



The Art of Following

Summary

The subject of following is almost non-existent in the literature on leadership. If following is discussed at all, it is discussed as a derivative of leadership and not as a subject in its own right. To fill the void concerning theories on following, three authors of Dutch consultancy Berenschot have developed a model of followership, with archetypes of good and bad follower behaviour. Their views are outlined in this paper. Practices from Shell, ABN AMRO, and TNT Group are used to illustrate organizational views on followership. This paper concludes that the leader – follower dichotomy is a false paradox. Following and leading are not roles or even mindsets, but internal activities within the same person that can switch from leading to following and back again in an instant. What is needed in organizations is heavy followership and light leadership.

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It is probably inevitable that a society as star-struck as ours should focus on leaders in analyzing why organizations succeed or fail. As a long-time student and teacher of management, I, too, have tended to look to the men and women at the top for clues on how organizations achieve and maintain institutional health. But the longer I study effective leaders, the more I am convinced of the under-appreciated importance of effective followers.

– Warren Bennis.

The Foundation for European Leadership¹ explored the little discussed concept of followership and its relation to leadership in the Knowledge Sharing Meeting of March 2005. To provide food for thought and discussion, the key speaker of the evening was Ber Damen, co-author of the book *The Art of Followership*². A panel of three leadership development experts from three multinational companies provided more opportunity for discussion. Cases from the three companies can be found throughout this text.

According to Ber Damen, the subject of following is almost non-existent in the literature. Instead, discussions and publications have focussed almost exclusively on leadership. If following is discussed at all, it is discussed as a derivative of leadership and not as a subject in its own right. Followers are seen as reacting to leadership and not vice versa. Even more perplexing is that any discussion of followership tends to result in a discussion on leadership – a fact that was demonstrated repeatedly in the discussions at the Knowledge Sharing Meeting. Some participants even mentioned the aversion they had to discussing following as a concept, or being considered a follower instead of a leader.

Damen points out that people in the position of follower vastly outnumber those in a position of leadership and that there can be no leadership without followers. As has been repeatedly stated, a leader without followers is only taking a walk. According to Damen and his co-authors, many of the problems in organizations are due to bad followership or the improper receiving of leadership. Good followership may be even more important to organizational success than good leadership.

Because of the over-emphasis on leadership, there is no common language to describe follower behaviour. Additionally, the assumptions that are usually made about followership have not been examined. Three assumptions that Damen highlights are: that following is something that happens automatically, that it is always better to lead than to follow, and that leaders not followers make the difference at work. To fill the void concerning theories on following, the authors have developed a model of followership, with archetypes of good and bad follower behaviour.

Types of Followers

The authors of *The Art of Followership*, distinguish three types of relationships between leaders and followers in organizations. The first, the relationship of exchange, is based on negotiation and has utility as a driving force. Leader and follower discuss material needs such as salary and benefits. The second, the relationship of authority, focuses on rights and has casting as a driving force. Leader and follower focus on responsibilities and task descriptions. The third, the relationship of cooperation, is values and has congruence as a driving force. Leader and follower deal with underlying motives, attitudes, and wishes in the job. These relationships usually correspond to a time frame. The first,

¹ The Foundation for European Leadership organises activities to develop and enhance the practice of European Leadership. www.foundationforeuropeanleadership.org

² Drenth B., Damen B., Goedhart A., *De Kunst van het Volgen*, Van Gorcum, 2005.



exchange, is usually the type of relationship that appears in the short term between leader and follower. In the mid term, the relationship of authority may appear. Finally, when the leader – follower relationship has been established for the long term, the relationship may move to one of cooperation. Obviously this time frame is fluid. Values, for instance, can be an issue that comes up at the very beginning of a relationship if values are readily discussed in the organization. But for values to be accepted by the follower usually takes longer than the acceptance of certain rights or the negotiation of an exchange.

Important for the health of the leader – follower relationship is the balance between the three types of relations. A good balance depends on the motivation of the follower and the quality of the leader. A healthy, well-established relationship will focus equally on all three. The exchange relation is about contribution and profit. The authority relation is about rights and obligations. The cooperation relation is about adopting and introducing values. It is only when all three are present and are attended to in the proper proportions that a healthy leader – follower relationship can occur.

An imbalance between the relations leads to dissatisfaction, a tendency to compensate with other types of relations, and to the danger of the follower dropping out of the relationship altogether. An over-emphasis on exchange for example, will lead to the follower mind-set that everything can and will be negotiated. An over-emphasis on authority will produce a follower who sees everything from the point of view that 'an order is an order'. Finally, an over-emphasis on cooperation, will lead the follower to adopt a love or hate relationship with his leader.

To arrive at the archetypes of followers, the authors have identified six forces that influence follower behaviour. These forces correspond to the three types of relationships between leader and follower. Each relation has a force where the leader is central to the relationship and one where the follower is central to the relationship.

Table 1 Forces of Followership

	Short term Exchange (utility)	Medium term Authority (rights)	Long term Cooperation (values)
Leader central	Contribute	Accept	Converge
Follower central	Profit	Appeal	Diverge

When viewed from the type of force dominating the leader – follower relationship, the authors derive six archetypes of followership. These archetypes can then be present in a “good” and in a “bad” form. A detailed description of the various archetypes can be found in the book *The Art of Followership*.

Table 2 Good Followers

	Short term Exchange	Medium term Authority	Long term Cooperation
Leader central	The Brilliant	The Fellow	The Supporter
Follower central	The Enjoyer	The Solicitor	The Idealist

Table 3 Bad Followers

	Short term Exchange	Medium term Authority	Long term Cooperation
Leader central	The Drudge	The Puppet	The Zealot
Follower central	The Profiteer	The Know-it-all	The Terrorist

It is important to note that the archetypes, relations and forces between leaders and followers are not static. They change in time and are dependent upon the situation and the people involved. Certain types of leaders may attract certain types of followers and vice versa. These leader – follower dynamics warrant further study.



What makes a good follower?

Perhaps due to all the attention lavished on leaders and leadership, following has developed a pejorative connotation in our post-modern culture. The subject of following is not as sexy as the study of leadership. Followers have the stigma of being passive, of being sheep. Who would want to publicly announce that they are followers and not leaders? In the discussion at the Foundation for European Leadership, some participants voiced this reluctance to be considered followers – even good followers. Following, from this perspective, is not a choice, but a necessity. You only settle for the role of follower at work when you are in a situation that precludes any choice for a leadership role. In this view, emancipated employees who have the luxury of choice of work would always choose a leadership and not a followership role.

Ber Damen and co-authors want to challenge this pervasive view. They contend that a good follower is able to lead upwards; he is able to lead in his followership. For this attitude the authors have coined the term “heavy followership”. Heavy followers take responsibility for their followership. The following they do is active and engaged. They do not passively wait for their leader to lead. When there is heavy followership, only light leadership is needed. The concept of heavy followership demands an active role on the part of the follower. When the three primary relations between follower and leader are imbalanced, the heavy follower needs to take action to balance them. He needs to speak up against bad leadership.

ABN AMRO Bank

Kees van Kaam, Senior Vice President Leadership Development, Group HR/Leadership Development

The vision of the Group Leadership Development is to facilitate organizational change and to support the fulfilment of ABN AMRO's role in society. One of the group's goals is supporting leaders to become free, responsible, authentic, and **engaged**. The concept of engaged employees (both leaders and followers) is important to ABN AMRO. In the 2003/2004 Employee Engagement Survey, all bank employees were surveyed to measure their “engagement”, defined as an employee's commitment to both their job and their organization. The term also refers to how employees strive to act in the best interest of the company and their willingness to invest discretionary effort in doing so. Engagement is a concept the organization will continue to measure and strive to improve.

Consequently, for ABN AMRO, engagement in followers is something a good leader should actively develop. The question for Van Kaam and the Group Leadership Development is whether leaders can bring about engagement in their followers. In leadership development terms, this means considering rewarding leadership styles that promote engaged followers: styles such as coaching, where employees are encouraged to take initiative, be innovative, and seek professional development. By supplying specific workshops to develop these leadership styles, ABN AMRO tries to develop leaders that can help the company develop engaged employees. But Van Kaam stresses that developing leaders requires active followers: leaders learn through feedback and self-reflection. Good followership therefore also requires an active role in supplying feedback to the leader. This too is a form of employee engagement.

The larger picture at ABN AMRO therefore, is that of an organization that promotes leaders who stimulate engaged followers, which measures the engagement of those followers, that promotes an active attitude in followers with responsibility to give feedback to leaders, and that uses this information in leadership development. In this way, ABN AMRO specifically promotes engagement in employees and could be termed an organization that strives for “heavy followership”.



In the book *Leading Up, How to Lead Your Boss so You Both Win*³, Michael Useem has examined examples of “heavy followership”. According to Useem, “leadership has always required more than a downward touch: it needs to come up from below as well as from the top.” Good followership in other words, is a form of upward leadership. More upward leadership is essential. Useem says: “The exercise of upward leadership is made easier by present-day expectations that we learn not just from our superiors but also from all points of the compass. The “360” has widely come to designate a manager’s annual task of gathering appraisals from direct reports, working peers, immediate bosses, even customers and clients. So it is with leading up: Instead of just motivating those below, we must now also muster those above; instead of just learning from those above, we must listen to those below.”

What do followers want from their leaders?

It follows from the above discussion of followership, that good followers expect light leadership from their leaders. In the Foundation for European Leadership event, characteristics mentioned for a good, “light” leader were the three h’s: humor, humility and humanity. Another characteristic mentioned by most participants was authenticity. This would include the ability and the willingness to learn from followers. Leaders need the ability to tolerate insecurity and ambiguity. It is because followers allow leaders to lead them that there is any leadership at all.

But the participants did not go so far as to suggest leaders be elected by their followers. An election implies freedom of choice and followers usually can choose only one person or do not know the other candidates. Leadership development programs in organizations need to document the type of climate a leader is developing, since there needs to be awareness of what followers are saying about their leaders. Involvement of followers in the appointment of the leader in this way is important. An organization needs to appoint leaders based on their contribution and merit.

Following and Leading: the paradox

An interesting point that was raised during the discussions was whether leadership and followership are actually two distinct concepts or whether they are two ways of looking at and naming the same phenomenon. Our society historically distinguishes leaders and followers, and views these concepts as more or less static roles for a person in an organization. However, these concepts seem to be historically tied to the hierarchical and industrial organizational system, where leaders and managers are in command and followers under them follow and execute their orders, as is perhaps still relevant to organizations such as the military and the Catholic Church.

More recently, with the emancipation of employees and the surge of highly educated knowledge workers, the static view of leadership and followership roles has been recalibrated to a more dynamic view. Here, a single worker in an organization repeatedly shifts from leadership to follower roles, depending on the activity he is engaged in. The same employee may be leading a team in the morning and following his manager’s policy in the afternoon. In organizations, we are all followers and leaders, depending on the role and situation we are in. This view has led to the concept of situational leadership.

³ Useem, M., *Leading Up; How to Lead Your Boss so You Both Win*, Crown Business, New York, 2001.



TNT

Michael Hathorn, Group Director Leadership and Organisational Development

TNT's leadership style is influenced by the very nature of the business itself: it is a fast-moving logistics company where the basic entrepreneurial spirit of "getting the job done" is valued. The implicit assumption is that leadership is not a static, hierarchical role reserved for the elite. Virtually all roles are seen as providing opportunities to demonstrate leadership skills. TNT places a strong emphasis on teamwork and looks to individual team members to contribute proactively in achieving the best outcomes.

A new three-day program, "Leading High-Performing Teams", is an example of this TNT mindset. Based on the recognized needs of senior and middle management, the program stresses that leadership within a team is situational in that all team members are expected to take the lead at one point or another. Most TNT teams have designated leaders, yet they are seldom seen as the primary determinants of team performance. To develop effective teams, the team leaders are expected to engage others in ways which may require them at times to be followers in their own teams. The basis for such successful teamwork is trust. Therefore, for team members to work together seamlessly and to trust each other, they need to develop skills to engage in authentic and productive dialogue. The program focuses on developing participants' skills so that team members are able to engage in such dialogue, to build commitment, and to demand mutual accountability. In doing so, the individual team members are confident enough to assume the leadership roles that play to their strengths, and comfortable enough to let other members do so as well. The team leader's primary challenge is to lead and to follow his or her team, and to foster that same ability among members of the team.

In the bigger picture at TNT, leaders stimulate employee engagement and are the drivers of development in the organisation. Fortunately, there is always room for those who can add value through their commitment, ideas and actions at all levels.

But the distinction between leading and following becomes even more fluid when we examine the ideals of light leadership and heavy followership. Because upon examination it becomes clear that heavy followers and light leaders share the same traits. For example: both heavy followers and light leaders listen well and emphatically to other's points of view. Both have respect for those they are leading or being led by. In his book *Management of the Absurd*⁴, Richard Farson notes that "one of the great enemies of organizational effectiveness is our stereotypical image of a leader". Leaders are not the heroes we often want them to be. Ultimately, the strength of the leader is his ability to elicit the strength of the group. By this Farson means that leadership is distributed among members of a group and that they take turns playing various roles, including various forms of the leadership role. Farson says: "people who are leaders in one situation are usually followers in others."

In this view, leading and following become two sides of the same coin: a good leader is a good follower and vice versa. Even more interesting is that a good (light) leader is expected to be able to constantly switch between leading and following. Ultimately then, there is no difference between following and leading. The whole leader – follower dichotomy is a false paradox. Following and leading are not roles or even mindsets, but internal activities within the same person that can switch from leading to following and back again in an instant.

Farson: "I have found that there are two kinds of good employees. One is the willing assistant prepared to accept whatever tasks are assigned and to accomplish them with dispatch and good will. The other goes further, anticipating what the needs are going to be and then offering solutions, not problems, ideas, not complaints. This anticipatory role is seldom asked for; nevertheless, it is an important leadership role played by those who are not called leaders." This view fits perfectly into the new theories of the networked organization. In this concept, there is no longer a clear hierarchical structure, but individual workers form networks to get things done. It also supports the concepts of tribal leadership and consensus leadership.

⁴ Farson, R., *Management of the Absurd; Paradoxes in Leadership*, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

**Shell**

Marjon Oosterhout, Head Global Leadership Development Shell International Exploration & Production

At Shell, the leader – follower distinction is not an issue in the corporate culture or in any part of the leadership development program. For instance, Shell builds its leadership framework on “nine planets” of leadership competencies. One of these competencies for leaders is being able to develop a shared vision. The vision is implemented top-down, and it takes good followership to make this vision your own. At the same time, as a leader, you have to translate this vision to your followers according to your own leadership style. So for Shell, all leadership roles entail both following and leading, depending on the situation. This is an integrated Shell philosophy and culture that makes the entire discussion on leading versus following obsolete.

Furthermore, Shell, like some other large multinational corporations, has a rotating career model. This means a leader can easily end up working for someone who worked for him or her in the past. This aspect of the career path at Shell requires employees to cultivate the leader = follower mindset.

One reason followership may be so interwoven with Shell culture is that loyalty is a cherished company value at Shell. Good followership could be considered an inherent consequence of this value for company loyalty. All Shell leaders consider themselves first and foremost loyal followers to the company. They lead in their followership and follow in their leadership.

Good followers lead in their followership and good leaders follow in their leadership

You cannot avoid leadership in an organization. That means there will always be leaders and followers, or at least there will be individuals performing these roles or exercising these mindsets. Important for the health of organizations is the quality of the leadership and of the followership that is exercised. Our culture thrives on polar opposites and dichotomies. We speak of leading versus following, but perhaps these concepts are one and the same. Good followers lead in their followership and good leaders follow in their leadership.

What is needed in organizations is heavy followership and light leadership. Heavy followers know how to balance the three types of relations with their leaders. From the discussions in the Foundation for European Leadership Knowledge Sharing Event, it has become clear that more research is needed on the practical application of the archetypes of followers, as developed by Ber Damen and co-authors.

Author Katrijn van Oudheusden has a keen interest in leadership and has undertaken to document the Knowledge Sharing meetings for FEL.