**Harvard
Business
Review**

Organizational Structure

What Every Leader Needs to Know About Followers

by Barbara Kellerman

From the Magazine (December 2007)

Summary. Reprint: R0712F Countless studies, workshops, and books have focused on leaders—the charismatic ones, the retiring ones, even the crooked ones. Virtually no literature exists about followers, however, and the little that can be found tends to depict subordinates… **more**

There is no leader without at least one follower—that's obvious. Yet the modern leadership industry, now a quarter-century old, is built on the proposition that leaders matter a great deal and followers hardly at all.

Good leadership is the stuff of countless courses, workshops, books, and articles. Everyone wants to understand just what makes leaders tick—the charismatic ones, the retiring ones, and even the crooked ones. Good followership, by contrast, is the stuff of nearly nothing. Most of the limited research and writing on subordinates has tended to either explain their behavior in the context of leaders' development rather than followers' or mistakenly assume that followers are amorphous, all one and the same. As a result, we hardly notice, for example, that followers who tag along mindlessly are altogether different from those who are deeply devoted.

In reality, the distinctions among followers in groups and organizations are every bit as consequential as those among leaders. This is particularly true in business: In an era of flatter, networked organizations and cross-cutting teams of knowledge workers, it's not always obvious who exactly is following (or, for that matter, who exactly is leading) and how they are going about it. Reporting relationships are shifting, and new talent-management tools and approaches are constantly emerging. A confluence of changes —cultural and technological ones in particular—have influenced what subordinates want and how they behave, especially in relation to their ostensible bosses.

It's long overdue for leaders to acknowledge the importance of understanding their followers better. In these next pages, I explore the evolving dynamic between leaders and followers and offer a new typology for determining and appreciating the differences among subordinates. These distinctions have critical implications for how leaders should lead and managers should manage.

A Level Playing Field

Followers can be defined by their behavior—doing what others want them to do. But for the purposes of this article, and to avoid confusing what followers do with who they are, I define followers according to their rank: They are low in the hierarchy and have less power, authority, and influence than their superiors. They generally go along to get along, particularly with those in higher positions. In the workplace, they may comply so as not to put money or stature at risk. In the community, they may comply to preserve collective stability and security—or simply because it's the easiest thing to do.

History tells us, however, that subordinates do not follow all the time. As the ideas of the Enlightenment took hold in the eighteenth century, for instance, ordinary people (in industrialized societies especially) became less dependent on kings, landowners, and the like, and their expectations changed accordingly—as did their sense of empowerment. The trend continues. Increasingly, followers think of

themselves as free agents, not as dependent underlings. And they act accordingly, often withholding support from bad leaders, throwing their weight behind good ones, and sometimes claiming commanding voices for those lower down in the social or organizational hierarchy.

Witness the gradual demise of communism (and totalitarianism) in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and now China. And consider the social and political upheavals, all of them antiauthority, in the United States and elsewhere during the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, there has been a dispersion of power at the highest levels of American business, partly because of changes in the cultures and structures of corporations as well as the advance of new technologies. CEOs share power and influence with a range of players, including boards, regulators, and shareholder activists. Executives at global companies must monitor the activities of subordinates situated thousands of miles away. And knowledge workers can choose independently to use collaborative technologies to connect with colleagues and partners in other companies and countries in order to get things done. The result is reminiscent of what management sage Peter Drucker suggested in his 1967 book *The Effective Executive*: In an era dominated by knowledge workers rather than manual workers, expertise can—and often does—trump position as an indicator of who is really leading and who is really following.

Types of Followers

Over the years, only a handful of researchers have attempted to study, segment, and speak to followers in some depth. To various degrees, Harvard Business School professor Abraham Zaleznik, Carnegie Mellon adjunct professor Robert Kelley, and executive coach Ira Chaleff have all argued that leaders with even some understanding of what drives their subordinates can be a great help to themselves, their followers, and their organizations. Each researcher further recognized the need to classify subordinates into different types. (See the sidebar "Distinguishing Marks: Three Other Follower Typologies.")

Distinguishing Marks: Three Other Follower Typologies

While there is a landslide of materials out there dissecting and explaining the intricacies of leaders, very few people have devoted time …

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Zaleznik classified subordinates into one of four types according to two sets of variables—dominance versus submission and activity versus passivity. His research findings intended to inform corporate leaders in particular. By contrast, Kelley and Chaleff were more interested in the welfare of those lower down the corporate ladder. Their work was designed to challenge and counteract what Kelley called the "leadership myth"—the idea that leaders are all-powerful and all-important.

Kelley classified subordinates into five types according to their levels of independence and activity, but his special interest was in fostering "exemplary" followers—those who acted with "intelligence, independence, courage, and a strong sense of ethics." These individuals are critical to the success of all groups and organizations, he argued. Meanwhile, Chaleff placed subordinates into one of four categories based on the degree to which the follower supports the leader and the degree to which the follower challenges the leader.

All three did pioneering work—and yet, as indicated, it seems to have had little impact on how current leader-follower relationships are perceived. In part, this is because of cultural, organizational, and technological changes that have taken place in just the past few years. Manual laborers, for instance, have been replaced by younger, tech-savvy knowledge workers, who are generally less disposed to be, in Zaleznik's parlance, "masochistic" or "withdrawn."

The most important point of all these typologies, however, is that leader-follower relationships, no matter the situation, culture, or era in which they are embedded, are more similar than they are different. Underlying them is some sort of dominance and some sort of deference. Segmenting followers, then, serves at least two broad purposes: In theory, it enables us all to impose an order on groups and organizations that up to now has been largely lacking. In practice, it allows superiors and subordinates alike to discern who in the group or organization is doing what—and why.

A New Typology

The typology I've developed after years of study and observation aligns followers on one, all-important metric—level of engagement. I categorize all followers according to where they fall along a continuum that ranges from "feeling and doing absolutely nothing" to "being passionately committed and deeply involved." I chose level of engagement because, regardless of context, it's the follower's degree of involvement that largely determines the nature of the superior-subordinate relationship. This is especially true today: Because of the aforementioned changes in the cultures and structures of organizations, for instance, knowledge workers often care as much if not more about intrinsic factors—the quality of their interpersonal relationships with their superiors, for instance, or their passion for the organization's mission—than about extrinsic rewards such as salary, titles, and other benefits.

A typology based on a single, simple metric—as opposed to the multiple rating factors used by the creators of previous segmenting tools—offers leaders immediate information on whether and to what degree their followers are buying what they're selling: Do your followers participate actively in meetings and proceedings? Do they demonstrate engagement by pursuing dialogues, asking good questions, and generating new ideas? Or have they checked out—pecking away at their BlackBerries or keeping a close eye on the clock? I categorize followers as *isolates, bystanders, participants, activists,* and *diehards*. Let's look at each type.

Isolates are completely detached.

These followers are scarcely aware of what's going on around them. Moreover, they do not care about their leaders, know anything about them, or respond to them in any obvious way. Their alienation is, nevertheless, of consequence. By knowing and doing nothing, these types of followers passively support the status quo and further strengthen leaders who already have the upper hand. As a result, isolates can drag down their groups or organizations.

Isolates are most likely to be found in large companies, where they can easily disappear in the maze of cubicles, offices, departments, and divisions. Their attitudes and behaviors attract little or no notice from those at the top levels of the organization as long as they do their jobs, even if only marginally well and with zero enthusiasm. Consider the member of the design team at a large consumer goods company who dutifully completes his individual assignments but couldn't care less about the rest of the company's products and processes—he just needs to pay the bills. Or witness the typical American voter—or, more accurately, nonvoter. In 2004, no fewer than 15 million Americans said they had not gone to the polls because they were "not interested in the election" or were "not involved in politics." Groups or organizations rarely profit from isolates, especially if their numbers are high. Unwittingly, they impede improvement and slow change.

To mitigate the isolates' negative effect on companies, leaders and managers first need to ask themselves the following questions: Do we have any isolates among us, and, if so, how many? Where are they? Why are they so detached? Answering these questions won't be easy given that isolates by their very nature are invisible to the top team. Senior management will need to acquire information from those at other levels of the organization by having informal and formal conversations about managers and employees who seem lethargic or indifferent about their work, the group, or both.

The next step, of course, is to take action. Depending on the reasons for alienation, there may be ways to engage isolates in the workplace.

If it's a matter of job satisfaction, a training and development plan might be drawn up. If it's a matter of job stress, a new schedule that allows for several days of work from home might be considered. In any case, leaders and managers will need to consider the return from making such investments in isolates: If it will be low or nonexistent, managers may ultimately decide to part ways with these followers. Employers that are satisfied with those who do an adequate job and no more might choose to keep these types of followers.

Bystanders observe but do not participate.

These free riders deliberately stand aside and disengage, both from their leaders and from their groups or organizations. They may go along passively when it is in their self-interest to do so, but they are not internally motivated to engage in an active way. Their withdrawal also amounts to tacit support for whoever and whatever constitutes the status quo.

Like isolates, bystanders can drag down the rest of the group or organization. But unlike isolates, they are perfectly aware of what is going on around them; they just choose not to take the time, the trouble, or, to be fair, sometimes the risk to get involved. A notorious example from the public sector is people who refuse to intervene when a crime is being committed—commonly referred to as the Genovese syndrome or the bystander effect. A corporate counterpart might be the account representative at a financial services company who goes along with the new CEO's recently mandated process changes, even as some of her colleagues are being demoted or fired for pointing out inefficiencies in the new system. To speak up or get involved would be to put her own career and reputation on the line at a time when the CEO is still weeding out "loyal" employees from "problem" ones.

There are bystanders everywhere—and, like isolates, they tend to go unnoticed, especially in large organizations, because they consciously choose to fly under the radar. In the workplace, silent but productive bystander followers can be useful to managers who just want people

to do as they are told—but they will inevitably disappoint those bosses who want people to actually care about the organization's mission. There are ways to bring bystanders along, however. As with isolates, the key is to determine the root causes of their alienation and offer appropriate intrinsic or extrinsic rewards that may increase their levels of engagement, and, ultimately, their productivity. Bystanders, perhaps much more than isolates, may be swayed by such incentives.

Participants are engaged in some way.

Regardless of whether these followers clearly support their leaders and organizations or clearly oppose them, they care enough to invest some of what they have (time or money, for example) to try to make an impact. Consider the physicians and scientists who developed the painkiller Vioxx: They felt personally invested in producing a best-selling drug for Merck, bringing it to market—and defending it even in the face of later revelations that the drug could create very serious side effects in some users. They were driven by their own passions (ambition, innovation, creation, helping people)—not necessarily by senior managers.

When participants support their leaders and managers, they are highly coveted. They are the fuel that drives the engine. In the workplace, for instance, they can make effective junior partners. When they disapprove of their leaders and managers, however, or when they act as independent agents, the situation gets more complicated. Former Merck CEO Raymond Gilmartin, for instance, was not trained as either a physician or a scientist. So it was easy enough for the people who on paper were his subordinates—the physicians and researchers championing Vioxx—to get ahead of him with a drug that brought the company a whole lot of trouble. (Vioxx was pulled from the market in 2004.)

Gilmartin could have done a much better job of communicating with and learning from these participant followers, perhaps bringing in experts from the outside to consult with him and his knowledge workers as Vioxx was being produced and marketed—and especially

as it was being questioned. Indeed, if Gilmartin had understood the leader-follower dynamic even a bit better, he might have been able to help his company avert public relations and legal disasters.

Although Gilmartin's subordinates acted as free agents, they supported him nonetheless—which highlights an important point about followers' attitudes and opinions. When it comes to participant followers, and to the other engaged follower types described later in this article, leaders need to watch them overall and pay particularly close attention to whether their subordinates are for or against them. (The for-or-against question does not even come up for disengaged isolates and bystanders.)

When it comes to engaged follower types, leaders need to watch them overall and pay particularly close attention to whether their subordinates are for or against them.

Activists feel strongly one way or another about their leaders and organizations, and they act accordingly.

These followers are eager, energetic, and engaged. They are heavily invested in people and processes, so they work hard either on behalf of their leaders or to undermine and even unseat them.

When Paul Wolfowitz ran into trouble as president of the World Bank, for instance, it was the activists among his staffers who led the charge against him. As soon as the news broke that Wolfowitz had intervened in a professional situation on behalf of a woman with whom he was having a personal relationship, members of the World Bank Group Staff Association promptly issued a statement: "The President must acknowledge that his conduct has compromised the integrity and effectiveness of the World Bank Group and has destroyed the staff's trust in his leadership. He must act honorably

and resign."

Activists who strongly support their leaders and managers can be important allies, whether they are direct or indirect reports. Activists are not necessarily high in number, though, if only because their level of commitment demands an expense of time and energy that most people find difficult to sustain. Of course, this same passion also means they can and often do have a considerable impact on a group or organization. Those activists who are as loyal as they are competent and committed are frequently in the leader or manager's inner circle—simply because they can be counted on to dedicate their (usually long) working hours to the mission as their superiors see it.

Some activist followers are effectively encouraged by their superiors to take matters into their own hands. This was the case at Best Buy. CEO Brad Anderson had consistently encouraged "bottom-up, stealth innovation" at the retail organization, and human resource managers Jody Thompson and Cali Ressler were bold—and smart—enough to take him up on it. They wanted to create policies that would enable a workplace without any fixed schedules—a "results-oriented work environment," or ROWE. Best Buy employees at all levels of the organization—in the stores and at headquarters—would be free to set their own hours and come and go as they pleased, as long as their work got done. On their own, Thompson and Ressler considered how to make such a policy work, how exactly to measure results in the absence of set hours, how to implement the new processes that might be required, and so forth. In 2003, they presented their ideas to several unit managers who were struggling with complaints from top performers about undesirable and unsustainable levels of stress in the workplace. The managers were open to hearing about ROWE—more important, they were willing to test it in their units. Word gradually spread about the grassroots experiment, building strong support and acceptance in various departments, until it finally reached management's ears—after some parts of the company had already implemented the new policy. The HR managers' program eventually was rolled out companywide.

Diehards are prepared to go down for their cause—whether it's an individual, an idea, or both.

These followers may be deeply devoted to their leaders, or they may be strongly motivated to oust their leaders by any means necessary. They exhibit an all-consuming dedication to someone or something they deem worthy.

Diehard followers are rare; their all-encompassing commitment means they emerge only in those situations that are dire or close to it. They can be either a strong asset to their leaders or managers or a dangerous liability. Hitler's most ardent disciple from the start was, arguably, Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels. As conditions in Germany began deteriorating, with the Allies closing in, Goebbels remained close to the leader—straight through to the end: Shortly after the führer committed suicide, Goebbels took the most radical diehard-type step when he and his wife took their lives along with those of their six children. Without Hitler, they considered life not worth living.

Of course, not all diehard followers are so extreme in their devotion. But they are willing, by definition, to endanger their own health and welfare in the service of their cause. Soldiers the world over, for instance, risk life and limb in their commitment to protect and defend. They are trained and willing to follow nearly blindly the orders of their superiors, who depend on them absolutely to get the job done.

Sometimes diehards can be found in more ordinary circumstances, even in traditional organizations in which they are motivated to act in ways judged by others to be extreme. Whistleblowers are a case in point. Usually we think them heroes and heroines. In fact, these diehards can and often do pay a high price for their unconventional behavior. Bunnatine H. Greenhouse, a U.S. Army contracting official who criticized a large, noncompetitive government contract with Halliburton for work being done in Iraq, was punished for being so outspoken. She had initially registered her complaint only to those

inside the Army. When this had no effect, she testified in 2005 before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee and described the contract as "the most blatant and improper contract abuse I have witnessed." Incensed by her remark, and citing poor performance, the Army removed Greenhouse from her elite Senior Executive Service position and reassigned her to a lesser job.

As I mentioned earlier, attitudes and opinions do not matter much when we are talking about isolates and bystanders, if only because they do little or even nothing. They matter a great deal, however, when we are talking about participants, activists, and diehards. Do these followers support their leader? Or, rank notwithstanding, are they using their available resources to resist people in positions of power, authority, and influence? My typology suggests that good leaders should pay special attention to those who demonstrate their strong support or their vehement opposition. It's not difficult to see the signs—participants and especially activists and diehards wear their hearts on their sleeves.

Good and Bad Followers

Certain character and personality traits are nearly always associated with being a good leader (integrity, intelligence, and wise judgment, for instance), as are particular skills and capacities (effective communication and decision making, for example). But given the different roles played by leaders and followers, what can reasonably be said about what constitutes a good follower? More to the point, what distinguishes a good follower from a bad one? Here my typology can again be of help.

First and foremost, there is this: Followers who do something are nearly always preferred to followers who do nothing. In other words, isolates and bystanders (little or no engagement, little or no action) don't have much to recommend them. Then again, doing something is not, in and of itself, sufficient, especially in cases of bad leadership. On the one hand, the story of "Chainsaw Al" Dunlap, former CEO of Scott Paper and Sunbeam, is one of a powerful leader with a mean

streak, an intimidating executive who cultivated a culture of tyranny and misery while realizing success at Scott Paper and failure at Sunbeam. On the other hand, it's the story of isolates and bystanders who were unwilling or unable to stop him from leading so poorly. It's also a tale of participants and activists who did something; trouble was they supported rather than opposed a leader who did not deserve it.

Or consider the extreme case of Darfur, which *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof has long described as a situation in which there is enough blame to go around, including to those among us who have known about the genocide for years but have done nothing to stop it. Kristof praises certain kinds of followers, however —participants and activists who, despite being without power, authority, and influence, did what they reasonably could to stop the murder and mayhem. One such follower was the 12-year-old from a small town in Oregon who, after seeing the film *Hotel Rwanda*, formed a Sudan Club and raised money by selling eggs and washing cars. Another was the doctoral student who in his spare time became the foremost expert on how investments by foreign companies "underwrite the Sudanese genocide."

Good followers will actively support a leader who is good (effective and ethical) and will actively oppose a leader who is bad (ineffective and unethical). Good followers invest time and energy in making informed judgments about who their leaders are and what they espouse. Then they take the appropriate action. The senior editors and other newsroom staffers at the *New York Times*, for instance, certainly may have had problems with the way Howell Raines, then the executive editor, was trying to remake the venerable publication and may have chafed at his arrogant leadership style. The tipping point for them, however, was Raines's mismanagement of the scandal involving wayward reporter Jayson Blair—an incident they believed could create lasting damage to an institution to which they were deeply committed and where credibility is everything.

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Conversely, bad followers will do nothing whatsoever to contribute to the group or organization. Or they will actively oppose a leader who is good. Or they will actively support a leader who is bad. Clearly Chainsaw Al's lapdogs fall into this last category. Most of the subordinates in his inner circle—those who were closest to him and who arguably could have afforded, professionally and financially, to oppose his ultimately destructive behavior—did nothing to try to shorten his miserable reign.• • •

Contrary to what the leadership industry would have you believe, the relationship between superiors and their subordinates is not one-sided. Nor are followers all one and the same—and they should not be treated as such. Insofar as they can, followers act in their own self-interests, just as leaders do. And while they may lack authority, at least in comparison with their superiors, followers do not lack power and influence.

Spurred by cultural and technological advances, more and more followers are either challenging their leaders or, in many cases, simply circumventing them altogether. Participant, activist, and diehard followers invested in animal rights can, for instance, on their own now mass-send messages via e-mail, collect data using concealed cameras, and post their galvanizing images on various websites. Their work has motivated chains like McDonald's and Burger King to ask their meat and egg suppliers to follow guidelines that include providing extra water, more wing room, and fresh air for egg-laying hens. In 2007, Burger King went a step further and announced that it would buy eggs and pork only from suppliers that did not confine their animals in crates or cages.

As this example and countless others confirm, it's long overdue for academics and practitioners to adopt a more expansive view of leadership—one that sees leaders and followers as inseparable, indivisible, and impossible to conceive the one without the other.

Barbara Kellerman is the James MacGregor Burns Lecturer in Public Leadership at Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, and is author and editor of many books and articles on leadership.