and more important."



There are four essential qualities of effective followers.

1. **They manage themselves well:** The key to being effective as a follower is paradoxically the ability to think for oneself. Followers also see themselves as equals to the leader they follow.
2. **They are committed to a higher purpose:** They work towards the purpose of the organization, and to certain principles and values outside of themselves. If they see a misalignment with personal values, they may withdraw their support either by changing jobs or by changing leaders.
3. **They build their strengths:** They have high standards of performance and are continually learning and updating their skills and abilities. They seek out extra work and responsibilities gladly in order to stretch themselves.
4. **They take risks:** They are credible, honest and have the courage to speak up. They give credit where due, but



also admit mistakes. They are insightful and candid and they are willing to take risks. They can keep leaders and colleagues honest and informed.

In information-age organizations, hundreds of decentralized units process and rapidly act on varied input within the design and purpose of the organization. This requires an entirely different relationship between leaders and followers.

Speaking up to the Boss

Part of the problem in following responsibly and pro-actively lies in the tendency for people to relate to authority figures as they would in a parent-child relationship. Early childhood memories are deeply embedded in the subconscious and trigger emotions in a split second. These memories are often out of our awareness, and it doesn't take much — a look, a tone of voice — to trigger anger or anxiety when confronted by the boss.

Developing one's degree of emotional intelligence can help regulate these split second reactions and allow more logical and appropriate interactions.

The danger in the leader-follower relationship is the assumption that the leader's interpretation must dominate. If this assumption exists on the part of either the leader or the follower, both are at risk. The leader's openness will diminish. Followers will easily lose their unique perspective and abandon healthy disagreement. Creativity and problem-solving processes become stifled.

It is obviously not an easy task to speak up and challenge the leader, but without the courage and skill to do so, corporate scandals can ensue. Giving candid feedback to the boss is a skill that is not practiced as often as necessary. Working with a neutral party such as a consultant or executive coach can help a follower or executive team member to act courageously and effectively.



Resources for Follow the Leader

Chaleff, I. (2002). *The Courageous Follower, Standing up to & for Our Leaders*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

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Kelley, R. E. (1988). In Praise of Followers. *Harvard Business Review*, Nov.-Dec. Reprint 88606.

**For more information on the
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of your business:**

Contact Mike at Proven Strategies

630-271-9550

mike@proven-strategies.com

www.proven-strategies.com

