

## Considering Followers as Leaders

By Emmanuel Agbor



At different times in history, there has been emphasis on various aspects and approaches to leadership. These range from a group approach of understanding leadership, to the situational leadership theory, to trait theory. One contemporary approach to leadership is that leaders consider followers as a constitutive part of the leadership process.

For a long time, the focus of leadership has been on what the person *called* 'leader' does, and the skills one needs to become a good leader.

This approach stresses that leadership starts with the leader, and that good leadership exists only as an extension of the "senior leader's" action and will. This model of leadership has been traditionally called the 'Heroic' model of leadership. This model of leadership was popular in the 19th century but continues even today in many organizations (Harrison, 1999). Organizations express the modern version of this leadership approach in followers' perceptions of leaders as the ones who achieve great successes in the organizations single-handedly. In such organizations, the leaders occupy central places and the followers believe that the leaders are ultimately responsible for every outcome, and are responsible to ensure that the organizational processes work smoothly.

However, this heroic approach to leadership does not seem to have any real chance of providing a meaningful advantage for the organization because leaders do not single-handedly lead organizations to greatness. Rather, leadership involves many individuals with various tools and skills (Spillane, 2005). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new form of leadership is replacing leadership as the exercise of centralized power and control (Gilkey, 1999). In this form, leadership is not the ability of one person to take charge, but the ability of one to inspire, empower, and exert broad influence. Leadership therefore, is an influence relationship among leaders and their collaborators, who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes (Harrison, 1999).

Moreover, equating leadership with the actions of those in leadership positions is inadequate because firstly, leadership practice typically involves multiple leaders, some with and others without formal leadership positions. It is essential, therefore, to move beyond viewing leadership in terms of heroic actions. Secondly, leadership is not something that leaders do to followers; rather, followers are one of the constitutive elements of the leadership process. Thirdly, it is not the actions of individuals, but the interactions among them that is critical in the leadership process. Therefore, all involved in this process are important (Spillane, 2005).

Hardly any one individual has all the skills and time to carry out all the complex tasks of contemporary leadership. Therefore, this calls for a shared leadership approach in organizations. Organizations cannot survive if leadership is limited to their senior leaders alone because leadership opportunities can arise at any moment and at any level in the organization. Senior leaders cannot be everywhere to handle the day-to-day activities, which usually happen at a rapid pace. In today's complex and swiftly changing world, organizations need all the leadership ability they can muster. It is not enough for a handful of people to lead. Rather, in today's organizations, everyone in the organization in some way must be involved in leading the organization (Bergmann, & Horst, 1999).

This explains why successful organizations are now moving in the direction of “distributed leadership”; the concept whereby the organization disperses power, authority, and decision-making around the entire organization (Hesselbein, as cited in Gilkey, 1999). In this structure, power and responsibility does not reside in a single person, but throughout the organization, giving the organization a whole constellation of leaders with shared values and aspirations, all of whom work together toward common goals (Heenan & Bennis, 2003). The purpose of dispersing leadership in this way is to empower everyone in the organization. To disperse leadership is to devolve initiative outward throughout the organization and develop the lower levels of leadership by giving them real authority (Gardner, 2000). In organizations that have dispersed leadership, the leaders at the lower level are trusted, given more discretion, more authority, and more information. Hence, they feel that they have a stake in the organization and a right to be involved in making decisions. In this case, they are much more likely to use their energies to produce extraordinary results for the organization. In organizations with high centralization of power on senior leaders, the middle and lower level leaders have little authority, which severely limits their ability and opportunity to be creative and effective.

Nevertheless, to emphasize the need for dispersed leadership does not deny the need for highly qualified senior leadership. Rather, the senior leaders themselves will be more effective if dispersed leadership produces creative followers and enlivens the organizations over which they preside (Gardner, 2000). Hence, today's leaders must be willing to work to create opportunities for everyone in the organization to lead, because the role of leaders today is to nurture and influence relationships

within the organization that empowers everyone in the organization to become leaders. Through this, the organization would build a structure in which the organization becomes a community of leaders and learners (Chirichello, 2004).

Many organizations that are successful today depend on multiple sources of effective leadership at all levels of the organization rather than maintaining an authoritarian or hierarchical leadership structure (Tichy, 1997). This type of organizational design brings competitive advantage to the organization.

In essence, individuals do not possess leadership; rather, leadership happens when people participate in collaborative forms of thought, action, and influence for the good and progress of the organization. This worldview fosters the premise that followers must have opportunities to become leaders. Hence, to foster organizational effectiveness and success in today's environment is for organizational leaders to consider their followers as part of the leadership process and to empower them to take up leadership in the organization.

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