

Leaders and Followers: The Forgotten Part of the Equation

Punch in “leadership books” on Amazon, and dozens of volumes pop up.

Punch in “follower books,” and you get titles about social media and Christian discipleship.

This same disparity holds true for my public library. Here patrons can find dozens of books on leadership concepts and systems – servant leadership, leadership by example, leadership on the battlefield and in the office – but little information on the development and character traits of a good follower.

Youth organizations, private academies, and many of our colleges promise to crank out “leaders for tomorrow.” No institution of which I am aware touts the production of outstanding followers – or even of good citizens, for that matter.

We Americans like to think of ourselves as rebels, independent, innovative, anything but followers. The word itself carries negative connotations.

Yet in reality most of us are followers, even those who in some capacity serve as leaders.

We follow certain political candidates. We follow orders in the work place. We follow the teachings of a faith or philosophy. We follow the news and follow people on Twitter. We follow the advice of a self-help book.

So why is so little information available about building good followers? After all, most leaders were once followers. Napoleons don't emerge as full-blown emperors in seventh grade.

Let's establish a working definition of "follower." One online dictionary describes a follower "as an adherent or devotee of a particular person, cause, or activity."

Good enough for my purposes here.

So what commendable traits might such "an adherent or devotee" display? What might distinguish a strong follower from a weak one?

First, strong followers understand the mission of their organization. Whatever they are doing – secretarial work, manual labor, military service, or any other job – they learn or possess the skills to contribute to that mission and perform their assigned tasks to the best of their abilities, even when the leadership is weak or wrong-headed. Given an objective – the taking of a hill held by an enemy, higher sales figures, stronger production, the building of a house – good followers do their best to meet the goals set for them, undeterred by circumstance, looking always for solutions rather than becoming part of a problem.

Next, good followers are loyal to their superiors unless that loyalty is undeserved. A woman I know, Sheila, a corporate secretary in Asheville, North Carolina, worked closely with her boss, a well-known public figure. Once at a dinner party a guest asked her a question about her employer's personal life. Sheila brushed aside the question, which later roused another man to compliment her on her discretion.

In contrast to Sheila are those employees who grouse

constantly about their work place and its leadership. They grump about the pay and the hours, gossip about their employers, and belittle their customers. Their constant griping fuels an unhappy work environment and hurts business.

Good followers are also bold enough to offer advice, and good leaders intelligent enough to listen. The second lieutenant in the field may give a colonel insight on the nature of the terrain that saves a dozen lives. The woman working an assembly line might offer the company's officers a tip that saves the company thousands of dollars a month.

Finally, men and women in leadership positions often face tremendous stress. Frequently, they make mistakes. The best followers recognize that their leaders are fallible, and that pressure and chance can result in a failure. Loyal followers acclaim the strong traits in their leaders while realizing that occasional failure comes with the territory.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not advocating some sort of blind, goose-stepping subservience. In raising this question – What makes for a good follower? – I am thinking of foot soldiers, not pawns on a chessboard.

We pay great attention to building leaders. Maybe it's time to examine and encourage the talents of those people without whom leaders could not exist.

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