

Followership

As often as we are leaders, we too are followers in the way that we lead by example and participate in a variety of activities. The followers are usually the most important members of the group since the leader needs them to get things done.

There are five common reasons why followers are willing to follow a leader. The leader's job is to understand why the followers keep coming back to create the most positive environment possible. The rationale become more positive as the list goes on.

Fear of retribution: "If I do not follow, I may lose my job!"

Following out of fear is not so much following as being tugged along at the end of a rope. The leader in such cases is using coercive push methods that will work only as long as the follower sees no other choice. Fear is not the tool of effective leaders (and certainly not ethical leaders). At best, fear-based approaches gain weak commitment and need constant attention lest the follower freezes or flees.



Blind hope: "We must do something. I hope this works!"

Here, the follower is desperate for some solution, and what the leader is offering is either the only option they see or the best of a relatively weak set of choices. The follower is thus not so much following out of agreement but from a lack of alternatives. Leaders should watch out for hopeful followers, who are likely either to be disappointed and disillusioned when less than a perfect outcome ensues, or who will jump ship and follow others if they give them more hope.

Faith in Leader: "What a great person. If anyone knows the answer, they do!"

In this situation, the follower is blind to the solution but is following because they have such faith in the leader, they believe that they will, by some magic or genius, provide the answer to the follower's needs. Again, there is significant hope in this motivation and could lead to disappointment, but at least there is more commitment to the leader, and failure is more likely to lead to the follower accepting situational explanations rather than point the finger at inadequacies in the leader's capabilities.

Intellectual agreement: "What a good idea. That makes real sense."

Here, the follower understands the logic of the argument that the leader is putting forward and hence is following the rationale rather than the leader as a person, who they may respect but are not blindly following. This level of followership is typical of educated people who need to understand the reasons why things happen. They may also have emotional commitment, but it typically comes on after rational buy-in has occurred.

Buying the vision: "What a brilliant idea. I don't care who thought of it."

When people buy a vision, they are emotionally closing on a view of the future that is appealing to them in some way and pulls them forward. They are not following the leader and the logic of how they will get to the vision is something they are happy to put off to a later date. Visions are much talked about in the leadership literature, and can be remarkably effective at motivating people, but only if they can be sustained over a period of time. It is one thing to have a vision and it is another to keep going during the difficult days that are typical of the journey there.

When followers are placed in a difficult situation to decide whether or not to abandon ship, they make judgments about both the leader and the solution. The resulting style of followership is displayed in this grid:

		Respect for the solution		
		Weak	Neutral	Strong
Respect for the leader	Strong	Blind Faith	Powerful Buy In	
	Neutral	Wait and See		
	Weak	Outright Opposition	Blind Hope	

The leader's job is to get everybody to a strong buy in position in a way where the follower's feel self committed to the solution.

Do your followers like you?

Why do people follow in the first place? They agree with your plan, like your personality, and expect to receive something in return (friendship, personal growth, compensation, etc.) Leaders should first establish respect in three key areas before expecting that a follower will be committed.

Goodness

If followers judge you to be good, then they know you have similar values to them. People with similar values share the same social rules and judge each other to be worthwhile. Similar values also encourage people to feel that they are in the same social grouping as one another. They say 'I am like you' and hence 'I like you'. Effective leaders understand the values of their followers and, at the very least, avoid breaking them wherever possible.

Similarity

We use external similarity as a short-cut to determine if a person is like us on the inside. If a leader seems to be like the follower (from the clothes, to the way the leader speaks, to the common experiences) then followers tend to like and trust the leader. Leaders have the 'common touch' that lets them speak to others in their own language, as an equal.

Vulnerability

We see ourselves as vulnerable, often with the sense of being a child that we all have to some degree. We see our failings, our limitations, and weaknesses. Leaders who appear perfect do not seem to be like their followers, and so we they distance themselves more from the perfect leaders. Leaders who demonstrate vulnerability are showing themselves to be human, just like the followers, so they will follow them - just so long as that vulnerability is not in an area that may threaten the follower or may prevent the leader from effective leadership.

Followership Style

According to Robert Kelley¹, there are five different followership styles.

Alienated followers

¹ Kelley, R. (1992). *The Power of Followership*, Bantam Dell

Alienated followers are deep and independent thinkers who do not willingly commit to any leader.

Passive followers

Passive followers do as they are told but do not think critically and are not particularly active participants.

Conformist followers

Conformists are more participative than passive followers, but do not provide particular challenge.

Pragmatic followers

Pragmatic followers are middling in their independence, engagement, and general contribution.

Exemplary followers

Exemplary followers are ideal in almost all ways, excelling at all tasks, engaging strongly with the group and providing intelligent yet sensitive support and challenge to the leader.



