



weLEAD Online Magazine

leadingtoday.org
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Followership

By Paul Hoffman



Colleges, universities, and scholarly think-tanks generate countless volumes on leadership and followers in relationship to leaders. Seldom do these well endowed institutions consider leaders in relationship to followers, from a followers perspective. As the study of followership evolves, its import on organizational growth grows exponentially.

Historically, followers were considered workers doing the bidding of supervisors and managers. Hierarchy shared only enough information for a worker to do, generally, his job. The worker had no idea how his piece fit into the whole. This industrial age thinking was appropriate in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century as masses of generally less educated farmers and farm workers left agriculture for a more secure life style in growing industrial cities.

Not only adults entered the industrial work arena, but also businesses employed children as young as pre-teen in dangerous and potentially deadly jobs. Without lengthy belaboring of child labor and multiple incidents of death and dismemberment that led to strict child labor laws, it is important that there is a link between the agricultural migration to cities and child labor laws. The puzzle pieces are complex and fitting them into an exact pattern is difficult, yet as part of the final analysis, the pieces lead to the establishment of public school systems and required minimum education standards. Over time, public secondary schools, and public colleges began providing advanced educational opportunities to more masses of people.

Workers receiving more education began questioning supervisors and managers who sensed their authority over workers shrinking. Workers began knowing and understanding their organization and knowing and understanding their place in their organization.

Perhaps an example from the text *Atomic: Reforming the business landscape into the new structures of tomorrow*¹ will provide a meaningful glimpse of change. Most scholars cite Martin Luther as the prime mover of religious reform, the Protestant Reformation. It is true that Martin Luther was highly significant for many reasons including translating the Bible into the language of the people. However, another person about 75 years earlier had a different role that was perhaps more formidable.

About 1455, Gutenberg, with his movable type printing press, produced the first print Bible. Rather than waiting years for a monk to transcribe a Bible, manually, word for word, Gutenberg could set type and reproduce hundreds of pages in days. Suddenly, people who could read, could obtain a print Bible. No longer dependent on clergy in the pulpit to interpret scriptural meaning, the power of the clergy was broken. Workers receiving an education broke the power of supervisors and managers similarly.

Martin Luther and Gutenberg did not cause the collapse of religion, they changed the face of it. People of faith did not stop being faithful, how they practiced their faith changed. Workers did not bring down organizations, they changed the face of management. Workers continued to work; however, how they worked changed.

Significant change in religious practice and worker behavior did not occur from a top down pronouncement. Rather, the significant changes occurred from the bottom up, from the follower who became aware that something needed change. In the mid 1800s in England and early 1900s in the U.S., sociologists and psychologists began studying something called leadership. Leadership was radically different from management ideas of command and control.

These early studies began telling managers that Machiavellian practices of power over workers were not satisfactory to gain worker compliance. They began teaching that workers do so because they want to contribute to the success of an organization. Past thinking emphasized that organizations exist for people, so they have a place to work. New thinking began emphasizing that organizations exist because of people who work because they want to.

Leadership was first defined about 1815, and, as already cited, studies of leadership began in the mid 1800s. About 1925, one hundred-plus years after leadership as an idea appeared, the first reference to followership occurred. Defining followership sounds similar to a childhood game called "follow the leader." Followers are an extension of their leaders.

¹ Roger Camrass & Martin Farncombe (2003). West Sussex: Capstone Publishing Limited.

Although these teachings were early leadership insights, they were still top down, applicable in the industrial age. Contemporary business is not industrial in 2009 as it was in 1909 and through the end of World War II. Moreover, technological advances make information available to huge populations over the internet, organizational intranets, and extranets. The idea of supervisors and managers withholding information seems unimaginable in today's corporations. The internet today is the Gutenberg printing press of 1455.

The shift to followership studies is seen in recent organizational studies that focus to the meaningful work of followers in organizations. Numbers vary, but researchers generally believe that about 75 to 90 percent of organizational accomplishments occur within follower groups who receive about ten percent of the acknowledgement. The research also assessed leaders work in organizations. Although leaders hold position and title, most spend approximately 70 percent of their work day in follower roles.

Even the great management researcher and teacher, Warren Bennis, admits that organizations function because of followers who he calls under-appreciated. Further, his research findings explain how important it is for leaders to seek needed information from followers while also emphasizing followers must tell the truth, telling leaders what they need to know, not what they want to hear. If you can recall The Four Seasons singing *Silence is Golden*, you can also recall the concluding lyric line exclaiming, "...but my eyes still see." Followers who see a need for change have an obligation to fellow workers, leaders, and the organization to speak up. In business, silence is not golden, it is lead.

Is there a reason why scholarly studies on followership do not exist? Are organizations overlooking the potential of followers? To the first question, followership is under appreciated by leaders. Some studies conducted among organizational followers examined how followers felt about leaders, thus missing an opportunity to study how followers feel about themselves. To the second question, the answer may appear a simple yes; however, yes is not simple and yes is not accurate.

Terms like postindustrial and postmodern may confuse many people who study organizations, their leadership, and their followership. Perhaps researchers apply industrial age corporate thinking to postindustrial and postmodern organizations. Research that examines socio-technical climate of organizations recognize the interconnections of people across industries, regions, national boundaries, cultures, and languages. The power of followers as knowledge generators is a new phenomenon and an untapped resource. One statistic finds that among ten thousand workers today, technology allows them as many as five million potential interconnections. Their ability to share and gather information make followers knowledge generators and innovative problem solvers for their organizations leading to greater efficiency.

The Boomer Generation reaching retirement presents contemporary business with opportunities to seek new leadership within their existing work force. Developing potential from within lets organizations project their values and vision into the future.

Achieving a future projection goes beyond coaching and beyond training and development. Coaching, training, and development are top down activities assuring that workers know and perform their assigned duties correctly, efficiently, and repeatedly. Transferring values and vision may appear top down; however, the transfer begins bottom up. A worker who desires upward mobility seeks a leader willing to accept the responsibility of a long-term mentoring relationship.

Leaders who accept a mentoring role in their organization project their interpersonal skills upon a protege developing, over time, a mutual learning experience that develops protege skills as the mentor learns new skills from the protege. Becoming a protege elevates a follower among peers and elevates a follower among leaders. Although the follower still follows, the follower makes a conscious choice to improve work skills, enhance knowledge of organizational politics, and expand understanding of values, vision, and organizational mission. Over time, the protege begins acting like a leader from within the ranks of follower.

John Maxwell in *The 21 Most Powerful Minutes in a Leader's Day*² ponders what it will take for leaders to transfer a lasting legacy onto their successors. He presents some data on mentoring future leaders and leaving a legacy of success for everyone. He posits that twenty-five percent of leaders gather followers who then leave and no one succeeds. Fifty percent of leaders gather followers who stay and success is limited. On the other end of the spectrum, only four percent of leaders gather followers who stay and develop others to the collective success of the organization. Finally, only one percent of leaders gather followers who stay in the organization and continue to lead, resulting in a legacy of success for everyone.

The four percent leader or the one percent leader is a rare breed. These few leaders recognize that their tenure is transient. Although they lead for a time, they acknowledge the temporary nature of their leadership. They further acknowledge the obligation of leadership to grow new leaders. The future of organizations is not within existing leaders, rather it lies among the ranks of followers. Part of visionary leading is seeing the future in followers.

² John C. Maxwell (2007). Nashville: Thomas Nelson. (pg. 366)

Successful succession depends on proteges seeking a mentor and a mentor taking on the awesome role, seeing the future in a protege. Maxwell writes of the four percent and one percent leaders, “And then [they] has to let go and get out of the way.” Are you preparing for the day you get out of the way?

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Paul holds a Doctorate of Strategic Leadership from Regent University, a MA in Leadership and BS in Organizational Communication from Bellevue University. Other academic accomplishments include an AA from the Community College of the Air Force in Social Services and a certificate from the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute in Human Relations and Equal Opportunity Treatment.

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