

# Sharing the Limelight: Balancing Leader-Centric Teaching with Followership

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**Abstract.** Leadership is a social influence process in which leaders and followers work in partnership to support an organization’s mission and values. Yet the way leadership is taught places nearly exclusive emphasis on only one side of this relationship; namely, students learn about the traits and behaviors of effective leaders. Followers, to the extent they are considered at all, are typically conceptualized in a mostly passive role, as subordinates who are the targets of the leader’s influence. Neglecting the role of followers, and specifically, the consequential impact different kinds of follower behavior can have, conveys an implicit message that leaders matter a lot and followers don’t much at all. The exercise described herein addresses this imbalance. Its objective is to help students develop a greater appreciation for the critical, complementary role followers play alongside leaders in organizations, as well as learning the specific behaviors and attitudes of “exemplary” followers.

**Keywords:** leadership pedagogy, followership.

“Organizations stand or fall partly on the basis of how well their leaders lead, but partly also on the basis of how well their followers follow” (Kelley 1988).

## 1. Introduction

Business schools highlight developing future leaders as a key component of their missions, with individual courses and entire programs built around teaching students how to be effective leaders (Collinson & Tourish 2015). Yet little evidence exists supporting the effectiveness of the various teaching methods instructors use (DeRue, Sitkin, & Podolny 2011). Further, critics of current leadership pedagogy argue that prevailing approaches promote a one-sided view that elevates and exaggerates the leader’s role in effecting change in organizations (Collinson & Tourish 2015, Petriglieri & Petriglieri 2015, Tourish, Craig, & Amernic 2010). For example, this flattering focus on the transformational leader is reflected in the way prominent business schools promote their leadership programs to potential students. A review of business schools’ websites found descriptions of organizational leadership as a “noble pursuit” appealing to

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students who have a passion to “change the world” (Stanford). Graduates will “shape the business world of tomorrow” (Wharton), “inspire others” (Dartmouth), and “show the way to others” (IMD) (Tourish, Craig, & Amernic 2010). This romanticized view of leaders as exceptional members of an elite group, i.e., the “heroic leader” stereotype that is also pervasive in popular culture and media, neglects the critical role followers play in the social influence process that defines leadership (Collinson & Tourish 2015, Kellerman 2019, Petriglieri & Petriglieri 2015, Tourish, Craig, & Amernic 2010). What is needed, then, is a redirection from an exclusive focus on leader development to leadership development, the latter a more expansive, contextual, and relational perspective. Namely, while the conventional leader-centric approach addresses the competencies needed by individual leaders to be successful, leadership development considers how leaders and followers enact their respective roles most effectively to achieve successful outcomes (Day 2001, Schyns *et al.* 2011). By explicitly including follower skills and behavior, leadership development captures a key element that is mostly overlooked in management education. The purpose of this article is to offer a classroom exercise for educators that begins to redress this omission. First, though, a brief examination of the followership construct is presented.

## **2. Followership**

As noted above, leaders are commonly conceptualized as exceptional individuals who are top-down agents of change, while followers are viewed as recipients or targets of their influence attempts (Petriglieri & Petriglieri 2015, Tourish, Craig, & Amernic 2010, Uhl-Bien *et al.* 2014). The leader-centric perspective is linked to a corresponding stereotype of followers as passive conformists (Chaleff 2009, Kelley 1992). In addition to discounting the follower role, the glorification of leaders may lead some individuals to pursue leadership roles for the acclaim and status, rather than for the opportunity to work with others towards goals about which they are truly passionate. In this vein, Susan Cain (2017), in a provocative New York Times op-ed titled “Not Leadership Material? Good. The World Needs Followers,” contends that the emphasis placed on leadership activities in the college admissions process motivates high school students to join clubs and compete for positions that look good on applications, instead of getting involved in extracurricular opportunities they really care about. To summarize, the “myth of leadership” (Kelley 1992, p. 15) of the transformational, unidirectional change agent needs to be offset in management education by a greater appreciation of and examination of the role of followers in organizational success (Kellerman 2019). As part of this effort, followership needs to be reconceptualized, removing the negative connotation of a passive individual who is “led” by another (Yukl & Gardner 2020) to a proactive, complementary role enacted in partnership with

leaders (Kelley 1992). To begin, the question of what constitutes effective followership is explored below.

To examine the characteristics and behaviors of effective followers, a first step is recognizing that a follower is a role, not a person, and the same is true for the term “leader”. While a follower is typically considered to be one of lower hierarchical rank with less formal power than a leader, the leadership myth promotes an artificial, fixed demarcation between the two that does not represent reality. For example, organizational members often occupy both roles simultaneously, i.e., managers have superiors as well as subordinates. Most individuals probably spend more time in the follower role than the leader role (Kelley 1992), and most new business school graduates are primarily followers, at least initially (Benjamin & O’Reilly 2011). As well, rather than “leader” being an exclusively formal appointment, an individual may emerge as a leader in one context while occupying a follower role in another, due to, for example, their experience level, expertise, or area of passionate interest. In addition, some individuals likely have dispositional tendencies toward the leader or follower role, reflecting personality traits or preferred conflict-handling styles. Finally, some people may gravitate toward followership over time, as a result of unpleasant or unsuccessful experiences when attempting to lead. Indeed, the complexity and fluidity of leader and follower roles in organizations further highlights the need for greater attention to effective followership in management education.

Followership has been formally defined as “the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process” (Uhl-Bien *et al.* 2014). While followership research dates back to the 1950s (Baker 2007), it first gained prominence in the literature through publications by Kelley (1988) and Chaleff (1995), followed by Kellerman (2007). Rejecting the view of followers as “sheep” or “yes people”, Kelley described effective followers as enthusiastic, intelligent, and self-reliant organizational members who partner with leaders to accomplish organizational goals. Chaleff focused especially on the accountability followers bring to the leadership process, coining the term ‘courageous follower’ to describe one who is honest and forthright with leaders to ensure they wield their power and influence in ethical, effective directions. Both authors developed two-by-two matrices to form typologies of followers, described next.

Kelley (1988, 1992) organized his classification according to the two dimensions of (1) independent, critical thinking and (2) active engagement. “Exemplary” followers are described as “their own persons” who “think for themselves,” are “self-starters,” and “go above and beyond” (Kelley 1992, p. 126). (See Appendix A for more descriptors of Kelley’s “exemplary” follower type.) In addition to exemplary followers who score highly on both dimensions, Kelley’s two-by-two matrix creates four other followership types. “Passive” followers are low on both dimensions. They lack initiative and are dependent on the leader for direction, completing tasks without much enthusiasm.

“Conformists” also score low on independent thinking, but are more actively engaged than passive followers. They are described as deferring unquestioningly to the leader’s authority; “good soldiers” who are eager-to-please and gladly carry out the leader’s requests. In contrast, an “alienated” follower scores highly on independent thinking, but is passive. He or she critically evaluates the leader’s ideas and plans with a dose of healthy skepticism, but for a variety of reasons (e.g., a history of broken trust, a “why bother?” learned attitude) expresses disagreement through griping and cynicism, rather than effecting productive change. Lastly, Kelley describes the “pragmatist” follower as occupying a safe, middle ground on the independent thinking and active engagement dimensions. He or she may occasionally speak up when it feels safe to do so, while stopping short of a wholehearted commitment to ensuring that the leader’s decisions and the team’s efforts remain focused on the organization’s overall purpose and goals. Although Kelley writes that most people have a default followership type they find most comfortable, it is not inflexible and can change under different circumstances.

Chaleff (1995, 2009) likewise developed a followership matrix with two axes. In this case, four follower types are created by (1) the degree of support the follower gives the leader and (2) the extent to which the follower is willing to challenge the leader’s decisions or behavior when they jeopardize the organization’s purpose or values. While these two dimensions may seem similar, Chaleff differentiates them as follows. “Support” refers to the extent to which followers dependably carry out the leader’s initiatives with energy and without needing a lot of oversight. “Challenge” references the degree to which followers speak up and stand up to leaders whose decisions or directions they believe are not well thought-out, are too risky, or otherwise do not align with the organization’s best interests. The four follower types created in this two-by-two matrix are labeled “partner” (high on both), “resource” (low on both), “implementer” (high support, low challenge), and “individualist” (high challenge, low support).

To summarize these two approaches, while Kelley terms the best follower as “exemplary” – an independent thinker who is actively engaged – Chaleff deems the “partner” type as superior – a follower who enthusiastically gets behind a leader’s vision and works toward its accomplishment, yet does not hesitate to question his or her directions if the organization’s values or goals are threatened. Clearly, these two conceptualizations of the best kinds of followers share more similarities than they are different. Their descriptions of the negative follower types share common features, too, such as deficits in energy and initiative, and a lack of critical thinking and questioning concerning the leaders’ decisions or plans. In contrast to “good” followership, the implication is that “bad” followership can impede progress and productivity, and at the extreme, even threaten a unit’s or organization’s well-being from an ethical standpoint.

Lastly, Kellerman (2007) used an approach different from the previous two to create her follower typology. She developed a single continuum of engagement