

FOLLOWERSHIP

“The highest reward for a person’s toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it” –
John Ruskin

Followership: If you have never heard the term before or never thought twice about it, you are not alone. It usually appears as a “non-word” when documents are spell-checked on the computer. Is it a new concept? Not really; just one that is often overlooked or forgotten.

And just why followership is overlooked and forgotten is an intriguing question. Without followers, would there be leaders? Who would they lead? Who would become leaders if they were not first followers?

Leadership is an interactive activity: leaders depend on followers and vice versa. Team efforts are valued highly in today’s workforce and such efforts require active followers. Followers set the levels of acceptance for leadership. And in many ways, it is more important for leaders to understand followers than for followers to understand leaders.

Followership can be defined as the willingness to cooperate in working towards the accomplishment of the group mission, to demonstrate a high degree of teamwork and to build cohesion among the group. Sounds pretty similar to leadership, doesn’t it? Effective followership is an excellent building block to effective leadership. There are numerous sources to which one can turn to find helpful information on effective leadership, leadership practices and on becoming the best leader one can be. Fewer such sources exist on guiding one to be an effective follower, though there are some. Take a look at the following behaviors, which have been identified as those comprising effective followership:

- Volunteering to handle tasks or help accomplish goals
- Willingly accepting assignments
- Exhibiting loyalty to the group
- Voicing differences of opinions, but supporting the group’s decisions
- Offering suggestions
- Maintaining a positive attitude, even in confusing or trying times
- Working effectively as a team member

As a follower, it is often easy to criticize the tactics, styles or ideas of a leader. This is especially

true when one has been “beat out” for a leadership position and feels resentment, bitterness or jealousy. It is difficult to be an effective follower with such feelings lingering.

Sometimes it helps to critically evaluate our own views towards leadership, the organization and ourselves as followers in order to get a better understanding of the situation. Through this we can learn how to create change in ourselves, how to deal with difficulties and how to become productive and happy followers. We might also learn that being a leader is not as easy as it may sometimes appear! Take some time to ask yourself the following questions – and don’t be alarmed if some of them are a bit difficult to answer:

- Am I truly pursuing the mission and goals of the group while balancing my self-interests?
- What ideas, purpose or values do I share with the leader? The group?
- Should I be taking more initiative?
- What particular pressures and challenges does the leader face?
- If I and/or the group provided more support to the leader, might it improve her/his behavior?
- The leader must have some redeeming skills, qualities and abilities which helped get her or him into this position of leadership. What are they? How can I help draw these out? How can I help change the environment so these skills and abilities can be demonstrated?

Although changing ourselves is usually not an easy task, most would agree it is easier than changing others. If you are experiencing frustrations or misunderstandings with your organization leader, take a step back and view the situation from the outside. Instead of asking how you can get the leader out of her or his position, ask how you can help her or him improve.

Even if you are perfectly satisfied with your leadership, it is necessary for you – just as it is for a leader – to evaluate your role as a follower/collaborator/group member to determine if you are performing in this role at the highest level possible. Remember, effective leadership requires effective followership. Do your best to make your group the best it can be!

Reference:

Boatman, S. A. (1997). *Student Leadership Development: Approaches, methods, and models*. Columbia, SC: NACA.

Gini, A. (1997). *Moral leadership and business ethics*. Chicago: Loyola University,

On-Line.

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