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Hardy, J.T.; Benson, A.; Hardy, B.E.

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Contextualizing Leaders' Interpretations of Proactive Followership

¹Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

²School of Sport, Health, and Exercise Sciences, Bangor University, Wales

³Departments of Kinesiology and Physical Education and Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier
University, Canada

Contact information for corresponding author: Alex Benson, bens9230@mylaurier.ca, 1-519-884-0720, extension 3691, 75 University Avenue West, Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3C5.

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in press

Abstract

Though proactive followership behavior is often viewed as instrumental to group success, leaders do not always respond favorably to the actions of overly eager followers. Guided by a constructivist perspective, we investigated how interpretations of followership differ across the settings in which acts of leadership and followership emerge. In thematically analyzing data from semi-structured interviews with leaders of high-performing teams, we depict how the construal of follower behaviors relates to various contextual factors underscoring leader-follower interactions. Prototypical characteristics were described in relation to ideal followership (i.e., active independent thought, ability to process self-related information accurately, collective orientation, relational transparency). However, proactive followership behaviors were subject to the situational and relational demands that were salient during leader-follower interactions. Notably, the presence of third party observers, the demands of the task, stage in the decision making process, suitability of the targeted issue, and relational dynamics influenced which follower behaviors were viewed as appropriate from the leader's perspective. These findings provide insight into when leaders are more likely to endorse proactive followership, suggesting that proactive followership requires an awareness of how to calibrate one's actions in accordance with prevailing circumstances.

Contextualizing Leaders' Interpretations of Proactive Followership

Acts of followership equate to much more than merely acquiescing to a leader's influence. As defined by Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten (2014), "Followership is the characteristics, behaviors, and processes of individuals acting in relation to leaders" (p. 96). Though initial theorizing provided a relatively negative portrait of followership (e.g., Zaleznik, 1965), studies of employee voicing behavior (e.g., Oc, Bashshur, & Moore, 2014), employee proactivity (Grant & Ashford, 2008), and contemporary theories of leadership and followership (DeRue & Ashford, 2008; Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008) support the idea that followers are active agents within the leadership process. In addition, follower proactivity is linked to a host of benefits, including enhanced psychological outcomes (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000), decision-making in teams (Dooley & Fryxell, 1999), and performance (Thomas, Whitman, & Viswesvaran, 2010).

Given the benefits of proactive behavior in organizational contexts, it is perhaps not surprising that leaders generally appreciate followers who are proactive in their roles. Early work in the area of leader-member exchange theory (LMX) demonstrated that followers who contribute extra effort in their work environment tend to experience higher quality LMX (Liden & Graen, 1980). Similarly, a meta-analysis revealed a positive link between follower enthusiasm and LMX (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012). Moreover, leaders who endorsed proactive followership characteristics had better relationships with their subordinates and, as a result, their followers performed at a higher level (Whiteley, Sy, & Johnson, 2012).

Despite evidence indicating that leaders generally endorse proactive follower traits, there is a potential downside to these self-initiated behaviors. A core feature of proactive behavior is that they are anticipatory and enacted out of one's own volition (Grant & Ashford, 2008). On

the one hand, this agentic quality is appealing to some leaders. For example, when leaders feel personally responsible over ensuring positive change in the workplace, followers who display proactivity are likely to receive better performance evaluations (Fuller, Marler, Hester, & Otondo, 2015). On the other hand, this also means that proactive followership behaviors are performed without instruction or permission from a leader—making them a risky endeavor because of the power dynamics associated with leader-follower relations. Consequently, proactive followership behaviors have the potential to be misinterpreted by leaders as acts of insubordination (Falbe & Yukl, 1992), a threat to their authority (Burris, 2012), and can create friction within a relationship (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010).

According to the *leadership process* framework, effective leadership is the result of a collaborative effort; one that thrives when there is complementarity in how people enact roles of leadership and followership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). For example, there may be times when leaders would benefit from gaining an alternative—but unsolicited—perspective on a strategic decision (e.g., Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006). In such cases, leaders may desire a more proactive followership orientation. In contrast, there may be times when leaders would benefit from moving forward with their established strategy (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). In these instances, leaders may react negatively to proactive behaviors. These examples illustrate an issue that has been echoed by several scholars: a leader's receptivity to proactive behavior is likely contingent upon a number of factors (e.g., Campbell, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Recognizing that overly eager followers can potentially create tension and undermine cooperative efforts from a leader's perspective, there is a need to understand when leaders are more receptive to proactive behaviors.

A number of studies offer evidence that leaders' responses to proactive follower behaviors partly depend on dispositional characteristics. For example, followers who engaged in proactive behavior, but lacked political skill (i.e., a constellation of abilities related to a person's social astuteness, networking ability, interpersonal influence, and sincerity), ended up with no better performance evaluations than those who were passive in their role (Sun & van Emmerik, 2014). In another study, engaging in anticipatory helping behaviors did not translate into better performance evaluations for followers who expressed too much negative affect or lacked prosocial values (Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009). In a study by Chan (2006), engaging in proactive behaviors led to worse performance evaluations when followers lacked the ability to effectively judge situations. In addition, employees who failed to provide constructive feedback when voicing their opinions received worse performance evaluation by third party observers (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Whiting, Maynes, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2012, Studies 1 and 3). Taken together, these studies suggest that effectively engaging in proactive follower behaviors requires a degree of skill. What these studies do not address, however, is whether there are opportune moments for followers to engage in proactive behavior.

The contribution of our work lies in further delineating boundary conditions of proactive followership. To do so, we explore whether the immediate circumstances underlying a leader-follower interaction influence leaders' interpretations of proactive followership. As Avolio (2007) noted, "The proximal context is the most immediate in terms of time and in terms of impact on both leaders and followers and their relationships" (p. 29). Our investigation used the leader process approach as a guide, which acknowledges that people engage in mutually recognized acts of leading and following, and the leadership process is a result of how these behaviors jointly interact with one another (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). An advantage of the

leadership process approach for exploring followership is that it does not privilege acts of following or leading as being more influential to the leadership process. To extend previous work that garnered insights from the perspective of the follower (Carsten et al., 2010), we concerted our efforts on identifying which patterns of following behaviors were desired (or condemned) from individuals in positions of leadership.

To be clear, the leadership process approach served as a way to frame our research questions, but it does not offer concrete predictions about which contextual features may influence leaders' interpretations of proactive followership behaviors (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Moreover, the epistemology of the leadership process approach is aligned with constructivism, which emphasizes that people construct their understanding of reality through a subjective lens (Mir & Watson, 2000). Thus, our interest was in detailing the meaning and significance that leaders ascribed to acts of followership. Working from the perspective that the meaning leaders ascribe to follower behaviors cannot be isolated from the context in which they are embedded, we investigated whether leaders interpreted proactive followership behaviors differently across contexts. As such, it was critical to ensure contextually meaningful details could be retained and incorporated into our analysis. In consideration of these points, we initiated a qualitative study to identify the circumstances when proactive followers behaviors were viewed favorably, versus those circumstances when they were met with resistance—or worse still, were seen as counterproductive from the perspective of a team leader. We first explored the general qualities leaders associated with effective followership to provide a basis for discussing their views on proactive followership behaviors. The primary purpose of the investigation was to examine the context-embedded nature of how leaders interpret proactive followership behaviors.

Research Context

We investigated leaders' interpretations of followership by drawing from the experiences of highly competitive sport team coaches. The rationale for this choice is that leader-follower interactions are particularly salient when people are engaged in problems that require social coordination, as their interactions with one another can have immediate ramifications for collective outcomes (Van Vugt et al., 2008). Moreover, deliberate and purposeful interactions frequently occur between leaders and followers when group members are bound together by a high degree of task and outcome interdependence. In addition, team members' roles differ according to specialized functions and hierarchical positions, offering additional contextual information that may be relevant to understanding how follower behaviors are perceived. Though several scholars have suggested that sport offers a fertile context for studying a range of issues relevant to organizations (Day, Gordon, & Fink, 2012; Wolfe et al., 2005), the group properties of sport teams are particularly similar to those found in localized work teams (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). Head coaches of highly competitive sport teams share many of the same duties and responsibilities as leaders who manage localized work groups, including designing and monitoring training activities, team member recruitment, delegating roles, and hiring staff.

Method

Participants

After obtaining approval from an institutional ethics board, full-time professional head coaches of Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) programs were purposefully recruited for their insights related to followership in a team setting. Fourteen coaches of male ($n = 8$) and female ($n = 6$) sport teams from seven Canadian universities agreed to participate. Half of the participants were the same gender as the team they coached, but there was an uneven distribution of male (n

= 12) and female ($n = 2$) coaches. The number of female participants (14.5%) is, unfortunately, fairly representative of the current ratio of male/female head coaches in the CIS (19%, Donnelly, Kidd, & Norman, 2011). The sports coached by the participants included basketball ($n = 5$), football ($n = 3$), hockey ($n = 3$), and volleyball ($n = 3$). On average, participants had 15 ($SD = 8.97$) years of professional coaching experience at the interuniversity level. We used publicly available information to direct our recruiting efforts to individuals whose experiences reflected coaching excellence (e.g., team championship(s), coach of the year award(s), and experience coaching for the Canadian national team). Within our sample, eleven coaches had been officially recognized as coaches of the year in their conference (e.g., Ontario University Association, Canada West), ten had won provincial or national championships, and five had coached for their respective national team. We selectively invited coaches on the basis of these accolades to capture the perspectives of individuals who were considered to be experts in their ability to manage group-member interactions in a high performance team setting and would have sufficient personal experiences to draw from when recounting their interpretations of followership in different contexts. We sought a relatively heterogeneous sample in terms of sport type and gender of the teams coached to enhance transferability of our findings (Patton, 2002).

Development of the Interview Guide

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture contextually situated descriptions of followership. To enhance the depth and richness of participants' responses, each interview began with rapport building questions to put participants at ease and promote a conversational flow (e.g., "Can you tell me about your previous experiences as a coach at this level?"). Next, questions were posed to elicit participants' general thoughts on the topic of followership (e.g., "Within your team, who do you consider to occupy a followership role?"). Our key questions

explored leaders' interpretations of followership behavior (please refer to Appendix A for these key questions). These questions were designed to tap into participants' episodic memories to gather contextually rich descriptions related to acts of followership. That is, participants were encouraged to discuss their actual experiences (e.g., "Can you tell me about an example of an individual who was a particularly effective follower?"), which were followed up by elaborative probes ("Can you tell me about a specific example of this individual's behavior?") and contrast probes ("Can you tell me about an example of an individual who was a particularly ineffective follower?"). Based on these initial responses, we then explored whether leaders' expectations of followership behavior varied across contexts ("Can you share any experiences where followers engaged in that behavior in a different context?"), and then followed-up with questions to gather their reactions to those behaviors (How did you react in that situation?). From a social constructivist perspective, semi-structured interviews offer the flexibility to explore the range and variation in which acts of followership emerge. For example, many initial descriptions of followership behavior were restricted to athletes in their first year with the team (i.e., rookies). These responses were then followed up by questions asking about other instances where follower-leader dynamics emerged. Although each interview covered the same key areas of interest, the order of questions varied by what was deemed to be the most appropriate given the nature of participants' responses. The researcher responsible for conducting the interviews was experienced in semi-structured interviewing.

Collection and Analysis of Data

The conduct and corresponding analysis of interviews followed a reflexive iterative framework (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Based on this framework, the interviewer kept a journal denoting relevant observations, which was updated following each interview to gauge

how incoming data aligned with our interest in articulating a contextualized representation of followership. This provided a way to explore emergent areas of interest while informing our decision as to when there were enough data to discern core consistencies in leaders' interpretations of followership. At this point when subsequent interviews were no longer providing novel information related to the research questions we set out to explore, data collection ceased.

The first six interviews were conducted in-person, with the next eight interviews conducted via telephone to expand our geographical reach to target coaches who were considered to be at the upper echelon of their respective league. The duration of interviews did not substantively differ as a function of whether they were conducted in-person ($M = 46$ minutes) or via telephone ($M = 42$ minutes). Though some critics argue that in-person interviews are superior to telephone interviews in terms of the depth and quality of information obtained, a review comparing these modes of interviewing (i.e., phone versus face-to-face) found no empirical support to claims of superiority (Novick, 2008). The interviews were all digitally-audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, which resulted in a total of 232 pages of transcribed data (excluding initial questions aimed at rapport development).

Interviews were analyzed in a manner whereby emerging insights were compared to existing theory (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Despite the relatively fluid nature of this process, our thematic analysis proceeded in several stages. The lead researcher—who collected and transcribed all of the data—began examining transcripts in their entirety to get a sense of the dominant viewpoints communicated. The understanding gleaned from these initial readings facilitated an open-coding process, which required the researcher to identify regions of text where there was a noticeable shift in meaning; that is, when the content contained within a

passage of text no longer conveyed information about the same idea or topic. These segments of text were coded based on their content to form the initial categories of data. Despite the benefits of fragmenting transcripts into more manageable units of data, a valid concern is losing contextually relevant details. To address this concern, the researcher then revisited each transcript to ensure no contextually relevant details were lost while parsing out segments of text. These coded passages were then compared with one another to search for common (and distinctive) properties to organize into coherent themes. To understand the essential properties within each theme, pertinent scholarly works were consulted to facilitate a conceptual understanding of these data-driven categories (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

At this point, a second member of the research team independently reviewed 40% (112/282) of the coded quotes allocated to themes to ensure that the raw data reflected the theme in which they were housed. Over the course of several meetings, the researchers met to discuss the nature of each theme to resolve any potential discrepancies. No systematic issues in the coding of categories were identified and the research team came to a consensus on how to slightly revise the description of several themes to better exemplify the range of content captured by participants' descriptions (i.e., ensuring each theme's heading accurately depicted its substantive content). The final stage of analysis was an interactive process where all members of the research group deliberated on how the themes could be best positioned together to articulate leaders' interpretations of followership, which continued until a consensus among the research team was achieved.

Results

Coaches' insights related to followership are organized around the personal qualities they associated with followership and the proximal contextual factors associated with proactive

followership behaviors. Table 1 depicts an overview of the themes, frequency of participant responses, and comparisons of participant responses as a function of gender.

Personal Qualities Associated with Followership

All of the coaches converged on the viewpoint that every team member eventually occupies a role of followership, even the head coach. However, as one coach bluntly stated: “Everyone has to know how to follow and there has to be that agreement within a leader-follower relationship—the agreement is that you’re going to follow and I’m going to lead, if that doesn’t exist then there’s nothing” [Coach 5, Men’s Basketball]. Coaches explained that while they did not desire an authoritarian leadership structure, a formal hierarchy exists to provide structure regarding how people should enact their roles. Newcomer athletes to the team were rarely given formal authority within the group, which is perhaps why coaches often began describing followership as it pertained to first-year athletes. A common thread running through coaches’ descriptions of ideal followership was that it began with an awareness of when and who to follow:

So for the receivers, [the positional coach] will give the demands of what the drill is for his receivers. He might have a couple [veteran athletes] then do a demonstration. So they’re following his lead, but then really, those other twelve receivers are following [the veteran athlete] because he’s the one who demonstrates it. [Coach 8, Men’s Football]

Beyond this core quality, coaches detailed characteristics that differentiated between what they perceived as effective and ineffective followership. In response to queries about team members who they considered to display exemplary followership, coaches viewed ideal followership as exhibiting: (a) a collective orientation, (b) active independent thought in the context of team

values, (c) relational transparency, and (d) an ability to process self-related information accurately.

A collective orientation. Coaches were unanimous in their viewpoint that exemplary followership required individuals to internalize and adhere to the team principles, such that followers' actions supported the leadership directive within the group. Put simply, coaches coveted followers who endorsed cooperative group efforts: "They've got to buy in to what the vision is; that's what the values and the covenant of the team are, and that is discussed at the beginning of the season, that's a shared venture" [Coach 2, Women's Basketball]. Echoing a similar sentiment, it was important for followers to be able to derive a sense of personal value from supporting team mates: "I think the ideal person buys into the concept of team and understands where team interacts with their individual rights, and where they have to compromise their decision or beliefs because of the team" [Coach 3, Women's Basketball]. Descriptors of team members who coaches considered to demonstrate ideal followership (e.g., hard-worker, reliable) were always discussed in relation to a follower's ability to contribute to the goals collectively established within the group.

In contrast, followers whose actions did not support the leadership directive within the group were seen as problematic: "I've had ineffective followers for the simple reason that they don't believe in the direction that you're providing" [Coach 11, Men's Football]. Likewise, an inward focus on personal achievements was perceived as a characteristic of poor followership:

They don't get it, they just—there is selfishness to their game; they're really fortunate to have players like [Alison], star players who will sacrifice ice time knowing that it's for team development and everybody gets a chance in our process in the first part of the season. [Coach 10, Women's Hockey]

In sum, coaches viewed effective followers as those who endorsed communal values relevant to the group and were diligent in following through and fulfilling the team principles they espoused; coaches had no patience for outright violations of team principles.

Active independent thought in the context of team values. Elaborating upon the value seen in having followers with a strong collective orientation, coaches made it clear that ideal followers engaged in and displayed critical thinking in relation to group-related matters. That is, they did not desire followership to come at the expense of personal agency:

I want [athletes] to be able to be independent thinkers because if they follow a senior who's making poor choices—that would be counter-productive.... That followership still has to have some independent thought, it can't be blind followership, and it still has to have the ability to kind of discern what is right and wrong, what's best for the team and what isn't best for the team. [Coach 11, Men's Football]

Rather than lauding followers who exhibited compliance to the demands placed on them, coaches thought that effective followership required a sense of personal accountability for the direction the group was heading. Although effective followership requires individuals to be active in their role and engage in critical thought, these actions had to fit within the boundaries of the team directives. As an example of this balance:

I think there has to be a commitment on the part of all the group members to support the direction [we are] going. It doesn't mean you have to buy in blindly, or you can't discuss it, or you can't negotiate where we're going, or how we're going, but you have to be supportive towards whatever the goal is....If it is going to be successful in a team there has to be leadership, but the followers have to be active and supportive in their followership. [Coach 9, Men's Basketball]

Relational transparency. Another quality endorsed by coaches was the degree to which individuals in a position of followership were willing to honestly communicate with individuals in a position of leadership; a theme that reflects a core sub-dimension of authentic followership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Although there were boundaries to when and which topics were up for discussion, as elaborated upon later, coaches indicated a desire for honest interpersonal dialogue between individuals in positions of leadership and followership. A recurrent pattern in coaches' descriptions was that problematic issues should be discussed as soon as they emerge, rather than waiting for issues to reach a critical point. They wanted followers who were proactive in seeking as well as providing feedback: "So if there's something someone is noticing that just isn't gelling the right way, then come and talk to me" [Coach 1, Men's Hockey].

Coaches explained how the leadership within the group relied on followers at all levels of the formal hierarchy to share their thoughts with leaders, which included everyone from newcomers (e.g., "I think that [newcomers] need to be able to voice their opinion because [a first year] might have some very good thoughts" [Coach 7, Women's Hockey]) to assistant coaches (e.g., "the assistant coach might learn of an issue and they need to feel comfortable coming to me and trust me that I'm not going to then go back to a player" [Coach 7, Women's Hockey]).

Moreover, coaches desired followers who were willing to challenge them on issues or offer alternative strategies when solicited. They explained that while the final decision on many matters remained up to them, they often incorporated the knowledge and insights from followers to make informed decisions. To this end, coaches often looked to their assistant coaches to hear their thoughts on strategies and other group management issues. Sometimes assistant coaches merely supported a decision to be made, and in other cases offered a divergent perspective that led to new insights on how to deal with an issue:

As far as feedback to me, I'm same as with the players, give me comments if you think there's something we can change. We constantly—before games, after practices—have little five minute conversations and chats about something on-ice or about a player, or what do you think about this lineup change, constantly gathering their feedback. [Coach 1, Men's Hockey]

An ability to process self-related information accurately. A second theme that closely maps onto to authentic followership is how well individuals in a position of followership are able to process self-related information (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Receptivity to others' viewpoints was viewed as a quality of effective followership, especially when the feedback related to personal performance critiques. The competition at this level of sport meant team members' performances were under constant scrutiny and, as such, athletes' roles within the group were subject to change on a daily basis. To exhibit effective followership then, individuals had to be able to assimilate and apply new self-related information in a productive manner rather than being engrossed by self-protection concerns:

I communicate with [more mature] people well, and also they just don't moan and groan. If they're not producing and I tell them, they can deal with that.... They just get it and they change, they change their behavior immediately and away we go. [Coach 10, Women's Hockey]

Notably, there was a distinction between wanting team members who have an intense competitive drive and athletes who have an inflated sense of their own abilities and distorted view of past performance:

I mean the biggest one is ego and their personal expectations about what their role should be, no question that is one of the biggest things and I get that and I appreciate that. Again,

I don't want players who are accepting of not playing for example, I want players who always think they should play. But at the end of the day, they have to accept the role if they're not playing. [Coach 5, Men's Basketball]

Thematic Summary

Leaders' interpretations of what constitutes appropriate followership covered an array of characteristics. These qualities depict a follower who is proactive in his/her responsibilities, accountable, willing to challenge leader ideas and offer alternative insights, and display an overt commitment to supporting team efforts. However, portraying ideal followership as a set of qualities rests on the assumption that these qualities will translate into context-appropriate behaviors—yet not all situations are conducive to proactive follower input (Chan, 2006; Whiting et al., 2012). The following section illustrates how proximal contextual factors that are salient during leader-follower interactions constrained when proactive follower behaviors were viewed favorably by coaches.

Proximal Contextual Factors Influencing Perceptions of Followership

Coaches' perceptions of appropriate followership depended upon a number of proximal contextual factors, and these factors were interrelated in a number of ways. Endorsements of followership behaviors were context-specific; coaches coveted individuals who were able to understand the changing role dynamics in the group and act accordingly. Leaders' construal of follower behaviors depended upon interplay among the following contextual features: (a) presence of third party observers, (b) performance versus learning contexts, (c) stage in the decision making process, (d) suitability of the targeted issue, and (e) relational dynamics.

Presence of third party observers. Although coaches generally coveted individuals who were proactive in their role as a follower, they noted that demonstrating critical thought and

voicing these thoughts were actually viewed negatively under certain conditions. Challenging or questioning a leader's decision in front of other group members was uniformly condemned by the coaches interviewed: "We need to be able to have a unified front and go forward" [Coach 11, Men's Football]. One participant offered a description of what he considered to be an athlete who exemplified this awareness of when to voice his thoughts: "When he has concerns or something I know he'll pull me aside after and say, 'Hey, I'm kind of confused as to why this is going on.' So if he has any questions then we talk about it privately" [Coach 8, Men's Football]. As it pertains to leader-follower interactions among the coaching staff, the private versus public distinction had a slightly different meaning. Coaches explained that they held coaching staff-only meetings, which they considered to be an appropriate context for voicing divergent opinions:

I want assistant coaches who won't be afraid behind closed doors to challenge me on an issue. Like 'Hey, I don't know if we should put her there, or play her in that role'. But I wouldn't want the assistant coach doing that in front of the team when we leave the coaches' room. [Coach 7, Women's Hockey]

In sum, receptivity to proactive follower input depended on who was aware of the exchange between the leader and follower, as there was a time and place to debate issues and ask questions. Coaches explained that they thought followers who challenged leadership decisions openly in front of others may create ambiguity and reluctance among the team's followership to support leadership directives.

Performance versus learning contexts. The nature of the task at hand was another salient factor that influenced how coaches interpreted proactive followership behavior. That is, there was a clear boundary between followership expectations as it pertained to learning contexts

versus performance contexts. Certain tasks and/or contexts emphasized the development and learning of skills that were pertinent to team success (e.g., skill acquisition, team tactics) whereas other tasks and/or contexts simply demanded successful task execution (e.g., competitive games). When there was situational urgency and performance demands were of primary concern, coaches were categorical in their responses—these situations demanded committed obedience, regardless of the other factors present:

There are times when, circumstances when, [followers] have to accept where we're going, but then we want them invested in where we're going. So calling a timeout with 45 seconds or 8 seconds left, we're going to run this play; we can't be having an argument about which play we're going to run. Which would be active followership to a degree, right? 'Coach I think we should do this!' You can't do that, here's what we're trying to do. We need you to accept that because of our time constraints. [Coach 9, Men's Basketball]

However, when there was less emphasis on immediate performance outcomes, coaches were more open to follower influence tactics and feedback:

The days of I'll tell you how it is and you'll go and do it are just gone in coaching.... I do want them to talk about it and bring up their questions and understand my reasoning, because I want to understand their hesitance with whatever it is, because hey maybe there is something to that. [Coach 14, Women's Basketball]

Stage in the decision making process. In addition to situational contingencies, the suitability of follower input depended upon whether the leader had come to a concrete decision: "I want them to make as many suggestions and give me as much feedback as they can so I can make informed decisions, and once I make informed decisions they become our decisions"

[Coach 3, Women's Basketball]. While open and honest dialogue on group-related matters were coveted in private discussions, there had to be an understanding that once a leadership decision was finalized, coaches expected the followership to actively support the decision: "We are going to make decisions that [the group] will have total say in, and we'll discuss them, but once we come to a decision on a certain issue, we're not going to debate it" [Coach 2, Women's Basketball]. Integrating this theme with the previously discussed boundaries, the perceived appropriateness of followers voicing their thoughts not only depended on situational constraints (i.e., in front of the team was viewed as a poor avenue for such an exchange, situational urgency), but then followers had to understand that once their input was taken into consideration, further debate on an issue became problematic from the perspective of the leader.

Suitability of the targeted issue. Another proximal contextual factor related to the perceived appropriateness of follower behaviors, leaders noted that regardless of the circumstance, certain leadership decisions were not up for debate or discussion: "I use the phrase 'this one is non-negotiable'" [Coach 4, Men's Volleyball]. Though the precise nature of the topics that were off-limits varied from team to team, coaches explained they attempted to clarify which group-related matters were not up for discussion: "So we're going to live with who we start [in the competitive lineup] and whatever the case may be, and that's the only thing that I have total power over, so I tell them that" [Coach 3, Women's Basketball]. Followers who made attempts to challenge coaches on these matters were seen as a nuisance and/or distraction to the task at hand. However, the nature of which topics were off-limits depended on a person's formal authority within the group. As an example, providing input pertaining to personnel for an upcoming competitive event was limited to pre-planned meetings among the coaching staff.

Relational dynamics. Interpretations of proactive followership behavior also varied according to the interpersonal dynamics between a leader and a follower. The most prominent consideration was the relative status difference between the individuals involved in the interaction. Coaches said that they were more receptive to proactive behaviors enacted by higher status followers (e.g., assistant coach, team captain). Specifically, they were more open to being challenged on their thoughts and strategies by members of the coaching staff and athletes who were considered veterans in the group:

You've got to have the courage to disagree with me and give me an alternative, right. So, and I think that is really important in a coaching staff. And by the same token, in my way of looking at it, I'd like that mentality in my senior players. [Coach 9, Men's Basketball]

To be clear, coaches were not dismissive of feedback from other followers, but they primarily looked to senior team members for their insights by virtue of their expertise in specific areas and/or opposing perspectives. In addition, coaches explained that sometimes the nature of their personal history with someone dictated the latitude of follower influence:

Well I have three assistants and their roles are really different and the expectations are really different. My sort of veteran assistant coach is the one who is involved in more tactical game planning and analysis kind of stuff, and studying opponents; it's almost a peer relationship there and I have enough trust to say: I want you to take the middles and work on this. [Coach 4, Men's Volleyball]

Coaches added a qualifier regarding their desire for feedback from high status group members by explaining that it was critical for them to understand that their role was to present a front of solidarity once decisions were agreed upon behind closed doors:

The biggest thing I convey to the coaches, and I never want to, but we had one instance this year where we had to bring it up; coaches kind of getting after each other in front of players. So it's natural, we're going to disagree. Between 15 coaches we're going to have disagreements, but it's important to do it in [coaching staff meetings] and not on the field.

[Coach 6, Men's Football]

More generally, coaches expected the coaching staff to conduct themselves appropriately across a variety of situations:

With the assistant coaches, there's more of a timing aspect than anything else. The players—I don't expect them to be as mature sometimes as the assistant coaches because there should be a degree of professionalism that comes with coaching, and they have to understand the timing of it and we certainly talk about that before we get into the season.

[Coach 11, Men's Football]

In essence, high status group members had less leeway from the head coach when it came to violating followership expectations. Coaches' agreement in echoing this sentiment reveals the complexities underlying the construal of followership behaviors. On the one hand, coaches coveted more proactive followership behaviors from higher status group members. On the other hand, coaches noted that they reacted more negatively to high status members who used influence tactics or offered constructive resistance under inappropriate conditions (i.e., in front of others, a performance critical situation, after a decision had been made, an unsuitable issue). Thus, it is critical to account for the interpersonal dynamics of individuals engaged in a leader-follower interaction when discussing acts of followership.

Supplementary analysis. Coaches noted at the outset of the interviews that, at one point or another, everyone had to embrace followership roles within the group. The foregoing themes

reveal that participants described their interpretations of followership behavior in reference to interactions with athletes as well as their assistant coaches. To understand whether certain situational factors had greater relevance to either referent group, we compared the frequency of coaching staff- and athlete-specific references in relation to proactive followership behaviors (see Table 2). Two notable patterns emerged. Whereas the proximal contextual factor related to performance versus learning contexts was primarily directed toward athletes' proactive followership behaviors, the factor related to the stage in the decision making process was primarily discussed in relation to interactions with other coaching staff members. Athletes and assistant coaches received relatively equivalent coverage across the remaining themes, suggesting that these factors apply to coach-athlete relationships as well as coach-assistant coach relationships.

Thematic Summary

Leaders coveted followers who had an acute awareness of which contexts permitted more proactive role engagement, versus contexts that required committed deference to leader decisions. In this sense, they desired individuals who could flexibly adapt to the situation at hand. For example, although leaders endorsed active and independent thought as a quality of followership, this was based on the supposition that followers would not constructively resist them during inopportune moments (e.g., performance-critical moments, after consensus on a decision had been reached). Likewise, relational transparency was a coveted followership trait, but there was a time and a place for initiating interpersonal dialogue. As Hannah, Sumanth, Lester, and Cavarretta (2014) suggested, failing to distinguish between the antecedent characteristics of good leadership and how these traits manifest into acts of leadership masks the complexities and context-embedded nature of a leader's actions. Though the point made by

Hannah et al. was directed toward the study of leadership, it is equally applicable to our discussion of followership. In sum, contextualizing acts of followership offers insight into when leaders are likely to endorse proactive followership behaviors in a team setting.

Discussion

A primary objective of the present work was to detail the context-embedded nature of how leaders respond to proactive followership behavior. By contextualizing acts of followership from the perspective of team leaders, we expanded upon recent theorizing that portrays followership as a co-creative force within the leadership process. Whereas the leaders who were interviewed coveted followership characterized by a collective orientation, relational transparency, active independent thought, and accurate processing of self-related information, the perceived appropriateness of followership behaviors depended upon the social context in which such interactions took place. We identified five proximal contextual factors that accounted for differences in how leaders construed proactive followership behaviors, which included the presence of third party observers, the momentary demands of the task at hand (i.e., performance task/context versus learning task/context), stage of the decision making process, suitability of the targeted issue, and relational dynamics.

Theoretical Implications

The context-specificity of followership tended to revolve around proactive follower behaviors, which entailed unsolicited advice or input from followers. Consistent with these findings, previous work has shown that both political skill (Sun & van Emmerik, 2014) and an ability to gauge the current situation (Chan, 2006) moderate the relationship between proactivity and supervisor performance evaluations. Though proactive behavior is a way for followers to influence the leadership process (Carsten et al., 2010; Oc et al., 2014), the potential rewards of

proactive followership are not without risk (Grant & Ashford, 2008). One way to understand why these behaviors are a double-edged sword in the context of leader-follower dynamics is by revisiting a defining feature of proactivity, which is that these behaviors are self-initiated. This means that the motives underlying proactive followership are largely unknown to observers; leaving the intentions behind such behavior open to interpretation. Considering that people attend to salient contextual cues in the environment when making inferences about others' motives (Grant et al., 2009), attempts to influence a leader's decisions in public may not be viewed as a thoughtful enterprise to benefit achievement of collective goals (i.e., prosocial motive), but perhaps as an attempt to subvert his/her leadership in front of others (i.e., egoistic motive). Similar reasoning is applicable to why leaders were adamant that followers required awareness and respect toward the topics that were non-negotiable and at which stage in the decision making process they simply needed to accede to the final decision. In other words, despite the best of intentions, overzealous follower behaviors (e.g., offering an alternative strategy, continued insistence) may be construed as acts of insubordination when enacted at inopportune moments.

Moreover, leaders' negative views toward proactive followership in situations where performance outcomes were of immediate concern are supported by temporal models of teamwork. Marks et al. (2001) suggested that the pursuit of common team goals represents a cyclical process of moving back and forth between *action* and *transition* phases. Action phases entail situations where performance outcomes are emphasized, whereas transition phases are characterized by a greater concern toward continued improvement as team members reflect and plan for future action phases. Within this model, formulating strategies and goals through discussions among team members are crucial during transition phases, but can be detrimental

during action phases because of the high degree of coordination required among individuals. As such, the demands placed on leaders during action phases requires commitment-oriented acts of followership, as additional debate and discussion from followers is likely to hinder, rather than enhance, team functioning. A caveat to this finding, however, is that leaders primarily referenced athletes' followership behaviors when discussing this contextual boundary, which has potentially weaker parallels to a supervisor-employee relationship than the coach-assistant coach relationship. In addition, organizational teams may not regularly encounter situations where there is a clear distinction between emphasizing immediate performance outcomes versus strategic development. Although this contextual boundary may be less applicable to the leader-follower dynamics found in many organizational settings, it applies to certain specialized groups (e.g., a military unit, a surgical team in a hospital). For example, in medical teams, performance outcomes are heavily emphasized during a crisis event, but learning is emphasized during debriefing periods (Hunt, Shilkofski, Stavroudis, & Nelson, 2007).

In addition to the different ways leaders construed acts of followership (i.e., in a positive or negative manner) across contexts, leaders described instances where pre-existing interpersonal dynamics influenced the degree to which acts of followership influenced their decisions. That is, leaders were more receptive to being influenced and challenged by followers who were closer to them in group status (i.e., prestige associated with formal rank). This aligns with Oc and Bashshur's (2013) model of social influence, which posits that followers who occupy higher ranks of status in a group may have a greater capacity to influence their leaders because of the strength and heightened psychological immediacy such positions afford. This has interesting implications for how followers may formulate their attempts to influence others in multi-tier hierarchical groups, as a low status follower may find better success by attempting to influence

their most proximal leaders who can then relay such messages up the hierarchy. An interesting twist, however, is that although leaders favored proactive followership behaviors enacted by high status group members, leaders indicated that they reacted more harshly to contextual violations enacted by higher status group members.

Limitations and Considerations for Future Work

In recognizing that interpretive qualitative research seeks to generate contextually rich knowledge based on participants' recall of events, these findings must be considered within several boundaries. Although we deemed our sample size appropriate by the consistency and range in which contextual factors were identified—which were additionally supported by existing theoretical accounts of why interpretations of behaviors are sensitive to contextual factors—we studied a select number of leaders' experiences that were limited to groups characterized by high degrees of task and outcome interdependence. However, we echo Williams (2000) who argued that although interpretive modes of research emphasize the subjectivity of participants' experiences, if researchers carefully consider the structural properties shared between group contexts when extrapolating insights generated in the context of highly competitive sport teams to another domain (e.g., military, businesses), these insights can usefully inform both theoretical and practical issues that may remain overlooked in less descriptive modes of inquiry. When generalizing these findings to organizational teams, it is important to consider that in sport teams, leader-follower interactions occur frequently, primarily in-person, team members are under constant scrutiny for their actions (i.e., roles are contingent upon frequent performance evaluations), and roles are guided by a formalized status hierarchy. In addition, metrics for performance in sport are readily available, but outcomes produced by individual efforts are difficult to isolate from collective efforts. It is also important to consider

the nature of the leader-follower relationships described in the current study. Although the use of student participants is common in (experimental) studies of proactive behaviors (e.g., Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014, Studies 1 and 2; Oc et al., 2014, Study 2; Whiting et al., 2012), leaders' insights pertaining to followership were partly based on coach-athlete relationships, which may differ from traditional supervisor-subordinate working relationships. Nevertheless, our key personality characteristics associated with effective followership aligns well with the qualities identified in studies of the workplace (Carsten et al., 2010; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). In addition, a supplementary analysis of the themes related to the contextual boundaries of proactive followership revealed that coaching staff- and athlete-specific references were generally equivalent in terms of frequency, with the exception of the performance versus learning contexts and stage in the decision making process themes. Taken together, the findings of the current study are most applicable to understanding the leader-follower dynamics that occur within localized work groups/teams that share these aforementioned properties.

A related consideration is that relying on leaders' recall and interpretation of past events puts an inherent constraint on the claims that can be made from these data. We only illuminated one side of Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2014) leadership process approach by capturing leaders' perspectives of followership. A reasonable extension is to explore whether other contextual demands are brought into focus when explored through the lens of a follower's perspective. In addition, there may be additional and meaningful contextual factors that are shielded by cognitive blind spots, which are not accessible through semi-structured interviews (Schacter, 1999). From this standpoint, capturing in-situ observations of critical incidents related to acts of followership may help bridge the gap between relying on how leaders and followers recall previous events.

Another boundary pertains to the exploratory nature of the present findings, as we did not test the proposed relationships between contextual factors and leaders' interpretation of followership. Manipulating these aforementioned contextual variables via experimental designs could help to discern whether, in fact, certain proximal contextual factors cause leaders to interpret follower motives in a different light (e.g., communal, self-serving) and whether this influences how leaders respond to acts of followership. Longitudinal designs, however, offer a more ecologically valid assessment to track how leaders respond to contextualized acts of followership over a period of time, albeit at the expense of experimental controls.

An attractive aspect of applying a more contextualized lens to the study of followership is that it opens several possibilities for expanding upon previous findings. As one example, Tepper et al. (2006) found that followers were rated positively when they used negotiation tactics in the context of a higher quality leader-follower relationship, but such negotiation tactics were futile in the context of a lower quality leader-follower dynamics, even though the frequency with which followers negotiated were similar. A reasonable question to pose is why negotiation tactics are ineffectual for followers in low LMX? One explanation is that perhaps followers who negotiate in context-appropriate situations foster a higher quality LMX, whereas followers who negotiate at inopportune moments undermine the quality of LMX.

Practical Implications

Leaders viewed followership as a critical aspect of the leadership process, as they relied on followership to offer alternative insights or solutions to problems while also expecting them to collectively support the directives established by the leadership. Contextualizing acts of followership revealed how proactive attempts to influence leaders at the wrong time and place can render a well-intentioned behavior as disruptive in the eyes of a leader. An implication of

this perspective is that followership requires an acute awareness and ability to calibrate one's actions in accord with the circumstances, as individuals need to understand when, and under which circumstances, certain patterns of followership are expected (e.g., overt commitment/compliance, proactive feedback). From a group dynamics perspective, it would be advantageous to clarify the contextual boundaries pertaining to when certain acts of followership are permitted, desired, or admonished. Proactively addressing such expectations might be especially effective in groups that operate with a multi-tier leadership structure, as inappropriate followership behaviors from people with intermediary formal authority—in our study, this referred to team captains and assistant coaches—may be the most disruptive to leadership efforts.

A practical concern, however, is that the pejorative nature of being labelled a “follower” has tempered attempts to popularize the importance of followership (Hopton, Christie, & Barling, 2012). Given leaders' specific expectations for how they wanted followers to act in certain situations, it would be prudent for leaders to open a dialogue pertaining to which patterns of followership they view as being supportive—rather than undermining—their leadership efforts. In addition, teams may benefit from reframing the terminology surrounding the role of followers. In accord with the leadership process approach (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), one solution is to convey that people engage in *acts of followership*, just as others engage in *acts of leadership*, and to explain that these roles are mutually supportive of one another as people shift between acts of leading and following. Focusing on establishing and clarifying expectations pertaining to effective acts of followership, rather than what makes a good follower, may encourage group members to view followership not as a static role of subordination, but as an essential aspect of cooperative group efforts that is entrenched within the leadership process.

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Table 1

Overview of Themes

Themes	Number of participants (<i>mu</i>)	Coach of male teams (%)	Coach of female teams (%)	Male coach (%)	Female coach (%)
<i>Personal qualities associated with followership</i>					
A collective orientation	14 (55)	8 (100%)	6 (100%)	12 (100%)	2 (100%)
Active independent thought in the context of team values	8 (14)	4 (50%)	4 (67%)	7 (58%)	1 (50%)
Relational transparency	14 (63)	8 (100%)	6 (100%)	12 (100%)	2 (100%)
An ability to process self-related information accurately	12 (42)	6 (75%)	6 (100%)	10 (83%)	2 (100%)
<i>Proximal contextual factors influencing perceptions of followership</i>					
Presence of third party observers	10 (22)	7 (88%)	3 (50%)	8 (67%)	2 (100%)
Performance versus learning contexts	11 (23)	7 (88%)	4 (67%)	10 (83%)	1 (50%)
Stage in the decision making process	11 (21)	7 (88%)	4 (67%)	9 (75%)	2 (100%)
Suitability of the targeted issue	5 (9)	2 (25%)	3 (50%)	4 (25%)	1 (50%)
Relational dynamics	13 (33)	8 (100%)	5 (83.33)	11 (92%)	2 (100%)

Note. *mu* = Number of meaning units. Percentages based on eight male and six female teams; and ten male coaches and two female coaches.

Table 2

How Proximal Contextual Factors Influence Perceptions of Followership: Comparison of Coaching Staff- and Athlete-Specific References

Proximal contextual factors influencing perceptions of followership	Number of coaching staff-specific references (<i>mu</i>)	Number of athlete-specific references (<i>mu</i>)
Presence of third party observers	8 (12)	6 (10)
Performance versus learning contexts	1 (1)	11 (22)
Stage in the decision making process	10 (15)	5 (6)
Suitability of the targeted issue	4 (5)	3 (4)
Relational dynamics	7 (12)	10 (21)

Note. *mu* = Number of meaning units

Appendix A: Key Questions for Interview Guide

Note: The interviews were semi-structured in nature. The key questions do not represent a verbatim portrayal of what the researcher asked the participants, and the sequence of questions varied according to the responses provided by the participant, and what was deemed as the most appropriate direction for the interview to follow. When appropriate, probing questions were used to maximize the richness of the data within the interviews. These consist of elaborative, clarification, and contrast type probes.

1. What comes to mind when you think of followership in sport teams?
2. What types of characteristics do you associate with followership?
3. Within your team, who do you consider to occupy a followership role?
4. Can you tell me about an example of an athlete you coached who was a particularly effective follower?
 - Ask about the personal qualities that made this athlete an effective follower.
 - Ask about specific behaviors that this individual engaged in, and the contexts in which these interactions occurred.
 - From a more general perspective, are there any other characteristics that you associate with being an effective follower?
5. Can you tell me about an example of an athlete you coached who was a particularly ineffective follower?
 - Ask about the personal qualities that made this individual an ineffective follower.
 - Ask about specific behaviors this individual engaged in, and the contexts in which these interactions occurred.

- Ask from a more general perspective, whether there any other characteristics that they associate with being an ineffective follower.
6. Can you please describe any circumstances when followership is especially relevant in your group?
- Use contrast probes to clarify expectations of followers in different settings (i.e., instructional periods, practice, scrimmage, games, social settings)
 - Use elaborative probes to query their reactions to acts of followership in these contexts
7. *If participant only spoke about followership pertaining to athletes: What followership expectations do you have for your assigned team captain(s)/assistant coaches/informal team leaders?
- Ask about specific behaviors this individual engaged in, and the contexts in which these interactions occurred

Conclusion of interview

At this time is there anything else you would like to discuss or add about your experience as a coach? (If participant declines to add anything) This brings us to the conclusion of our interview; I would like to thank you for sharing your personal insights and experiences with me. To ensure all the information we have discussed is an accurate portrayal of your thoughts I will provide you with a transcribed version of the interview in its entirety for you to read over if you wish.