

# White Paper

## **Follow the Leader**

*The roles, traits and qualities associated with effective followership*

Globally it is accepted that corporations succeed or fail on the basis of how well they are led, and each year enormous amounts of time (and money) are invested in finding, selecting, recruiting and developing leaders who will deliver this success.

But are we in danger of over-emphasising the role (and impact) of the leader, and forgetting that **every leader must have people to lead**? Grand battle plans could have come to nothing if, for example, Napoleon had been without an army, and was therefore a “leader without followers”.

Corporations succeed or fail partly on the basis of how well their leaders lead, but partly also on the basis of how well their followers follow.

*In 1994, declining profitability and intensified competition forced a large commercial institution to reorganise its operation and significantly reduce its work force. Time and resources were stretched so thin that one manager had no choice but to delegate the reorganisation to his staff, people who had recently undergone training in self-management.*

*Despite serious reservations, the manager set them up as a unit without a leader, responsible to one another and to the organisation. The group was required to undertake all the tasks associated with reorganisation – writing their own job descriptions, designing a training programme, determining criteria for performance evaluation, planning and resourcing the unit to achieve business objectives.*

*They pulled it off. The staff within the unit achieved their objectives successfully and the department’s capacity to control and direct itself virtually without leadership saved the organisation months of turmoil.*

What was it that these employees did? Given a goal and parameters, they went where most departments could only have gone under the guidance of an effective leader. But these employees accepted the delegation of authority and went there alone. They thought for themselves, sharpened their skills, focused their efforts and put on a fine display of grit and determination under difficult circumstances.

### **They followed effectively.**

To encourage this kind of effective following in other organisations, we need to understand the nature of the follower and his/ her role.

Who are the followers, and what are the characteristics and traits of an effective follower?

Let’s first examine the question -

### ***Leader or follower?***

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Recent studies reveal that we rarely spend more than 20% of our time leading in our daily work, no matter what our status or position. If we only spend 20% of our time as leaders, we clearly spend the remaining 80% as followers.

Most of our time – whatever our management title or role – we are followers. It’s the most frequent role that we play – both in and out of work.

Even CEOs have to follow laws and regulations, shareholder desires, the wishes of the Chairman and the advice of internal and external advisors. It is interesting to note that in a recent study of some 7,500 senior executives, virtually all of these individuals believed that they led more than they followed – despite the behavioural evidence and diary entries that belied this claim!

So followership – not leadership - dominates our lives but not our thinking because our preoccupation with leadership keeps us from considering the nature and importance of the follower.

It is essential, therefore, that the essence of good followership can be identified, understood and developed. Without effective followers, a leader cannot achieve the success that he or she is capable of delivering, and an organisation will fail to achieve its full potential.

### ***The Role of the Follower***

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Bosses are not necessarily good leaders; subordinates are not necessarily good followers. Many bosses couldn’t lead a horse to water; many subordinates couldn’t follow signposts. Some people will avoid either role; others accept the role thrust upon them and perform it badly.

In his highly-acclaimed book “The Power of Followership: How to Create Leaders People Want to Follow and Followers Who Lead Themselves”, author Robert E Kelley asserts that

“What distinguishes an effective from an ineffective follower is enthusiastic, intelligent and self-reliant participation – without star billing – in the pursuit of an organizational goal”.

Thus the role of the effective follower is to take an **active** and **enthusiastic** role in delivering corporate (or team) objectives. The role of the follower is not passive - it is a considered choice. Effective followers are well-balanced and responsible adults who can succeed without strong leadership.

In an organisation of effective followers, a leader tends to be more an overseer of change and progress than a swash-buckling hero.

Some people choose followership as their primary role at work, and serve as excellent team players that take great satisfaction in helping to further a cause or achieve a shared goal. Others will take a leadership role in some situations, but choose the follower role in a particular context.

Consider the leader/ follower relationship in a recent political situation. Upon losing the leadership vote of confidence from the Conservative party, former leader Iain Duncan-Smith stated – openly and with apparent candour – that he would “enthusiastically, loyally and with energy... give active support and follow whomsoever was chosen to replace him as leader”. His transition from leader to follower was instant, and (even allowing for the usual dose of political positioning) in his statement clearly recognised that his role as hierarchical leader had come to end, and that it had transformed into one in which he would actively service the needs of the chosen specialists and the party in achieving their aims. This synthesis from leader to follower may often be invisible to the external eye, as committed followers move from leader to follower and back again.

Ex-SAS leader Sir Peter de la Billier asserted that most people wouldn't be able recognise who the leader was in any SAS team. He explains that the hierarchical leader's job is to provide strategic direction initially; thereafter his job is to service the experts in his team so that they can put their individual expertise to best use at the right time. This exemplifies the leader/follower model being used as the time and need arises, and demonstrates the need for leaders to build both leadership – and followership – skills.

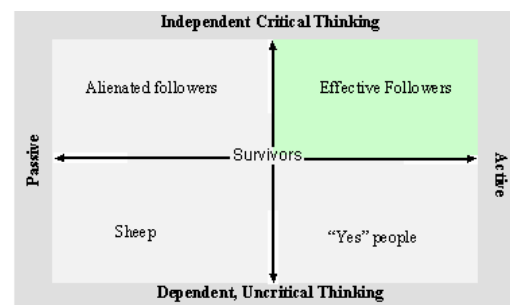
### ***The Qualities of Effective Followers***

Followers are often experts in their own field, well-educated, sophisticated and highly-trained. They are less deferential, more challenging and will actively choose followership as a considered option, rather than simply falling into a submissive or

following role. As organisational structures flatten, the quality of those who follow will become more and more important.

In trying to identify the difference between effective and ineffective followers Robert E. Kelley looked at two behavioural dimensions –

- the degree to which followers exercised independent critical thinking
- their ranking on an active/ passive scale.



The resulting diagram (above) enabled him to categorise followers into one of five groups:

1. Sheep – passive and uncritical; perform tasks allocated and then stop.
2. Alienated followers – passive, critical and independent in their thinking. Disgruntled acquiescence; someone/ something turned them off.
3. Survivors – adept at surviving change; perpetually sample the wind and adapt thinking to match current requirements.
4. **Effective followers**
5. Yes people – passive and un-enterprising; depend on leader for inspiration

Focusing on **effective followers** only, Kelley found them to demonstrate the following characteristics.

They invariably

- thought for themselves and were self-starters
- were energetic and assertive
- regularly took risks
- solved problems independently
- were proud and fulfilled
- had consistently high ratings from peers and superiors

- succeed without the need for strong leadership
- offer as much value to their organisation as their leaders

Clearly Kelley's effective followers share a number of essential qualities:

1. They manage themselves well;
2. They are committed to the organisation and to a purpose, principle or person outside themselves;
3. They build their competence and focus their efforts for maximum impact;
4. They are courageous, honest and credible.

1. *Self-management* – Paradoxically, the key to being an effective follower is the ability to think for one-self, to exercise control and independence and to work without close supervision. Good followers are people to whom a leader can safely delegate responsibility. Another quirk of this paradox is that good followers see themselves (except in terms of line responsibility) as the equals of the leaders they follow.

**Self-confident followers see colleagues as allies and leaders as equals.**

2. *Commitment* – Effective followers are committed to something – a cause, a product, an organisation – in addition to the care for their own lives and careers. This can often be misinterpreted by some leaders, who read loyalty to a cause/ organisation as loyalty to themselves. Effective followers will temper their loyalties to satisfy organisational needs – or will find an organisation to which they can commit.

3. *Competence and focus* – On the basis that committed incompetence is still incompetence, effective followers master skills that will be useful. Good followers take on extra work with enthusiasm, but make sure that their core responsibilities are delivered to the highest standard before embarking on additional or incremental duties. Effective followers know their own strengths, speak up on areas that they feel uncomfortable with, and see their co-workers as colleagues rather than competitors.

4. *Courage* – Effective followers are credible, honest and courageous. They establish themselves as independent, critical thinkers whose knowledge and judgement can be trusted. They give credit where credit is due, admit mistakes and stand up for what they believe in. Insightful, candid and fearless,

effective followers can keep leaders and colleagues honest and informed.

“Courageous followers can keep a leader honest – and out of trouble.” (Robert E Kelley)

### **Developing Followership**

It should be evident by now that the characteristics of a good leader and those for a good follower are essentially the same and the differences are to be found in their degree and context, rather than their definitions. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that when you find an individual who exhibits initiative, self-control, commitment, talent, honesty, credibility and courage, we inevitably hear the cry “Here’s a leader!”.

But if we remember that followership is a role – not a person – and accept that effective leaders and effective followers are often the same person playing different roles at different times of the day, then the necessity to develop effective followership becomes more acute and obvious.

We can buy vast arrays of books on the subject of leaders, leadership, biographies and autobiographies, yet when did you last see a book on developing followership skills or Followers? (Robert E Kelley's book in 1992 was ground-breaking, yet his principles and theories remain relatively unrecognised in today's management handbooks.)

Most organisations assume that leadership has to be taught but that everyone knows how to follow. This assumption is based on three key misnomers : (1) that leaders are more important than followers; (2) that following is simply doing what you're told (passive), and (3) that followers draw their energy and talent from the leader.

Development that addresses each of these core erroneous assumptions will ensure that the organisation benefits from positive and active followership. Some of the ways in which an organisation can support the development of effective followership skills and culture can be summarised as follows:

1. *Redefine followership and leadership* – Instead of seeing the leadership role as superior to that of the follower; encourage a culture that recognises the roles as equal but different activities. Independent thinking, creativity and commitment should be actively encouraged, and negativity (by managers) towards these traits actively discouraged.

2. *Develop followership skills* – Encourage active participation in specific development interventions that focus on topics such as :

- Improving independent, critical thinking
- Self-management
- Aligning personal and organisational goals and commitment
- Examining the similarities and differences between leadership and followership roles
- Develop confidence and skills to move from leader to follower with ease

3. *Recognise and reward followership* – Revise the performance evaluation criteria to include followership as well as leadership, and assess employee's behaviour in things such as independent and creative thinking, originality, courage and commitment.

4. *Utilise an organisational structure that promotes followership* – Unless followership can practicably be incorporated into everyday activities, the concept will remain just that – a concept. Consider some of the practical opportunities: leaderless groups; groups with rotating leadership; delegation to the lowest level; task teams with specific objectives and parameters, but with no nominated "leader".

If you're sold on the benefits of developing followership within your organisation (motivated workforce, self-managed, committed, solve problems independently) then a combination of organisational development and personal development is required to kick-start your followership economy.

Whilst followership can clearly provide a strategic and competitive advantage, most development organisations do not provide specific development activity to promote active followership. Check out the content of current leadership training; how many include followership in the itinerary or topic content?

The answer to this question is that none of the "top" four business schools for executives are yet offering followership as a stated item within their leadership development programmes. This is the "yin" without the "yang"; remember the statistics from the beginning of this Paper?

**"Only 20% of time is spent leading....."**

However you look at it, the equation just doesn't add up. In today's fast-moving business environment, both leaders and followers need to develop core followership

skills if they are to succeed and achieve their potential.

The authors are indebted to the insights and theories of Robert E Kelley, whose book "The Power of Followership: How to Create Leaders People Want to Follow and Followers Who Lead Themselves" and subsequent article "In Praise of Followers" (Harvard Business Review) have inspired and provided the key models for this discussion document.

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#### **For further information contact:**

Jon Murphy -

[jon.murphy@eacg.co.uk](mailto:jon.murphy@eacg.co.uk)

phone:

**Sydney +61 2 9004 7879**

**Singapore + 65 6409 0636**

[www.eacg.com.au](http://www.eacg.com.au)

[www.eacg.asia](http://www.eacg.asia)