

Heroes and Sidekicks: Ensuring Proper Followership

By Bruno Neal



I can still remember 10 years ago when some of my friends and co-workers in the learning and development departments “realized” that proper leadership was the solution for almost everything wrong happening in the company. It seemed to me that we were looking for an easy scapegoat at the time—something we could target and develop to the extreme.

We needed to create a “hero”—a super-leader with all the gadgets and tools, who would be responsible for winning the war against employees’ bad performance.

The solution was easy! Let’s choose our candidates to be heroes and develop those talents. Let’s give them the right skills, knowledge, and tools and help them drive the company to success through leadership. There would be nothing our new hero won’t be able to fight and win.

But why was there always some sort of gap? Why did our hero always have some weaknesses?

Why it’s needed

Even when using a talent management plan and developing a strong leadership development program, I have noticed that in most cases, leadership initiatives fail without proper follow-up and support. For many years, I thought that the support needed to come from upper management only. Analysis and transfer of behavior reports have shown us that leaders finished the leadership development courses ready to apply their new knowledge and skills.

They were the new heroes, willing to be empowered and accountable.

But there was one big challenge. They needed to be able to get followers to compromise. The new heroes needed “sidekicks.”

To be able to win the war against bad performance, the “heroes” and “sidekicks” (leaders and their followers or employees) needed to work together. They needed to watch each other’s backs and combine their qualities to achieve results. But there was another big challenge. We had spent a lot of time developing the heroes’ training programs and we forgot about the sidekicks’ development. Inevitably we realized that sidekicks need proper training as well.

This was not just about onboarding, orientations, or compliance training, but something that would make followers strong as well; something that would make them capable of helping and rescuing their heroes whenever necessary. We needed another training program with plenty of resources that could give our sidekicks their own gadgets and tools to help them support the heroes and win the fight for quality and performance excellence.

Senior and upper management support is needed, but it is not the only thing that can help the leadership program to be successful. I was developing

leaders and not giving them appropriate follower support.

Guidelines

To leverage the success of any leadership development program, trainers need to draw a model of the supervisor with a direct report. We should make our workforce knowledgeable, skillful, empowered, and accountable. Both a leadership and a followership development program should be put in place, and both development programs need to complement each other. Heroes and sidekicks should have a support program where together, they would be able to achieve a successful outcome in their respective roles.

A sidekick is a close companion who is generally regarded as subordinate to the one he accompanies—Don Quixote’s Sancho Panza, Sherlock Holmes’ Doctor Watson, The Lone Ranger’s Tonto, or Batman’s Robin.

How it works

Let’s take in perspective, for a minute, the relationship between Batman and Robin.

Having had the finest education as Bruce Wayne’s ward, Robin speaks several languages with fluency. He is also a brilliant and experienced strategist. Additionally, Robin’s interpersonal skills and efforts to remain in contact with other heroes make him a master at rallying, unifying, and inspiring the superhero community. Robin was trained to supplement Batman’s skills. He was trained to offer the best support to Batman to fight the bad guys.

Let’s leave the comic book world and apply the content of this analogy in the real world. For example, if “delegation skills” and “giving performance feedback” courses are designed for the leadership program, the counterpart courses on the followership program should be “how to receive delegation and work with my manager” and “receiving performance feedback.”

At the end of the delegation skills course, the leader will be able to use delegation as a powerful tool and properly manage her workload. The course

teaches the leader how to prioritize tasks meeting deadlines, be candid, adapt quickly to new situations, appreciate others' work styles, and avoid politics. The leaders also learned how to use five specific principles to complete a delegated task successfully.

The critical factor with workforce and leadership development is to invest in both the employees' and leaders' skills in partnership with one another. Programs should be developed with a counter-partnership.

On the other hand, followers will be introduced to receiving delegation and working with their managers. At the end of this course, they will learn how to effectively participate as a strong team member and effectively complete tasks delegated to them by exercising their team-building and effective communication skills. The followers will also learn what their managers won't be able to delegate and why.

At the end of the giving performance feedback course, the leader will learn how to be specific rather than general; be descriptive, not evaluative; describe feedback that employees can act on; choose one or two pieces of feedback the person can concentrate on; avoid inferences about motives, intentions, or feelings; and build the person's self esteem. Meanwhile, the followers would be taking the course in receiving performance feedback, learning how to enhance performance based on feedback, receive and consider feedback, recognize difficult situations, and create an action plan to address performance issues.

In both case scenarios, leaders and followers learn how to effectively interact with each other, with only one goal in mind: team, department, and company success.

Checklist:

A company leadership program needs to be customized to the company engagement to achieve business results. Here are some counter-partnership programs that could help a company strive for performance success.

| Hero (Leader) | Sidekick (Follower) |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Essential communication skills | Communicating effectively with your manager |
| Resolving conflicts | How to effectively be part of a solution |
| Giving performance feedback | Receiving performance feedback |
| Delegation skills | How to receive delegation and compromise with my manager |
| Handling emotional situations | Emotional intelligence |
| Ethical and legal behavior | Ethical and legal awareness |
| Growing our business | How to be part of the big picture |
| Finance and account management | Helping my team to achieve business results |
| Strategic planning | Strategic thinking |
| Building customer loyalty | Building customer partnership |

Results

Robin was trained to support Batman, to help Batman win battles and achieve goals. At the end of the day, both had a separate agenda and qualifications. The critical factor with workforce and leadership development is to invest in both the employees' and leaders' skills in partnership with one another. Programs should be developed with a counter-partnership point of view. There cannot be a leadership without followership.

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Resources:

- Adams C. "What's the origin of 'side kick'?" *The Straight Dope*, April 19, 1976
- Kellerman B. *Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders* Harvard Business School Press, 2008
- Riggio R.E., Chaleff I., Lipman-Blumen J. *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations* Jossey-Bass, 2008
- Atchison T. *Followership: A Practical Guide to Aligning Leaders and Followers* Health Administration Press, 2003
- Sun Tzu *The Art of War*



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