THE ART OF FOLLOWSHIP

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Business publications dedicated to the analysis and attributes of great leaders tend to ignore half of the equation. The nature of leadership can best be understood by turning over the coin and studying followership.

Look on the shelves labelled 'Leadership' in your local bookshop and you will see an array of publications on the characteristics of great leaders. Beleaguered executives are invited to compare themselves with lists of leadership competencies, against which they always find themselves wanting. Attempts to imitate others, even the most successful leaders, are doomed to failure. As Bill Burns, CEO of CHF, the $20bn global pharmaceutical division of Roche, told us: "The idea of us all becoming Jack Welch is nonsense."

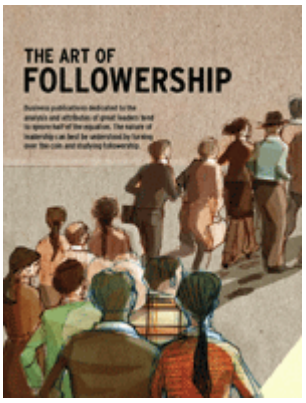
The underlying assumption of a great many of these books is that leadership is something we do to other people. We do not agree. In our view, leadership is something we do with other people. Leadership is a relationship; a relationship between leaders and followers. Followers are the other side of the leadership equation. Without them, there is no relationship and no leadership.

So, put yourself in the role of a follower and ask: "What do you expect of a leader?" Surprisingly, perhaps, the question is seldom asked explicitly by researchers. We have libraries full of leadership studies, but the analysis of followership has barely begun. Yet it is difficult to operate effectively as a leader without some sense of what followers want or need.

But is it possible to generalise about what followers want? Over the past 20 years we have interviewed more than 1,000 people from every level, from the boardroom to the shop floor, on the subject of leadership. These interviews have been complemented by directly observing a number of global organisations including Capital One, GlaxoSmithKline, Gap, Legal & General, Lufthansa, Nestlé, Polygram, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Roche, Sony, Unilever and WPP (Goffee and Jones, 1998, 2005). We have found that followers are as individualistic as leaders and, when interviewed, their replies are diverse. However, there is a pattern to their responses which can be described under four broad headings. The four elements that followers want from leaders are: authenticity; significance; excitement; and community.

AUTHENTICITY

First, followers demand authenticity. We want our leaders to show us who they are, to reveal some of their real human differences. Consider Sir Martin Sorrell, CEO of communications group WPP. Sorrell runs an organisation full of creative talent. Creative people are notoriously difficult to manage but they are critical to WPP's success. Sorrell himself is energetic, opinionated and clever. Over a 20 year period he has applied these talents to build a formidable global business. He has also learned to use some of his personal differences as a leader.



Interviews with Sorrell's colleagues show a fairly consistent picture. First, they will tell you of his rapid response to emails, whenever and wherever he may be. It is not unusual for Sorrell to spend a working week in the US but remain on UK time. All of Sorrell's 15,000 colleagues have access to him. As he told us: "If someone contacts you, there's a reason. It's got nothing to do with the hierarchy. It doesn't matter if they're not a big person. There's nothing more frustrating than a voicemail and then nothing back. We're in a service business."

But this is not the only difference that he communicates. "I am seen as the boring, workaholic accountant and as a micro-manager," he says. "But I take it as a compliment rather than an insult. Involvement is important. You've got to know what's going on." Anyone receiving a visit from Sorrell can expect some tough one-to-one questioning, on the numbers as well as the creative side of the business. Sorrell's difference reminds people that WPP is a creative business.

The other thing Sorrell's colleagues note is his permanent state of dissatisfaction. He constantly reminds people that 'there's a long way to go'. Sorrell uses his leadership differences – accessibility, close involvement in business detail and restlessness – to balance the creative side. Sorrell is authentic.

The best leaders excel in their followers' eyes by being themselves. So now ask yourself whether you communicate your differences skilfully to others. Do they know something of who you are and where you come from?

SIGNIFICANCE

Second, followers need to feel significant. In simple terms, they need recognition for their contribution. It is

remarkable how often, as individuals, we seem to want recognition but do not give it in return. The result is a recognition deficit.

Why is this? There are many explanations. Some executives just seem to be too busy, and mistake activity for effectiveness. These are the people who save up their recognition, good and bad, for the annual appraisal. Others seem temperamentally unsuited to giving personalised feedback. It is interesting – perhaps worrying – to note that a disproportionate number of introverts find their way into leadership roles. Of course, introverts can make others feel important, but it tends to take much more effort. In other cases, the problems appear to be cultural. The British, for example, are often uncomfortable both giving and receiving praise. In contrast, there are also some particularly aggressive corporate cultures where the imperative is to 'just do it'. Recognition is for wimps.

Effective leaders find ways to break through these barriers. Sir Martin Sorrell may be a tough, finance-driven leader, but this does not prevent him taking the time to carefully, swiftly and personally respond to emails from colleagues around the world. Greg Dyke openly praised the contributions of individuals at the very 'British' BBC within days of taking up his post.

During his long tenure as chairman of GE, Jack Welch was well known for his handwritten notes. He might thank a colleague for a job well done, or simply encourage them to greater efforts. Despite his colossal work load, Welch made the time to jot down a few well-chosen words of recognition. A colleague of ours recently visited an eminent Japanese business consultant and thinker in Tokyo and noticed he had a note from Welch framed on his wall. Many GE employees have similar testaments to their leader's recognition. Ask yourself whether you pay the same kind of attention to those you wish to lead. Do you make them feel that their achievements are important, and that they have a vital role to play?

EXCITEMENT

Third, followers need a sense of excitement. Leadership involves exciting others to higher levels of effort and performance. It is more than simply getting things done, or carrying on doing today what we did yesterday. How do leaders lift people in this way? Partly it is through using their personal differences. Partly it is through the movement from personal closeness to distance and the sense of edge which this often creates. Some of the most effective leaders we have seen retain a rather enigmatic quality as a result of their management of social distance. This, in turn, can make them a little mysterious and, yes, exciting.

But beyond this, leaders are often able to excite others through their passionate commitment to clearly articulated personal values and a vision. This is a common theme in leadership literature. Business leaders such as Microsoft's Bill Gates and The Body Shop's Anita Roddick seem able to infect others with their passions, whatever they may be. Effective leaders produce electrifying moments.

When we have finished leadership development workshops, we sometimes ask participants two questions. The first is: "Do you excite people to a higher performance level every day that you are at work?" The second is: "How will people feel when you return to your workplace after this workshop? Will they look forward to hearing your new ideas, or will they be worrying about what you will be complaining about this time? Are you a source of energy, or a drain?" Asking these questions can produce interesting and sometimes disturbing insights.

COMMUNITY

Fourth, followers want to feel part of a community. They have a deep-rooted desire to belong, to feel part of something bigger, to relate to others, not just to the leader. While head of Electronic Arts' European operations, David Gardner may have held a record of sorts in team-building away from the office. Gardner took his entire European workforce, almost 1,000 people, to Club Med on a four-day trip. At first, his people were sceptical, bordering on cynical, about the whole idea. But the event was such a success that the following year the staff clamoured to know where they were going next. "Nowhere," was Gardner's answer. Such jaunts were to celebrate success, he told them, and the numbers this year were not up to expectations.

Do you engender a sense of belonging? Are you a community builder? Do you help people to connect to each other and to the over-arching purpose of the organisation?

THE ART OF FOLLOWERSHIP

If this is what followers expect of their leaders, what should leaders expect of followers? What is it that makes a good follower, and how can followers contribute to the creation of effective leadership? These are questions for all of us, since although some may become leaders, we are all followers.

What makes these questions pressing is the persisting evidence that followers are often able to 'lead' leaders astray. In the early sixties, for example, President Kennedy escalated US intervention in Vietnam on the basis of, at best, questionable intelligence and advice from his colleagues. Some 40 years later, British prime minister Tony Blair's support for the Iraq invasion appeared to be on the back of similarly fallible inputs from advisors. In a business context, remember also how Ken Lay, the Enron chairman, blamed unscrupulous subordinates for his company's dramatic fall from grace. In each of these cases, detractors will argue that the leaders heard what they

wanted to hear.

Research by Lynn Offerman (2004) shows that leaders may fall victim to followers in a number of different ways. First, there are followers who impose a version of majority rule. Technology-led companies, for example, often develop products which appeal greatly to their technical colleagues but mean very little to end consumers. IBM, Apple and Dell have all experienced large-scale failures, at least partially explained by leaders unable to resist the unerring logic of the collective ranks of their technical specialists.

Second, there are circumstances where leaders may be fooled by flattery. We all like those who like us. But leaders are prone to swallowing the adulation of others and of developing an exaggerated sense of self worth. This is one way of explaining how senior executives, sometimes with exemplary leadership track records, may damage their hard-won reputations by accepting lavish compensation or retirement deals towards the end of their careers.

In each of these cases, followers may play an active (although not always conscious or intentional) part in the derailment. But clearly there are also circumstances where potential followers are simply disengaged or alienated from aspiring leaders and their organisations. In many respects, this detachment may be the most worrying symptom of modern organisational life. Just as bureaucratic roles squeeze out the lifeblood of leadership, so too they create disengaged subordinates rather than actively engaged followers.

All leaders must, at one time or another, occupy the position of a follower. Aristotle once noted that all great leaders must first learn to follow. So what makes a good follower?

First, good followers are prepared to speak up, even if this involves significant personal risks. Good followers will tell leaders what they see as the truth, whether they want to hear it or not. Warren Bennis (1989) quotes the legendary movie mogul Sam Goldwyn who, following a series of box-office disasters, brought his staff together and told them: “I want you to tell me exactly what’s wrong with me and MGM [US media company Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer], even if it means losing your job.”

As with leaders, good followers share a commitment to an over-arching purpose or corporate vision. They care enough about the organisation, its mission and their own linked ambitions to be able to voice criticisms. In extreme cases, and as a last resort, this takes the form of whistleblowing. But a much healthier situation is one where followers confront their leaders, and where concerns are listened to and addressed.

Of course, not all followers will voice the same concerns. Indeed, good leaders look for diversity and constructive dissent. The job of the leader is typically to hear these different voices and to then search for a common focus or set of interests which can form the basis of their leadership.

Second, good followers are prepared to complement the leader. They will provide a counterweight within the team, knowing well what the leader can and cannot do, understanding weaknesses and reacting accordingly. We often see this kind of teamwork in business in the relationship between an effective chairman and chief executive; or in sport between a manager and coach. Like the best leaders, good followers understand what they do best and when.

Third, good followers have a skilful appreciation of change and timing. They understand that leaders must conform – up to a point. Without a degree of conformity, leaders are unlikely to find points of connection or common cause with followers. But once followers see evidence of both competence and conformity – that leaders do what they say and are loyal – they are likely to grant leaders scope for innovation and change. Political leaders with narrow majorities often build up such credits, as US president Bill Clinton did to win support during his first administration. Similarly, Tony Blair was granted opportunities to create ‘new Labour’ once party members were convinced of his abilities to protect at least some of the crown jewels of ‘old Labour’ (social welfare, the National Health Service and so on). In each case, apparently reluctant followers are more party to the change process than is often acknowledged.

But just as followers can sanction change as well as continuity, they are also able to tolerate leaders shifting between social closeness and distance. They do not confuse leaders with their best friends. They recognise the moment when separation, if only temporary, is necessary and even inevitable to achieve the shared purpose.

Skilful followership, then, inevitably involves acceptance of some degree of ambiguity and uncertainty. This runs against popular wisdom, which holds that followers look to leaders to provide security. Followers who expect their leaders to have all the answers are naive, and such expectations do their leaders no favours. The point is to help leaders to learn. Followers should encourage a process of mutual exploration as both parties cope with changing contexts and demands.

Some followers may become leaders in the process. The reverse will certainly apply: there will always be times when leaders will need to follow. Ultimately, the follower’s duty is to resist blind obedience and to know when to withdraw support from a failing leader. This can be a fine line. Leadership inevitably entails personal risk.

Sometimes things go wrong. When they do, it is often, but not always, because leaders are derailed by a fatal flaw.

There are other times, however, when leaders fail for other reasons. For example, they may fall foul of external events or internal politics over which they have no control. The fact is that leadership is a risky occupation. There are no guarantees of success and no magic formulas. But we also believe that whatever the price of leadership, the prize is worth it.

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