

What Makes a Follower?

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Much about the nature of leadership has changed over the years, as many of the chapters of this book describe. And while we have seen minor changes in the content of leadership, most of this change has occurred in the context of leadership which is undergoing rapid and turbulent transformational change. The dynamic global economic and political environment, scarcity of resources, market place competition, instantaneous communications, new technologies and a rapidly changing workforce make effective leadership essential in these ambiguous, complex and uncertain times. The people in our workforces are more diverse, multicultural and heterogeneous, more dispersed, demand more collaboration than competition, insist on better interpersonal relationships with their leaders and they have high expectations for what their organizations will do to support them. We have traditionally looked to our leaders to create the plan, define the path and encourage the heart. In times such as these, more thought should be given to involving followers in these critical components of leadership.

Dr. Robert Ginnett has studied airline crews in order to describe the behavior of the most effective pilots in command. Ginnett found that the most effective leaders were those who engaged the entire crew as partners, with the result that each was fully involved in and attentive to the ongoing mission. Moreover, the leader had created an environment in which crew members were enabled to behave as partners, sharing information as they got it, offering alternative perspectives without fear, and actively seeking ways to improve operations at all times.

More thought should be given to the follower—what good followers might be—what good followers must be—and how to develop good followers? An organization that can succeed with followers who simply do what they are told poses leadership challenges that are different from the challenges of leading a team of creative, engaged followers. Conditions that call for proactive followers call for a particular approach to human capital development and leadership.

Leadership experts have long argued for consultation among leaders and followers when conditions permit, usually when the problem is complex, expertise is widely distributed among the members of a group, and there is time for deliberation. Then, there are the times when the pace of action is fast and orders are called for. The challenge these days is that the tempo of operations has increased in general. It is too easy to believe that every situation is one in which there is no time for consultation and no place for alternative ideas. Yet, the evidence is clear that followers often have information and ideas that are essential to the success of operations. In fact, the failure to bring all perspectives to bear on an operation can have disastrous consequences.

Follower Styles

The most effective followers know that they cannot be fully effective unless they work with both a commitment to high performance and a commitment to developing effective relationships with colleagues (including their supervisor), whose collaboration is essential to success in their own work. These followers are intent on high performance and recognize that they share the responsibility for the quality of the relationship they have with their leaders. Two dimensions (performance initiative and relationship initiative) describe four follower roles that are familiar to organizational leaders: the subordinate, the contributor, the politician, and the partner.

Types of Followers

Subordinate. The subordinate is a follower who does what he or she is told—competent at a satisfactory level but not one to whom the organization looks for leadership or to whom challenging assignments are given. We

have seen this follower in traditional assembly line operations. The subordinate keeps a job and may rise in a seniority-driven organization but demonstrates neither an interest in relationships nor a commitment to high performance. The subordinate is the only kind of valued follower in hierarchical organizations that operates only with orders from the top and obedience from the bottom. In organizational settings where this is desired behavior, “good” followers will exhibit these characteristics even when they are fully capable of and even desirous of behaving like individuals described in other quadrants of this analysis. It is also the likely style of a somewhat or completely disaffected follower who is not interested in giving anything extra, believes that high performance will not be recognized and rewarded, or whose job is not one of his or her primary concerns. New followers in an organization may also temporarily adopt this style while they attempt to discover “which way the wind is blowing” in terms of organization culture and expected follower behavior.

Contributor. This type of follower behaves in an exemplary ways, works hard and is known for the quality of his or her work. This person rarely seeks to understand the perspective of the boss, however, and generally waits for direction before turning to new challenges. Although this person is thorough and creative in obtaining the resources, information, and skills that are needed to do the job, the interpersonal dynamics of the workplace are not of particular concern. As a result, the contributor rarely shares her or his expertise and knowledge. These individuals can develop into full partners by gaining skills and perspectives on the relationship initiative dimension. Alternatively, their valued inclinations can be accommodated and their work value maximized by allowing them to focus on where they excel and feel comfortable doing, and by removing or minimizing aspects of the job that call for interpersonal relationships with the supervisor and others. Contributors pose a leadership challenge to develop them into contributing and engaged organization citizens.

Politician. The politician gives more attention to managing relationships than to maximizing performance. This person possesses valuable interpersonal qualities that are often misdirected or misunderstood. Followers such as these are unusually sensitive to interpersonal dynamics and are valuable for their ability to contribute when interpersonal difficulties. They can provide valuable assistance to the leader because they are willing and able to give insights into group relationships. However, often these followers neglect the defined aspects of their jobs in favor of the more relationship-oriented or political aspects of their relationship with the supervisor and others. This is a particular problem when others rely on them for job performance. Politicians can become full partners by focusing on job performance and learning how to balance these two concerns, or they can be accepted as they are and given responsibilities that call primarily for the skills and inclinations they possess. Since politicians often have well developed networks, they can be valuable during times of rapid change, threatening competition and organizational vulnerabilities. Jobs characterized by the dual role of follower and leader often are ideal for the politician.

Partner. Partners are those who have the competence and energy to do the job that they are assigned but who are also attentive to the purpose of the organization. At any time partners understand and share the goals of their leader and use this understanding to focus their own efforts. Such followers seek to master the skills required for their job and maximize their own accomplishments while seeking also to understand their boss’s agenda and the strategy for accomplishing that agenda. Partners understand how to get ideas into play when the tempo of operations is high and when it is time to do what they are asked.

The most effective leaders develop their followers as partners by teaching them how to play this role. But not all organizational members are, or need to be, partners. The role of partner is reserved for mature team members who are high performers with the experience and commitment to understand the big picture. It is a role to which all followers can aspire and is not dependent upon rank or position. Leaders and followers who behave as partners make modern organizations work at all times and under all conditions.

The partner is committed to high performance and effective relationships. The energy given to the development of relationships serves the purpose of gaining the kind of understanding that leads to plans and actions that anticipate new directions and contributions that serve unmet needs. Organizations that anticipate and keep pace with change in the global environment are characterized by leaders who encourage partnership and followers who seek to be partners.

Sometimes the best way to staff an organization that will rely on its members' behaving as partners is to hire them. At other times, leaders will need to develop partners from those assigned to the organization. In either case, leaders who have to hire or develop partners need a model to guide their efforts. What follows is such a model.

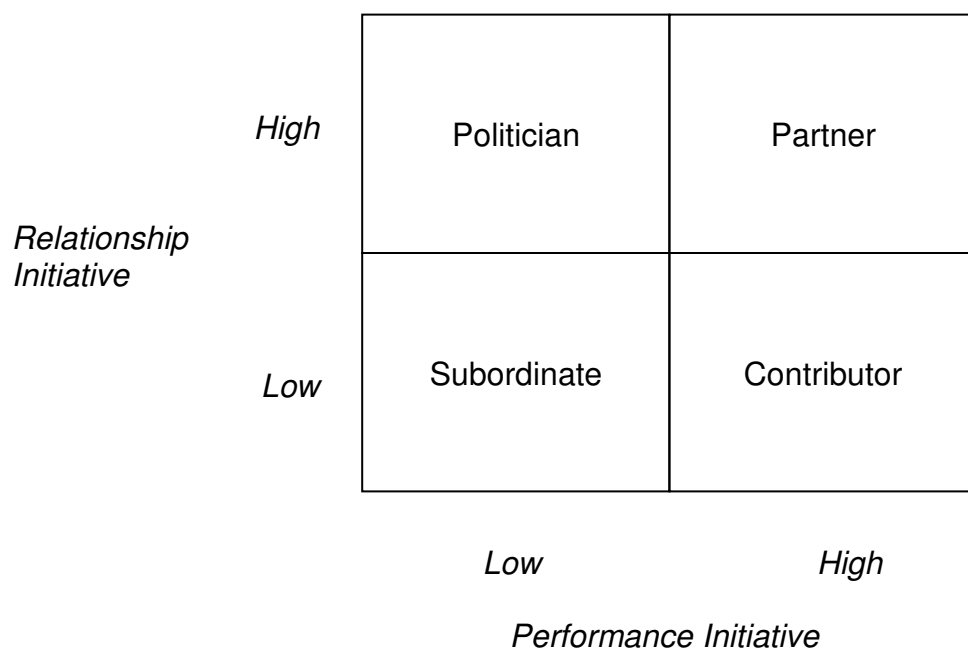


Figure 6.1: Follower Styles

Follower Behaviors

The four types of followers can be identified by their behavior on the performance initiative dimension and the relationship initiative dimension.

Performance Initiative

Performance initiative refers to the follower's active efforts to do a good job. A person who demonstrates a great deal of performance initiative finds ways to improve his or her own performance in the organization, which might include improving skills, sharing resources with team members and trying new strategies. The people at the high end of this scale understand that their future depends on the future of the organization and are not content to simply do what they were asked to do yesterday. At the low end of this scale one finds satisfactory performers, whereas at the high end one finds experts who lead in their fields and whose contributions strengthen the performance of the organization.

To assess this dimension of follower initiative, we need to consider the extent to which the follower thinks of ways to get his or her assigned job done, the extent to which the follower treats himself or herself as a valuable resource, how well the follower works with coworkers, and what view the follower takes toward organizational and environmental change. Followers differ in the extent to which they take positive initiatives in each of the four domains described below:

Doing the Job. Followers vary in the extent to which they strive to be as good as they can be at what they do. At

one end of this continuum are the followers who go through the motions, performing the tasks that are assigned to them up to the minimum standards required to keep their jobs, and doing little or no more. At the other end of this continuum, some followers care deeply about the quality of their performance. They set standards for themselves and others that are higher than the minimum prescribed by the organization, and that are focused on effective performance rather than on merely meeting defined standards. For these followers, work is an important and integral part of their lives. They take pride in what they do and apply high personal standards for performance from which they can derive personal satisfaction. They usually have leaders who model behaviors that lead to high commitment to superior job performance and who inspire followers to emulate them.

Working with Others. Another important dimension of follower performance is working with others in the organization. At one extreme is the follower who cannot work well with others and therefore is continually involved in arguments and disputes, irritating everyone in the process. These followers actually interfere with the performance of others in the organization. In contrast, some followers work alone. They do not have difficulties with others, but they do not really work with them either. Their performance is solely dependent on what they themselves do (or so they think). But many followers do take advantage of working with others, to varying degrees. When followers work effectively with others, they are able to balance their own personal interests with the interests of others, discovering a common purpose and working to achieve common goals. That means emphasizing cooperation over competition, finding success in the success of the whole group instead of in self-achievement only. They view their leaders as coaches, mentors and colleagues rather than bosses.

Self as a Resource. Another important aspect of follower performance initiative lies in the extent to which the person treats herself or himself as a valuable but limited resource. Some followers pay little attention to their own well-being, neglecting physical, mental, and emotional health. This may yield some short-term benefits for the organization when the follower is most effective in important ways; in the long run such neglect is likely to lead to burnout or stagnation (depending on the other aspects of follower performance initiative). Followers who will be effective over the long haul recognize that they are their own most valuable resource and take care to maintain their own physical, mental, and emotional health by balancing work and other interests (e.g., family and friends, community activities and relations, physical and nutritional fitness). Leaders play a very important role in helping followers maintain this balance by modeling its importance and supporting followers' efforts to stay healthy and valuable to themselves and the organization.

Embracing Change. The other important dimension of follower initiative is the follower's orientation to change. In many cases a follower's reaction to change is to ignore it or hide from it. Change is threatening and confusing, altering the time-honored and familiar. Some followers actively take the initiative to resist change, finding ways to prevent things from being done differently. At the positive end of this dimension are the followers who look for new and better ways to do things because they are committed to continuous quality improvement and see change as the vehicle for continuous improvement. These followers see change as an opportunity for improvement for their organizations and themselves. Such followers anticipate or look for change. They can be extremely effective as agents for change, by explaining to their coworkers the advantages of doing things differently; and showing by example how different doesn't have to mean worse. Leaders who are responsible for implementing change should evaluate their followers on this dimension, looking to those who will embrace change as their vanguard.

Relationship Initiative

Relationship initiative refers to the follower's active attempts to improve his or her working relationship with the leader. People who demonstrate a high degree of relationship initiative find ways to help the leader succeed because they know that "you can't succeed if your supervisor fails."

On the relationship initiative dimension there are several questions to be explored: To what extent does the follower understand and identify with the leader's vision for the organization? Does the follower actively try to engender mutual trust with the leader? To what extent is the follower willing to communicate in a courageous

fashion with the leader? How actively does the follower work to negotiate differences with the leader? At the low end of this dimension people take the relationship that they are given. At the high end they work to increase openness and understanding in order to gain a perspective that can inform their choices as a partner. The following subscales describe the relationship initiative:

Identifying with the Leader. Followers vary considerably in the extent to which they understand and empathize with the leader's perspective. Many followers simply do not. Viewing the leader as something strange and not quite human, they do not try to think about how things look from the leader's perspective or what the leader's goals or problems might be. In organizations with clear hierarchical structures and relatively strict chains of command, it is probably quite natural to see this element missing in the typical follower's approach to the leader. Followers may even be encouraged to think of their leaders as sufficiently different (i.e., superior) as to defy understanding by mere mortals. In contrast, some followers have thought more dispassionately about their leaders, understand their aspirations and styles, and have developed sufficient respect for the leader to adopt those aspirations as their own. These followers understand the leader's perspective, do what they can to help the leader succeed, and take pride and satisfaction in the leader's accomplishments. Leaders who try to make their own views, goals, aspirations and concerns understood by their followers make it much easier for their followers to adopt and identify with their perspectives.

Building Trust. Followers can also take the initiative to act in ways that will build their leader's confidence and trust in them. This means that the follower will look for and take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate to the leader that she or he is reliable, discreet, and loyal. Followers who demonstrate these qualities to their leaders will in turn be asked for their opinions and reactions to new ideas. Followers who do not seek out such opportunities for building trust, who do not understand or see as important this aspect of their relationship with their leaders, will be treated accordingly and will not be in a position to help their leaders as much as they might. Leaders can encourage followers on this by making available opportunities to demonstrate trustworthiness and by rewarding such behavior with their attention and their confidence and confidences. Mutual trust is the glue that holds the relationships between leaders and followers together.

Courageous Communication. Part of building trust includes being honest, even when that is not the easiest thing to do. This aspect of relationship initiative is important enough to consider in its own right. Some followers fear (often with good reason) being the bearer of bad news and are likely to refrain from speaking unpleasant truths. This can range from the classic notion of the yes-person to simply refraining from speaking one's mind when that might be uncomfortable for the speaker and listeners. But followers who take the initiative in their relationships with their leaders are willing to speak the truth even when others may not enjoy hearing the truth, in order to serve the goals of the organization. A follower who exhibits courageous communication takes risks in order to be honest. Followers are more likely to take risks when the leader has developed a culture where followers are not only allowed to deliver courageous communication but are expected to and are rewarded for doing so.

Negotiating Differences. Another aspect of relationship initiative concerns the follower's approach to differences that arise between leaders and followers. A follower who is oriented toward improving her or his relationship with the leader is in a position to negotiate or mediate these differences. In the case of a difference of opinion between a leader and follower, the follower may engage in open or hidden opposition to the leader's decisions, hiding his or her differences of opinion and quickly agreeing with the leader regardless of true personal opinion. Alternatively, the follower who is concerned about the leader-follower relationship will air these differences in order to have a real discussion that may persuade either party or lead to a compromise that is satisfactory to everyone. This, although desirable, can present a risk for the follower unless the leader has created an environment that encourages followers to air differences and to take a win-win negotiating approach in their interactions with their leaders. The big payoffs are outcomes that lead to creative and innovative actions that benefit leaders and followers.

Developing Partners

While each of the follower styles can be effective in organizations, leaders can create the conditions that lead followers to partnership. This requires that leaders know what they are looking for in their followers. The model we have described above presents this picture. Creating the right conditions for effective followership next requires a clear understanding of practical steps that invite followers to partnership.

Sharon Moore, owner of Moore Interiors, makes a point of making room for partners in her company. When Moore Interiors reorganized and moved functions between its two buildings, the warehouse became the company's new headquarters. Sharon decided to identify the former warehouse as "Moore Interiors" in bold letters on the warehouse and gave the job of putting the name on the building to a salesman in the company. She also gave the salesman the license to figure out how to do the job, which would take a week.

As the work unfolded Sharon could see that the salesman had chosen a different approach than she originally had in mind. He was putting three-foot-tall letters six feet apart so that "Moore Interiors" would stretch across the entire face of the large building and "Beauty for Rooms" (the company's motto) would make a bold statement on the opposite side of the building. Sharon thought about redirecting the young man's efforts but then thought of the cost to personal initiative of doing so. She decided to let the salesman finish the way he had started. In the weeks after the job was done, the company received numerous compliments on the appearance of the new headquarters building. Sharon decided that the job did look better than what she had had in mind, but more important, one more salesman understood that his ideas were valued. Even more important, Sharon shared her reflections about this event with all of the employees. The wider result was that everyone understood how the owner viewed quality, initiative, and teamwork.

Those leaders who share their own thinking about why they do what they do and push their followers to think with them about why things work the way they do also push their followers to become partners. Those who encourage feedback on operations and welcome questions from their followers have a greater chance of achieving partnership. Ginnett's work shows that the difference between the best pilots in command and the others is that they directly engage each member of the crew and empower them to be active partners in the success of the mission. The best partners learn how to share what they see and think because their leaders teach them when to give their input—and when not to. Leaders who work day-to-day to create partners will find them ready when they need them, and partners who are willing to accept this role will find that they are valued by their leaders.

Epilogue

It is counter intuitive but true, that larger complex organizations often offer employees the greatest freedom to choose follower roles, especially if they are what Karl Weick has called "loosely coupled" organizations. In these situations, individual followers can create partnerships that significantly increase the probability of their success, even when the organization as a whole "hasn't got a clue." The best will recognize this opportunity and grab it. So think about sharing this chapter with colleagues—followers and leaders. Remember that followers who are true partners act in the best interests of the organization and their leader. You can't lose!

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