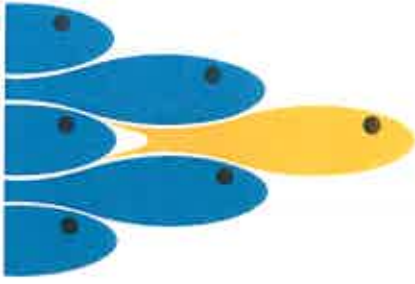




HOW TO BE A
BETTER FOLLOWER
by MARC HURWITZ



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HOW TO BE A BETTER FOLLOWER

Just before the start of the new millennium, I was working in a corporate job as a senior technical specialist; the logical next step in my career was to take on a management role. To prepare for this increased responsibility, I embarked on an MBA.

The next three years of my life were spent working during the day, taking classes at night, doing assignments and projects on the weekend, and trying to balance all that with a young family. It was not easy, but just as the clock ticked over to the year 2000, I celebrated with a similar freshly minted degree.

Shortly after, I was promoted to my first managerial role. This new responsibility quickly taught me that there was still a lot I didn't understand, even with an MBA! For example, now that I was leader, why was it that I was spending so much time dealing with my boss rather than leading my team? Should I also be leading my boss? And, what was I to do when my specific team members did not want to follow me?

A piece of the puzzle was missing from my education, and even from the mentoring I was given at work. After puzzling on this for a couple of years, it hit me: followership! This insight was the start of 10 years' research, development, and field-testing that culminated in a book exploring the many practical implications of understanding followership and leadership as complementary roles.

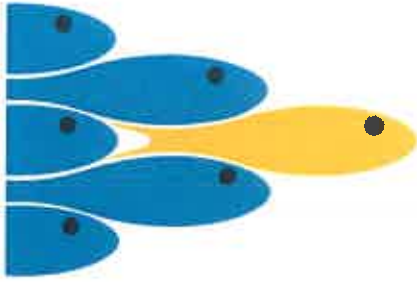
Q: What do you get when you put 100 leaders in a room?

A: Not much!

In fact, whenever multiple people try to exercise leadership at the same time, you get a lot of self-promotion, separate agendas, arguments, and politicking. Not much real work gets done. Followership is essential; there is no leadership without followership.

Now imagine two teams, both of which have excellent leaders. The first team is populated by bad followers – passive, combative, unengaged, literal order-takers, individualistic, etc. – and the second team has excellent followers – proactive, engaged, curious, supportive, etc. Which team do you think is going to do better? If you had a team with a mixture of both types of follower, which followers are going to get promoted or given choice assignments? And which people do you think will be more satisfied at work?

Strong followership is integral to effective, creative collaborations. It also has personal benefits including better raises, more choice assignments, greater influence, higher job satisfaction, and an increased sense of autonomy and freedom.



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Here is what the research says about followership:

- Companies, divisions, and teams with strong followership have higher revenue, quality, and customer satisfaction of 17-43% compared to those with poor followership.
- About half of performance evaluations are based on followership.
- The importance of followership increases as you move up the organizational ladder (much like leadership).

Everyone in an organization – front-line staff, front-line manager, director, vice-president, and even the chief executive officer – has times when they lead, and other times when they follow. Not knowing how to follow reduces your personal effectiveness, hurts any team or collaboration you are involved with, and limits your ability to mentor others.

That change in thinking from 'leadership is everything' to 'we all have both leadership and followership responsibilities' is game changing. In my work, we have applied these ideas and practical advice in many situations, from individual coaching to company-wide change initiatives.

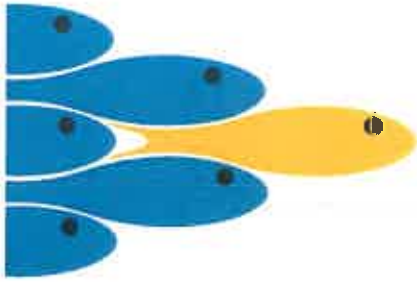
Here are six followership practices that will instantly improve any team you are on.

1. THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX, NOT OUTSIDE THE BOSS

Creativity is a hot-button issue because the world has become smaller, more global, faster, and more demanding. Creativity is essential for simply staying in the game, but unfettered creativity is less than useful.

Consider these two scenarios: the first was a group tasked with creating a new menu concept for a restaurant chain. After exploring the problem, the group was divided into teams of five; each team was to investigate and propose a new menu item for the chain. One team, motivated by a single strong-willed team member, developed an entirely new restaurant.

The second scenario was of a senior management team challenged by the CEO of their large retailing business to increase same-store sales without spending any money. The team decided to find out what customers were doing in the store, how they shopped, and what might be stopping sales. It turned out that when customers entered the store some of them did not take a cart. When these customers' hands were full, they went to the checkout even if they could have stayed longer and bought more. The management team decided to place shopping bags around the



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store and see if that would change behavior. It worked like magic! Now, when the customer was tired of carrying store items, they would go over, get a shopping bag, and keep shopping. In-store sales went up immediately.

You have probably heard of this second scenario for two reasons. The first is because it worked, and it got implemented. The second is that the retailer was IKEA, and the solution was the big yellow bags you see everywhere in the store. But the odds are you have never been to one of the new restaurants designed by that first group. Why? Because the boss never implemented the solution.

When a leader asks her team to think outside the box, what she actually wants is for her team to think outside their box, i.e., what they normally do, but inside hers – what she feels is most needed, valued, possible to achieve, and sellable within the organization.

How can followers do this? First of all, clarify expectations. Find out what type of solution is useful. In the IKEA example, Ingvar Kamprad (the “IK” in IKEA) made his expectations clear. Not every leader does this and, when that happens, a strong follower takes the initiative to clarify the situation. Is an incremental improvement valued or is there an appetite for something more disruptive? What resources are available? What cannot be changed? How much risk is tolerated? What values must be preserved?

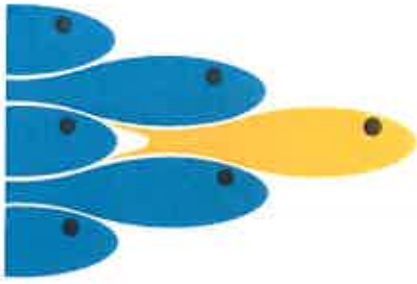
2. DON'T BE A BOSS-STRICH

Few things are more disruptive than having to build new relationships at work. And few relationships are more critical to workplace success than between a boss and a direct report. What is surprising, however, is the number of people who put their heads in the sand when a new manager arrives, hoping that nothing will change and expecting that their work will speak for itself. The problem is that change is almost guaranteed in this situation, and work rarely speaks for itself.

Here are four specific conversations to initiate whenever there is a new boss.

Conversation 1: Build the relationship. Take full responsibility from the start for making the relationship with your new boss work. Ask about his working style preferences and adapt to them. Also, be sure to communicate your own working preferences but recognize that coordination is the key; you have one leader but they have many followers so it is most efficient/appropriate for you to do more of the adapting.

Conversation 2: Share and acquire organizational knowledge. If your new leader is from outside your department or organization, or this is her first time leading, you



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may be able to smooth the transition with some reverse mentoring. Let her know what the team norms have been, but be diplomatic and flexible to change. If you are the one who is new to the team or organization, ask about what to expect and develop an expert network to learn as much about the area/business as you can.

A successful strategy is to make a list of 20 questions to ask about the area, from small things such as, "Do meetings generally start on time," to larger questions such as, "Who are your star performers and why are they considered stars?" Ask a few questions at every update meeting, document the answers, and use it as a personal development tool.

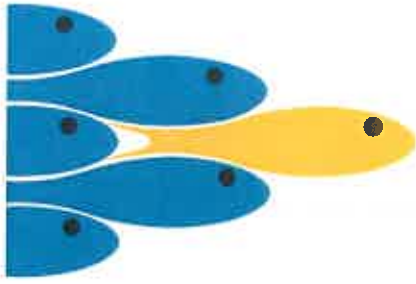
Conversation 3: Adapt and align to better support the leader. When someone starts a job, it is natural to try and figure out how to do it well. Ultimately, however, a strong follower does more than do her own job well, she also figures out what her leader needs and provides that. It means going beyond the formal job description and doing tasks that are called *extra-role* behaviors.

How do you know what else to do? Find out what your boss's boss expects of your leader, and how can you help him achieve those goals? What challenges, opportunities and priorities does he have? What does your leader not like doing, or does poorly, and figure out if it is something you could take on? Clarify whether your goals and priorities are providing the maximum support. The follower's number one job is to help her leader maximize effectiveness while staying true to a supportive role.

Conversation 4: Advocate for your leader and her decisions. All of us want to feel valued and supported at work. It is the single biggest factor behind workplace motivation and engagement, and a key to retention. Most of us know it, and value and support staff in our leadership role, but then promptly forget to do it in our followership role.

At a recent workshop, we asked over 100 employees which of them had shown genuine appreciation for a task their leader had done in the last month? About a dozen hands went up. We then asked how many of them had told their leader that they 'had their back', and supported initiatives their leader had done? Even fewer raised their hand. This lack of support is unsurprising – research has documented that people routinely fail to recognize extra efforts by their leader – but it is weak followership.

Being a leader can feel like being a parent; a lot of work that garners little appreciation. But the leader-follower relationship is not the same as a parent-child interaction. Instead, it is two adults who have agreed to take on certain roles to be more efficient and more effective together. As a follower, show appreciation. Give your explicit support. The results may astonish you.



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3. TAKE THE OFFENCE IN COMMUNICATIONS

Good communication, so we are told, is two-way. The leader sends out information and the follower responds. Perhaps this one-sided perspective is why over 20% of a leader's time is spent *seeking out* information.

Strong followers think about communication as *four-way*. It is a mutual process where followers also take initiative to offer information, and the leader provides feedback. After all, leaders are not telepaths and do not have secret crystal balls that lets them know what is going on, or when to ask a question.

There is a critical difference, however, between leadership and followership communication. In general, the purpose of leadership communication is to unleash follower initiative. The purpose of followership communication is different: to stimulate the right leadership action. What does your leader need to do with the information you are providing? Make a decision? Get involved? Change expectations? Panic less? When considering communicating upwards, be clear, candid, and to the point, and always keep in mind what you think the leader should get involved in, when, and how.

4. BE A TEAM MEMBER, DON'T DECLARE YOUR INDEPENDENCE

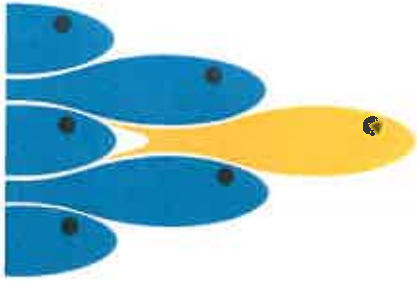
When hiring, most employers say they want self-motivated, independent thinkers with the ability to work under little or no supervision. But is that who they actually want to lead?

We worked with one person who came to us after having been turned down for a job. At the job interview, our client was asked what she wanted from her leader. Her response was: "Well, I really don't need a boss who micromanages me as I am very responsible and reliable. My ideal boss would understand that I like to work independently, that I know how to do my job, and that I can be counted on to get the job done." She then added, "I can manage myself."

It is hard to lead, coordinate, or manage a team when its members are determined to be independent. Rather, the best followers work at being easy to manage.

5. BE PART OF A WOLF PACK

Back in the 1980's, about 20% of work was done in teams. Now that number is closer to 80%. Gone are the days when being a team player meant just getting along,



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cooperating, and not causing conflict. Today you need to collaborate: to think, create, and build with a team, while leveraging its strengths. It is like the difference between a flock of sheep [the old days] and a wolf pack [today].

Sheep are passive, consistent, and do as they are told. It is not an exaggeration that a flock will follow their leader off a cliff.

In a wolf pack, when it is hunting, one wolf may circle around to get behind the prey, another might lunge forward, yet another may cut-off an escape route. Each takes on whatever role is needed by the pack and actively looks for opportunities to support the effort. There is still an alpha dog – the formal *leader* – but during the hunt, *leadership* can be taken on by any of the pack members. Hunting is a collaborative activity. Sheep, well, they bleat a lot and, as Benjamin Franklin said, “Make yourselves sheep, and the wolves will eat you.”

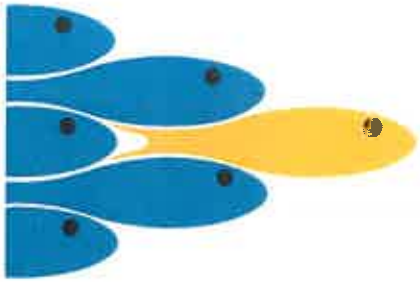
Ask yourself, what are all the ways to add even more value to my team and organization? What disruptions am I causing? When do I need to take on a leadership role, and when should I be the best possible follower?

6. BE A DECISION ADVOCATE, NOT A DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Contrary to popular opinion, devil's advocate behavior is disruptive, destructive, and often just bad followership.

The origin of the devil's advocate role comes from the process of canonization in the Catholic church. The devil's advocate is a lawyer specifically charged with arguing against conferring sainthood, while their counterpart who argues in favor of it is known as an angel's advocate. Having a devil's advocate is important to canonization, but has a limited place in most teamwork. It should be used judiciously.

If you want to have influence and be a true thinking partner, it is usually better to be a decision advocate. This does not mean being a yes-man, but it does mean saying “yes and” more than “no, but.” During meetings, build on ideas. Build up ideas. Figure out how they could work rather than why they won't work. Keep your approach and tone positive. Studies show that you need to give at least four times as much decision support as criticism to be considered effective. The time to be critical is after an idea has been thoroughly explored and contrasted with the other ideas on the table.



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CONCLUSION

Followership is integral to leadership. It is also different from leadership: if leadership is about setting goals for a team to follow, then followership is about the pursuit of team goals and the best ways of doing it. Framed this way, everyone has a followership role from time to time, regardless of position in a formal hierarchy.

When done well, leadership and followership combine to create great partnerships and healthy, impactful collaborations. To quote Mr. Spock giving a 'traditional' Vulcan greeting, "I am pleased to see that we are different. May we together become greater than the sum of both of us."