The Impact Of Leadership And Followership: An Organizational Phenomena

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ABSTRACT

Although traditional research has viewed leadership and followership as separate functions, recent studies have acknowledged the importance of followership in both the effectiveness and development of leaders. Followership models have emerged suggesting that leaders cannot be effective without having experience as a follower and that leaders and followers share characteristics that when successfully used in concert, can result in the achievement of organizational goals. Several stereotypes of what it means to be a follower inhibit both the development of followers and the willingness of aspiring leaders to assume followership roles. More research on the importance of followership to the health of an organization is necessary to encourage follower development.

Keywords: Leadership; Followership; Models of Leadership

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF FOLLOWERSHIP

The synergy between leadership and active followership is increasingly recognized as a crucial relationship and an important element of organizational achievement. The prevailing notion among experts and researchers supports leadership as both desirable and necessary (Alvesson & Blom, 2015). Per Malakyan (2014), leadership "seems almost a monopolized discipline that teaches how to influence people and make the leader successful in order to reach personal and organizational goals through success, effectiveness, and productivity" (p. 6). Over time, leadership studies have been primarily focused on leaders (Hollander, 1992) and have developed predominantly from the viewpoint of the leader.

Although leadership has garnered the overwhelming majority of consideration from scholars, the concept of followership is now emerging. Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, & Morris (2006) suggested that more focus is placed on leadership and what makes a leader successful because of the fundamental sentiment that an organization succeeds as the leader succeeds. However, "it does seem ironic that the effectiveness of a leader is to a great extent dependent on the willingness and consent of followers" (Bjugstad et al. 2006, p. 305). Essentially, there are no leaders without followers, and active followership results from an acceptance of authority which gives legitimacy to the leader's vision and direction (Hansen, 1987).

Willson (2012) defined followership as an upward influence that encompasses individuals' behaviors and contributions that affect outcomes within a team. In concert with effective leadership, operational followership can help generate workplace environments that are favorable to high performance (Whitlock, 2013). Leaders possess a responsibility to positively affect the development of followers, thus strengthening the team. Realization of this idea is essential, and leadership needs to be considered in its context as an interpersonal phenomenon of which followership is a key element and not simply as a practice in which leaders issue directives to followers (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

Recent research is taking the concept a step further, suggesting that great followers can even impact the development of leadership. Chaleff (2009) noted that new literature seeks methods to educate and train followers that are willing to

affect change, stand firm on behalf of leaders and organizations, and create strong leaders and organizations. In the current postindustrial era, followers retain more rights, freedoms, and influence than ever, allowing followers to challenge and refuse ineffective leaders (Malakyan, 2014). The nature of the information age has increased the need for more malleable leader-follower interaction (Bjugstad et al. 2006). Thus as Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser (2008) argued, "leadership cannot be studied apart from followership and an adequate account of the leadership process must consider the psychology of followers" (p. 193).

At the surface, the idea of followership is associated with a negative connotation. Bjugstad et al. (2006) acknowledged the stigma associated with the term "follower" as well as linkage to condescending characteristics such as passivity, weakness, and conformity. Although nearly 80% of people function as followers (Malakyan, 2014), there exists a tendency for individuals to avoid being categorized as such. Williams and Miller (2002) found that over one-third of more than 1,600 executives surveyed on the subject failed to acknowledge personal followership status despite holding positions with job responsibilities that were consistent with being a follower. Furthermore, "followership is rarely discussed when corporations seek to better themselves" (Bjugstad et al. 2006, p. 305), ultimately disregarding the importance of effective followership as an integral element of the leadership process as well as an essential component of organizations achieving goals.

Followership Models

Like leadership, followership can be categorized into several models that help to explain the complex interaction between leaders and followers. Malakyan (2014) proposed the need to include followership into the leadership discussion, suggesting that many traditional leadership theories and models either fail to incorporate the role of followers or view leadership and followership as separate social identities that function independent of one another. The variety of followership models encompass a wide range of followership principles, from how followership builds leaders to what constitutes effective leadership-followership relationships and finally how leaders may only be as effective as the level to which a leader accepts the role of follower within the context of organizational mission.

Litzinger and Schaefer (1982) posed the idea of the West Point Thesis, which stems from the notion that leaders develop only from the ranks of capable followers and only the mastery of followership adequately prepares an individual for leadership. The research alluded to a parallel theory known as dialectic of master and slave, which claims "leadership is possible not only on the condition that followership has been learned, but on the more radical condition that the leader has known subjection" (Litzinger & Schaefer, 1982, p. 78). Litzinger and Schaefer (1982) suggested that throughout history, legendary leaders such as Churchill, Bismarck, and Caesar were first distinguished as effective followers to a cause before achieving leadership status. The military serves as a primary example of how impeccable followership at lower ranks is a prerequisite for ascension to leadership positions.

While followership can breed leadership, understanding the transposable nature of leadership and followership is valuable to an organization. Malakyan (2014) suggested that although traditional views regarding leadership and followership support separate concepts, the more practical model views leadership and followership as interchangeable functions capable of being demonstrated by the same person. Kelley (1992) stated that leadership and followership "are complimentary, not competitive" (p. 40) and in fact, one individual operating in both roles simultaneously may be more effective (Chaleff, 2012). Malakyan (2014) called this theory the leader-follower trade (LFT) approach, where "leaders and followers trade their functions in order to develop their intrapersonal perspectives, foster interpersonal relationship, and maximize mutual effectiveness" (p. 11). Hollander (2009) referred to this relationship between leader and follower as the "two-way flow of influence" (p. 37), where the leader influences the follower, the follower influences the leader, and both individuals, who share leadership and followership traits, work towards effective outcomes together. The leader and the follower in this relationship empower one another, find ways to complement one another in different situations, and "embrace a vision that is always bigger and higher than the leaders' or the followers' abilities" (Malakyan, 2014, p. 13). The LFT can be applied to any number of leadership models and theories using a symbiosis between leader and follower that works towards personal and organizational effectiveness.

One final followership model addressed by Litzinger and Schaefer (1982) is Barnard's (1938) Acceptance Theory of Authority, which implies that an order is given authority not by the individual that gives the order, rather an order is given authority by the individuals to whom the order is given. Given this constraint, leaders must lead in a manner that is "construed by followers to be consistent with the goals of the organization" (Litzinger & Schaefer, 1982, p. 80). In this model, leaders are essentially followers, governed by the values of the organization and determined by followers to be trustworthy based on how well the leader performs to the same standards and values by which followers are held. Consistent with the Acceptance Theory of Authority, a leader poses a serious threat to the health of an organization when a command does not conform to organizational principles. Per Litzinger and Schaefer (1982), "mastery of followership is even more important in the leader than in the follower" (p. 80).

Stereotypical Barriers for Followership

The negative connotation associated with followership can hinder the morale and development of individuals in follower roles. Alvesson and Blom (2015) identified negative identity and reduced autonomy as obstacles connected with leadership and followership from the followers' point of view. Regarding negative identity, because leaders are considered superior to followers (Gordon, 2011) it makes sense that followers tend to feel inferior in relation to leaders. People are reluctant to identify as followers, a characteristic Laurent (1978) discovered in middle managers who almost exclusively highlight the authority in managing employees while denying the position as a subordinate managed by a superior.

The nature of leadership lends towards reduced autonomy amongst followers. Individual discretion to perform a job is a major component of a healthy work environment for many employees. Per Foley (2010), "autonomy is the one thing that makes professional life more fulfilling" (p. 173) and traditionally, individuals on the lower end of hierarchical relationships are subject to greater constraints that diminish autonomy. Leadership is associated with counteracting free and diverse thinking (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) while followership involves accepting a leader's desires and value systems. True leadership is not only "about helping people do things they really like to do, but also to make them do what they do not like to do, especially when these tasks are necessary for organizational performance" (Alvesson & Blom, 2015, p. 275). This friction results in inevitable reduction of autonomy for the follower, thus an individual that values autonomy may struggle in assuming a followership role.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although research on leadership has dominated academia for the majority of history, the concept of followership has become relevant as society has transitioned into the information age. Per Malakyan (2014), "leadership and followership as behavioral functions ought to be treated mutually and studied simultaneously" (p. 16). Leadership cannot exist without followers, and recent research indicates that followers have the ability to impact leaders and even develop leaders from within the ranks. Several models have emerged regarding the relationship between leadership and followership, each alluding to the idea that followership is an important component of effective leadership, either directly or indirectly. The challenge for the development of followership as a prerequisite for leadership comes in the stereotypes associated with being a follower. By nature, followers are designated as inferior in status and importance, which presents issues for individuals that aspire to assume leadership positions. Ultimately, research has shown that "leaders sometimes function as followers, and followers sometimes function as leaders" (Bjugstad et al. 2006, p. 315) suggesting that it is imperative to continue research into followership and continue developing the understanding of the pivotal role followers play within an organization.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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