Flagship Followers: Leadership Flip

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Abstract: Followers are necessary for a leader yet workforce training, organizational development programs and higher education focus only on leadership skills with little attention to followers. The perception and role of follower is changing due to social media. A literature review finds that followers have variety in their styles with skills that not only benefit the leader but the organization. Organizations should invest in training to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities of followers and capture the best practices of the critically thinking and engaged followers as well as integrate followership skills into workplace training, organizational development and higher education.

Keywords: followership, leadership, workforce development, higher education, human resources

The student raised her hand while wiggling in her seat. I was answering another students'question, but her hand pulsed up and down like a fast heartbeat. My students are passionate, and it creates for an engaging learning experience. I take a breath and point to her, she pops out of her seat and asks, "what makes a leader?"

The room goes silent and all eyes on me, Professor Murphy.

"A leader is a person with followers," I say simply, "and it is that simple."

She does not sit down and in a passionate, urgent voice asks, "Can you give examples?"

"The Kardashians have followers, I don't follow them, but others do. So, we could say they are social media leaders, their followers can be counted on social media. Hitler had followers too. What makes them leaders? Followers. Followers make the leader and in their execution of the mission give a competitive advantage, so it is a worthwhile investment to develop followers."

She sat down, smiling.

The discussion continued and I went into leadership theories as well as the top ten leadership qualities and the five themes of: strong ethics and safety, self-organizing, efficient learning, nurtures growth and connection and belonging which are in terms of the followers and from the Harvard Business Review article entitled "The Most Important Leadership Competencies, According to Leaders Around the World" by Sunnie Giles (March 2016).

Making a good, successful leader discussion led to the common nature versus nurture discussion where some leaders are born with some qualities and some leadership skills get developed over time. Like any expertise and as explained by Malcolm Gladwell in his book Outliers (2008), it takes time and opportunity to become an expert, so it takes time and opportunity to become a successful leader too.

Organizations invest to develop leaders by creating and delivering internal leadership programs as well as sending potential leaders to external leadership retreats with yet other prospective leaders getting expensive coaches to prepare them for c-level positions within the organization

(Samani & Thomas, 2016). Making leaders takes time as an expensive investment, whereas followers are just born.

"You've probably heard that success is preparation meeting opportunity, but I will say that a successful leader attracts followers, followers choose to follow. Everyone has comfort and experience as a follower before they even start their first job," I look out at the lecture hall, they are scribing it in their notebooks. Pens set down and big eyes on me when she pulses her hand in the air again, I point, she stands.

"Professor Murphy how come we don't study followers?" her voice is fast, loud and excited.

The bell rings, no one moves, class is over, but they are still looking at me with those big eyes and hands ready to write.

"Another good question! The flipside of leadership is followership, we are all followers but might not be aware of it, who do you follow? Do you know? If followers make a leader, who have you made a leader? Write in your notebook, right now, the number that you think, a good guess, at how many people and organizations you follow.Then before our next class, check your number against the actual number on your social media accounts, bring both numbers for our next class," I say with a smile. They are mirroring my smile and smiling back at me,packing up for their next class.

Yes, a leader is only a leader if they have followers. That is the only definition of leadership for this writing, a leader is a person with followers. Period.

There are countless books, articles and experts on leadership. Leadership theories, leadership behavior, leadership interactions, leadership traits and how to learn to be a leader are common studies for any MBA student,yet followership is important, without it there would be no leaders.

So clearly followers are important but then what is followership? What are the qualities of a follower? How do followers impact leadership? Why is it important? Could followers benefit from further development? So many leadership programs, training and executive retreats are available for potential leaders, how can the follower be developed to intentionally and attentively direct their energy as a follower?

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Followers execute their leaders' strategy, Leaders cannot exist without followers. Leaders and followers work together to take the vision from the communication to daily work operations – so it's two different sides of the same coin (Lapierre & Carsten, 2014). A follower is a person that

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directs their thoughts and actions toward the vision of a leader to accomplish predetermined goals. The follower is an active member of the organization, intentionally giving their knowledge, skills and abilities toward the leaders' vision to achievement (Ramazzina, 2017).

According to Kelley (2008), a leader in the studies of followership, followers account for 80 percent of the success of an organization, while leaders are only 20 percent. The followers' attention and energy can be self-directed toward the leaders vision and achieve their work responsibilities effectively toward the common goal. Followers are not passive but active and selective in the leader and ideas to follow (Tanoff and Barrow, 2002).

"Real leadership is being the person others will gladly and confidently follow," according to John C. Maxwell, a leader in the studies of leadership. Being a great leader is all about having a genuine willingness and a true commitment to influence the thinking and behavior of followers to achieve a goal through positive influence and shared vision (Maxwell, 1999). No leader can ever achieve anything great or long-lasting all alone (Bennis & Thomas, 2007), followers are required to make a leader.

In research, until recently, followership pedagogyhas been minimal. Over 100 years of leadership studies have not given definition (Bligh, 2011) or attention to this critical role of following. Social media and the internet have flipped the attention from leaders to followers as technology enables massive amounts of information for, and about, followers. Being a follower is easier and faster too, the internet and social media enables easier and faster following without geographical boundaries or time constraints. Information is right-sized for the follower, in chunks, at a time convenient for the follower. The person or organization that leads, can instantly let their followers know updates, and respond to their followers reaction, making a lean, agile feedback loop. Due to leaders having immediate feedback they can change their course of action if needed, enabling iterations of refinement in a symbiotic relationship.

Additionally, if a leader is only a leader by having a following then it is also true that a follower is only a follower if there is a leader. So, followers co-construct (Carsten &Uhl-Bien, 2012) or socially construct their leader (Carsten et al., 2010; Kean et al., 2011) through followers reactions and exchanges that serve as an "upward influence" (Kelley, 2008), the unspoken perspective about what creates a leader (Lord & Brown, 2004) and the evolving processes (Koonce, 2016). The perceptions of the follower and the relationship includes knowledge, skills and abilities of the follower having an influence on the effectiveness of the relationship, so impacting both roles

Kelley Followership Model

Kelley (1988) defined followership along two dimensions: critical thinking and engagement in organizational decisions. Kelley then categorized followers into five classifications: passive, conformist, alienated, pragmatist and exemplary styles (Kelley, 1992).

The passive followers are low on both critical thinking and engagement. They prefer to let others do the thinking so do just enough to keep their jobs. The passive followers follow instructions but require close supervision.

Conformistscan appear engaged and energetic but low on critical thinking, they are involved in decisions, and yet eager to please (Kelley, 1988)Passive engagement involves followers waiting for direction from the leader before reactively taking action (Latour &Rast, 2004).Conformists follow others' thinking and like to please the leaders; consequently, autocratic leaders tend to prefer conformist followers (Kelley, 2008), sometimes thought of as "yes men."Alienated followers are engaged with the ideas and leaders but tend to interpret the ideas and leaders with a negative perspective that can isolate them (Kelley, 2008).

The pragmatist style by followers have a moderate level of engagement and critical thinking (Kelley, 1992). They pause before acting and prefer the status quo as any new leadership communication could be a "flavor of the day" so they wait for others to act first (Kelley, 2008).

Exemplary followers engage actively and have independent critical thinking. They process the information from leadership and may discuss it with diplomacy and tact. They work well with others (Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson & Morris, 2006) and are willing to challenge leaders by providing alternative solutions if they think it is beneficial (Kelley, 1992). Exemplary followers "assume responsibilities beyond their minimum job requirements and exert considerable effort to accomplish goals" (Blanchard Welbourne, Gilmore, and Bullock, 2009, p. 112-113).

A follower can be an active and contributing member of an organization, their behavior is a contributing effort to achieve organizational goals. Followers can get greater satisfaction, reward, realization and fulfilment of one's talents and potentialities, and other benefits from work than poor followers. Having good followers enhances organizational effectiveness and adaptability (Hurwitz and Hurwitz, 2009). According to John S. McCallum (2013), a follower has eight qualities: judgement, work ethic, competence, honesty, courage, discretion, loyalty and ego management.

II. DISCUSSION

Engaged followers are productive and have workplace knowledge, skills and aptitudes that businesses value. Followers are people who capture and exchange best practices, question processes to make it better, have a strength in discipline for self-directed learning and have insight and wisdom to have a relationship with others (Ramazzina, 2017). Wong and Law (2002) found that the emotional intelligence of followers and leaders have positive effects on job performance and attitudes, additionally, that the emotional labor of the job moderates the emotional intelligence of the job outcome relationship.

To gain the benefits of the critically thinking and engaged follower, and the leader, it is critical to recognize they are in a relationship that is in progress. A relationship is jointly created by the followers and leaders (Baker, 2007; Riggio, 2014). The dynamics of the exchanges in the relationship is critical to understand both the outcomes and future (Murji, 2015; Riggio, 2014; Vugt, Hogan, &Kaier, 2008). Too often

the success, or failure, of an organization is credited to the leader but performance is impacted by the fit and health of the relationship between the leaders and followers (Tabak, et al., 2017). The dyadic interplay of roles in the relationship enables as exchange, a perspective of behavior in the organization that speaks to the relationships (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012).

Additionally, followers co-construct (Carsten &Uhl-Bien, 2012) or socially construct their leader (Carsten et al., 2010; Kean, Haycock-Stuart, Baggaley and Carson., 2011) through followers reactions and exchanges that serve as an "upward influence" (Kelley, 1992), the unspoken perspective about what creates a leader (Lord & Brown, 2004) and the evolving processes (Koonce, 2016). The perceptions of the follower and the relationship includes knowledge, skills and abilities of the follower having an influence on the effectiveness of the relationship, so impacting both roles.

The role of the follower becomes influential to the leader which means that the leader and followers cocreate the organizational vision which enables both roles to take initiative, solve problems and influence each other and the outcomes of work (Chen, Kanfer, Kirkman, Allen, & Rosen, 2007; Hoption, 2014). Unfortunately, higher education and organizational development place more emphasis on the development of leaders and less on followers and the nurturing of the relationship (Ferrell, Boyd, &Rayfiled, 2013; Hoption, 2014). Followers are also sometimes leaders, perhaps at home or in their community, and leaders become stale and outdated if they don't have influencers that they follow (Tabak and Lebron, 2017). Followership as an integral component of leadership, leadership is an integral component of followership (Roseenbach, 2015). So, it is necessary that both roles and their relationships be developed for the benefit of the individuals as well as the organization.

Managers and leaders may not be aware of the organizations need to purposefully make followers of all employees (Ramazzina, 2017). At every stage of a professional career there is a followership component especially in today's workplace where there is more collaborative decision making and the expectations that everyone will share knowledge and skill (Ramazzina, 2017) so a culture and learning opportunities to support that followership skills will benefit the organization.

Unfortunately, the role of follower has some negative connotations that might mean weak or conforming, this may be why there has been less attention by training organizations (Giambattista, 2018). Followership is valuable yet is underacknowledge, underrated and underdeveloped (Hurwitz et el, YEAR). Bestselling books, higher education and executive programs tout the development of leadership skill sets while ignoring the necessary relationship (Giambattista, 2018).

Leadership studies have found that the impact of implicit perceptions of followers and leaders can influence decisions and that these perceptions could be distorted (Heslin&VandeWalle, 2008). Organizational investments in workplace development have primarily been for leaders rather than followers (Murji, 2015; Sy, 2010).

Organizational leaders, human resource professionals and programs offered in higher education and workplace training should close the gap between leader development and follower development by creating learning opportunities to allow learners, in a follower role or leader role, to explore their implicit assumptions to find out ways to improve their relationship building efforts in the workplace (Nilson&Gopaul, 2016). At the same time, practical learning on the job should aim to provide feedback for learners to identify followership behaviors and discover possibilities that make it appropriate to change behavior or use multiple styles and skills based on the situation. Creating practical "learning by doing" opportunities can target multiple learning goals pertaining to both leadership and followership development (Tabak et el., 2017).

In the workplace the perception and mind set about leaders and followers can influence behavior (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Goodwin, Wofford, & Boyd, 2000). The assumption based on perception of another's' qualities and actions determine interpersonal outcomes such as relationship quality, trust, and job satisfaction (Sy, 2010). Returning to the definition of a leader, having followers, the awareness and development of followers is also critical. Due to the negative perceptions of the followership role it could be a tough sell, yet it is necessary.

Everyone at some time, to some degree, is a follower. As each person recognizes themselves as a follower; energy flows to where attention goes. Giving attention to followership knowledge, skills and abilities to increase awareness, to recognize critical thinking skills and engagement, as a follower can lead to the identification of training needs, performance improvement and improved organizational culture.

III. RECOMMENDATION

The annual company meeting for Berkshire Hathaway was held on May 1, 2004 and it is when the leader, chairman Warren Buffett, answers questions from the nearly 20,000 followers. In the mass crowdready with a question was a 14-year-old boy from California, asking of leader and billionaire Buffett, "What advice would Buffett give to a teen boy on how to be successful?" (Schwantes,2008).

Buffett said, "It's better to hang out with people better than you. Pick out associates whose behavior is better than yours and you'll drift in that direction" (Schwantes,2008).Buffett told the teen to intentionally, mindfully, selectively be a smart follower!

Everyone can benefit from that answer, particularly as it relates to business. It does not take Warren Buffett say there is a need to develop the knowledge, skills and attitude of a follower, everyone can direct attention and action to develop followership. Kelley (1988) defined followership along two dimensions: critical thinking and engagement, these skills fit in the area of professional development but are not identified as followership skills perhaps due to the negative connotations that might mean weak or conforming (Giambattista, 2018). In today's business world and with

social media, it is common to be a follower. For example, on LinkedIn to be a "follower" epitomizes a user that chooses to see all of another's posts in their content feed, gaining users to follow is the principal objective for an online organization on social media. It is easy to follow an organization or Chief Executive Officer in terms of the organizations performance or a president's blog. The word "follower" is changing, it is gaining a positive perception though currently that perception is primarily in social media (Burton, 2016).Training in followership qualities will benefit not only the individual follower and leader but also the organization.

IV. CONCLUSION

Organizations have internal workplace training that may include some professional development skills but those skills for followership may be buried in overall training.According to John S. McCallum (2013), a follower has eight qualities: judgement, work ethic, competence, honesty, courage, discretion, loyalty and ego management. These qualities should be developed in followers of any organization.

Actively being a follower needs to be encouraged and promoted just as the development of leaders because"building better organizations requires a balance of strengthening leadership and followership skills" (Hurwitz and Hurwitz, 2009, p. 84). Bringing it to the forefront and connecting it to workplace training programscan be a challenge initially, but it is worthwhile investment as benefits become evident. Changing perspectives on followership and developing followers can help to minimize the elitist view of leadership and encourage followers to become more aware of their meaningful contribution to the organization (Koonce, Bligh, Carsten & Hurwitz, 2016).

Yes, a leader is only a leader if they have followers. That is the only definition of leadership, that a leader is a person with followers. Period. In today's business environment with immediate feedback in real time, it is a competitive advantage to leverage the symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers. Developing the qualities and abilities of followers benefits the organization.

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