

---

## **In Praise of Followers<sup>1</sup>**

by Lawrence V. Suda, CEO  
Palatine Group, Inc.

### **Introduction**

Leaders matter greatly. But in searching so zealously for better leaders we tend to lose sight of the people these leaders lead. If you have not heard the term "followership" before, or not thought twice about it, you are not alone. It usually appears as a "non-word" when documents are spell-checked on the computer. It is not a new concept, just one that is often overlooked or forgotten.

Why followership is overlooked is an intriguing concept. Without followers, would there be leaders? Who would they lead? Who would become leaders if they were not first followers? Leadership and followership is a supportive bond: Leaders depend on followers and vice versa. Think about it: Without his armies, after all, Napoleon was just a man with bold ambitions. Organizations and projects succeed or fail partly on the basis of how well their leaders lead, but partly also on how well their followers follow. In the words of one renowned project leader: "Project bosses are not necessarily good leaders; team members are not necessarily effective followers. Many bosses couldn't lead a horse to water. Many subordinates couldn't follow a parade. Some people avoid either role. Others accept the role thrust upon them and perform it poorly."

Leadership and followership are closely intertwined. Effective followers can shape productive leader behavior just as effective leaders develop employees into good followers. In this paper and presentation, we examine the important role of effective followership, including the nature of the followers' role, different styles of followership that individuals express, and how effective followers behave. We also explore how followers develop personal potential to be more effective. We also look at what followers want from leaders and examine the leader's role in developing effective followers through feedback and coaching.

Followership is important in the discussion of leadership for several reasons. Without followers there are no leaders. For any project or organization to succeed, there must be people who willingly and effectively follow just as there must be those who willingly and effectively lead. Leadership and followership are fundamental roles that individuals shift into and out of under various conditions. Everyone—leaders included—is a follower at one time or another. Indeed, most individuals, even those in positions of authority, have some kind of boss or supervisor. Individuals are more often followers than leaders.

Our concept about leadership is that it is primarily an influencing role. This means that in a position of authority, an individual influences others and is influenced by the actions and the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. This paper was originally presented at the PMI Global Congress North America 2013 in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA and included in the congress proceedings; republished here with author's permission.*

attitudes of followers. In fact, one leadership theory is based on how managers adjust their behavior to fit situations, especially their followers. Thus, the nature of leader–follower relationships involves reciprocity, the mutual exchange of influence. The followers’ influence upon a leader can enhance the leader or accentuate the leader’s shortcomings.

Many of the competencies that are needed in leaders are the same qualities needed in effective followers. In addition to possessing initiative, independence, commitment to common goals, and courage, a follower can provide enthusiastic support of a leader, but not to the extent that a follower fails to challenge a leader who is unethical or threatens the values or objectives of the organization. We believe that ineffective followers are as much to blame for poor performance, ethical and legal lapses within organizations as are poor and unethical leaders. Followers have a responsibility to speak up when leaders do things wrong.

### **Who Wants To Be a Follower?**

But, who wants to be a follower? This is an obvious question in discussions about increasing performance in the workforce because the view held when the term follower is used is that followers are submissive and play a subordinate role. They are people who are somehow viewed as sub-par.

Philosophically from childhood, our focus has been on being a leader and has directed attention away from the importance of following. Yet no project or organized effort can succeed or be sustained without followers. Think of a military scenario. Without good followers, the army could not accomplish their strategic military goals. Neither could a sports team win games if everyone decided to be the coach. Each person plays a vital role. The contribution of all followers, who may have different skill-sets, to high performing sports, military or project teams is irrefutable. High quality work cannot get done without good followers.

### **Why Understanding Followership Is Important: Engagement**

According to the research conducted by Gallup, more than half of Americans don’t like their jobs. (1) What’s worse, up to one in six aren’t just uninspired at work but are actively damaging their companies by draining resources and lowering morale. Gallup’s survey of about 150,000 full and part-time employees in 2012 indicates 18% of employees could be characterized as “actively disengaged.” These employees take more sick days, monopolize their managers’ time, and perhaps more significantly, spread their discontent among the staff. “Actively disengaged employees aren’t just unhappy at work; they’re busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish,” the report concludes Gallup estimates that this class of workers costs the US between \$450 billion and \$550 billion a year in lost productivity. (2)

We believe that the topic of followership is directly tied to the subject of employee engagement. Employee engagement as a measure of performance and management strategies to increase engagement has become a hot topic since the original Gallup organization research was published. While most of the research identifies low levels of employee engagement in many organizations and strategies to increase that engagement for the purpose of improving productivity, the cause-and-effect relationship are not clearly understand. The Gallup organization defined employee engagement as "an employee's involvement with, commitment

to, and satisfaction with work." (3) Research conducted in the past decade has shown that employee engagement has declined significantly in most industries, with some research citing as few as 29% of employees being actively engaged in their jobs. Various research studies have shown that the following factors influence employee engagement: Employers' commitment to and concern for employee welfare; employee perceptions of job importance; clarity of job expectations; career advancement opportunities; regular dialogue with superiors; quality of working relationships with co-workers and superiors; perceptions of the ethos and values of the organization; and employee rewards and recognition.

### **Changing Expectation of Followers**

There was a time in the not too distant past when followership meant keep your head down, be quiet and do what I tell you to do. Followers were expected to put in an honest day's work and only speak-up when asked. The managers had all the formal authority and power. This is no longer the reality in organizations today. Over the past fifty years employers' expectations for work have changed dramatically and now have higher expectations of the workforce. In addition, the generations entering the workforce have higher educational levels, and increased willingness to change companies, jobs and even careers. Employees want meaningful work and to be treated with dignity and respect. These cultural changes have not only impacted the private and public sector but also such traditional organizations as the military and religious institutions.

### **Defining Followership**

Researchers widely recognize that followership is an emerging concept. It seems that anyone you ask would know what a follower is, but cast connotations aside and consider the role of a follower, and the definition does not seem so simple. According to Kellerman "Followers are subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors, and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall in to line" (4). The majority of people, particularly in organizations, are more often followers than leaders but until recently the role of the follower has not been considered an inherently valuable position, or a role with a specialized set of skills, motivations, and the power to enhance organizational potential. (5). The world and the organizations in it have been viewed through the leader-centric lens and little attention has been paid to those who do not lead. (6) Followership recognizes that followers can be in a position to better recognize the day to day events within an organization that can actively cultivate good followers, and that sometimes following is more difficult than leading. (7)

For the purpose of this paper and presentation, we define followership as the willingness to cooperate in working toward the accomplishment of the mission, to demonstrate a high degree of teamwork and to build cohesion among the organization members. Effective followership is an essential 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 sources exist on guiding one to be an effective follower, though there are some.

### **The Psychology of Followers**

While asking why anyone would want to be a leader is an interesting question, a more interesting question is asking why anyone would want to be a follower. Why would you be

someone called a follower? A simple answer is people follow because they derive benefits. The psychological payback of following exceeds the psychological cost of following. Throughout our human history, most humans were in small, nomadic clusters. These tribes offered protection, food and survival. The groups with the best leader and followers had a higher probability of survival than those poorly led that consisted of poor followers. The physical benefits for followers outweighed the psychological costs and so most likely they stayed connected to the tribe. If some followers were dissatisfied with the leader's goals and agenda, they had a choice of either fighting for the top position, or leaving to join other groups.

In today's workplace, leaders face similar conditions. Leaders must do all they can to keep followers aligned with the goals and agenda of the organization. If followers perceive that the psychological costs outweigh the benefits, they may become disengaged, or leave if those inequities persist.

There is another aspect at play. A cost-benefits type analysis does not fully explain why people choose to play followership roles. Social psychology indicates that something other than cost-benefits explorations may be happening when people choose to play followership roles.

There are conditions, where people seem all too willing to abandon good followership simply to follow orders, even when it is ethically and morally wrong. There are many situations throughout human history where this has been the case. Social experiments also show people will follow orders even to the point of hurting others. We are a witness to current history from the 9/11 attack, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and many other atrocities in this past decade. For leaders in organizations, this research shows that merely occupying a position of authority grants leaders a certain amount of influence.

### **Styles and Models of Followership**

Robert Kelley distinguishes followers in terms of their behavior and personality attributes and defines the different styles of followership by considering two different behavioral dimensions: one dimension measures the degree to which followers think independently and critically and the other assesses the level of engagement whether active or passive in the organization. Based on these two dimensions, Kelley defines five basic styles of follower; the sheep, the yes people, the alienated, the pragmatics, and the star followers. Each exhibits a different degree of independent thinking and organizational engagement and differs in their motivations.

The following is a basic assessment of each follower type according to Kelley: (8)

1. The **sheep** are passive in their thinking and engagement and are motivated by their leader rather than themselves.
2. The **yes-people** also allow their leader to do most of the thinking and acting for them but are generally positive and always on the leader's side.
3. In contrast, the **alienated** are predominantly negative but think more independently. They think for themselves but do not contribute to the positive direction of the organization.
4. The **pragmatic** exhibits a minimal level of independent thinking and engagement as

they are more willing to exert energy and get involved when they see where the direction of the situation is headed. The pragmatics lack in demonstrating critical thinking and are motivated by maintaining the status quo.

5. Finally, the **star followers** think for themselves, have positive energy, and are actively engaged. They agree with and challenge their leaders.

Kelley's model focuses on the role of followers in an organization and creates a framework for identifying the different types. Through his assessment, organizations are able to recognize where the different perceptions and negative connotations of followers have developed and to consider the importance of the positive followership styles that exist. He conceptualizes that effective followership exhibits a variety of qualities including the ability of followers to manage themselves, build on their own competence, exhibit commitment to the organizational purpose, and are courageous, honest, and credible. Kelley argues that the same qualities that make effective leaders are those that make effective followers and emphasizes the importance and purpose of followers. He states that "we need to view followers as the primary defenders against toxic leaders of dysfunctional organizations". (9) In general, Kelley places significant emphasis on the necessity and how-to ability of organizations to cultivate effective followers, how to teach people to stand up and prepare them to be successful.

Ira Chaleff's (2008) model also focuses on followership in the workplace. (10) Like Kelley, Chaleff conceptualizes how organizations can equip the everyday workers with the skills and mindsets required to be effective followers, and develop an even stronger framework for followership development. Chaleff also names the power that followers exhibit in their different qualities and distinguishes that power as courage. His Courageous Follower model reveals five different dimensions of attitudes and behaviors: (11)

1. The courage to support the leader
2. The courage to assume responsibility for common purpose
3. The courage to constructively challenge the leader's behaviors
4. The courage to participate in any transformation needed
5. And the courage to take a moral stand when warranted to prevent ethical abuses

From these different dimensions of attitudes and behaviors, Chaleff differentiates four styles of followership based on the degree to which followers have the courage to support or the courage to challenge the leader. (12) Like Kelley, Chaleff divides these styles into groups:

1. The **resource** style of followership exhibits low support and low challenge.
2. The **individualist** style represents low support and high challenge. This follower will speak up but typically takes a position opposed to the majority.
3. The **implementer** style demonstrates high support and low challenge.
4. The **partner** style is characterized by high support and high challenge, assuming full responsibility for their actions and acting accordingly.

Chaleff and Kelley's models are very similar; each identifies the styles of followership by considering the levels of independent thinking and organizational engagement. Chaleff's emphasis on courage is similar to Kelley's perception that followers are essential in limiting

toxic leaders, but Chaleff develops a stronger context for evolving and encouraging followers to be more effective. He stresses the follower potential and purpose to “influence upward” in order to transform the organizational culture. He states that “once people have a sense of the range of follower styles and of their own tendency, they need to connect these to situations they encounter in organizational settings” (13), and offers examples of how organizations have used this exercise with success. Furthermore, Chaleff more specifically establishes that both leaders and followers serve a common purpose, each from their own role. In general, Chaleff’s model provides a more in depth “how-to” for organizations to evolve their followers and transform their culture.

Barbara Kellerman provides a more worldview of followership and takes the concept outside just the organizational perspective. (14) Like Kelley, Kellerman positions follower styles in a more hierarchical method, placing followers on a continuum of low engagement to an absolutely committed follower. Kellerman’s model, however, provides a more holistic view of followers through conceptualizing followers in relation to leaders and in relation to other followers. She identifies five different followership styles:

1. **Isolates** are completely detached and do not know or care about their leaders. For example, “Americans who are eligible to vote but never do” (Kellerman, 2008, p. 86).
2. The **bystanders** observe but do not participate, they typically stand aside. Kellerman (2008) offers the powerful example of German followers during the Holocaust.
3. **Participant** followers are a bit more engaged. They either favor their leaders and organizations or are clearly opposed.
4. **Activists** feel strongly and act accordingly.
5. And **diehards** are deeply devoted to their leaders. Their followership and devotion defines who they are and determines what they do.

Kellerman’s main focus is clearly on the level of engagement. She asserts that the level of engagement is the single most important factor in differentiating followership styles. In their respective contributions, both Kellerman and Chaleff indicate that dividing followers in to types allows another lens of perception in to how people can transform and create transformations. From Chaleff’s perspective, followers can transform the organizational culture, the norms and behaviors of an organization, and from Kellerman’s perspective, people with less authority can make a difference in the world over time. To Chaleff, these transformations require courage to support or challenge leaders and to Kellerman they require a level of engagement to influence the system. To finalize the comparison of the three different models, it is important to note that each author agrees that there are different styles of followership, that there is a difference between effective and ineffective followership, and that followers can and should influence their leaders.

### **The Effective Follower**

Effective followership is not always easy – it takes courage. Demonstrating courage and integrity applies to followers as well as leaders. Followers sometimes experience an even greater need for these qualities because of their subordinate position. To be effective, followers have to know what they stand for and be willing to express their own ideas and opinions to their leaders, even though this might mean risking their jobs, being demeaned, or feeling inadequate.

---

Effective followers have the courage to accept responsibility, challenge authority, participate in change, serve the needs of the organization, and leave the organization when necessary.

**Courage to Assume Responsibility** means the effective follower feels a sense of personal responsibility and ownership in the organization and its mission. The follower assumes responsibility for his or her own behavior and its impact on the organization. Effective followers do not presume that a leader or an organization will provide them with security, permission to act, or personal growth. Instead, they initiate the opportunities through which they can achieve personal fulfillment, exercise their potential, and provide the organization with the fullest extent of their capabilities.

**Courage to Challenge** means the effective followers don't sacrifice their personal integrity or the good of the organization in order to maintain harmony. If a leader's actions and decisions contradict the best interests of the organization, effective followers take a stand.

**Courage to Participate in Transformation** means effective followers view the struggle of change and transformation as a mutual experience shared by all members of the organization. When an organization undergoes a difficult transformation, effective followers support the leader and the organization. They are not afraid to confront the changes and work toward reshaping the organization.

**Courage to Serve and be Subservient** means an effective follower understands the needs of the organization and actively seeks to serve those needs. Just as leaders can serve others so can followers. A follower can provide strength to the leader by supporting the leader and by contributing to the organization in areas that complement the leader's position.

**Courage to Leave** Sometimes organizational or personal changes create a situation in which a follower must withdraw from a particular leader-follower relationship. People might know they need new challenges, for example, even though it is hard to leave a job where they have many friends and valued colleagues. If followers are faced with a leader or an organization unwilling to make necessary changes, it is time to take their support elsewhere.

### **What Leaders Need from Followers**

If followers don't do their jobs well, leaders and the organization suffer. One aspect of being a good follower is to understand what leaders want and need. In our workshops, we ask project managers to brainstorm and discuss what they need from team members and a summary of frequently characteristics are listed below: Leaders and organizational situations vary, but here are a few things every good leader wants from his or her followers:

- **A Can-do Attitude.** Leaders don't want results no excuses. A leader's job becomes smoother when he or she has followers who are positive and self-motivated, who can get things done, who accept responsibility, and who excel at required tasks. Leaders value those people who take responsibility when they see something that needs to be done or a problem that needs to be solved. Leaders depend on the ideas and actions of followers.
- **A Collaborative Approach.** Leaders are responsible for much more in the organization than any individual follower's concerns, feelings, and performance. Each follower is a part of the leader's larger system and should realize that his or her actions affect the whole

- **The Personal Drive to Stay Current.** Leaders need followers to know what is happening in the organization's industry or field of endeavor. In addition, they want people to understand their customers, competition, and culture and how changes in technology or world events might affect the organization.
- **The Passion to Drive Personal Growth.** Leaders want followers who seek to enhance their own growth and development rather than depending solely on the leader to do it. Improvement efforts might include taking classes or seminars, but there are many other ways people can drive their professional growth. Anything that exposes an individual to new people and ideas can enhance personal and professional development. One example is when followers actively network with others inside and outside the organization. Another is when followers take on difficult assignments, which demonstrates a willingness to face challenges, stretch their limits, and learn.

In addition to the above listed leader expectations consistently listed and discussed, project managers in our workshops also cite the following behaviors that comprise effective followership include:

- Volunteering to handle tasks or help accomplish goals
- Willingly accept difficult assignments
- Exhibiting loyalty to the leader, team, project and organization
- Offering suggestions to improve
- Maintaining a positive attitude, even in these confusing, difficult times
- Working effectively as a team member
- Being a resource for the leader
- Helping the leader be a better leader
- Building a professional, trusted relationship with the leader
- Having realistic expectations of the leader

### **What Followers Need from Leaders**

In our workshops, the question we asked about the leaders' expectation of followers is reversed. We ask participants to list and discuss "what followers need from leaders."

We know good followers are created partly by leaders who understand their obligations for developing people. Leaders have a duty to create a leader-follower relationship that engage the whole people rather than treat followers as passive sheep who should blindly follow orders and support the manager. In this training exercise with project managers, we consistently hear is that as followers they want their leaders to be honest, innovative, inspiring, and competent. A leader must be worthy of trust, envision the future of the organization, inspire others to contribute, and be capable and effective in matters that will affect the organization and the people. In terms of competence, leadership roles may shift from the formal leader to the person with particular expertise in a given area. In addition, we consistently hear that followers need the following:

- **Clear Goals and Direction** Followers need leaders to clearly communicate where the team, project or organization is going and why. Creating an inspiring image is only one aspect of setting direction. Followers also need specific, unambiguous goals and objectives, on both an individual and team level. Having clear goals lets people know

where to focus their attention and energy and enables them to feel a sense of pride and accomplishment when goals are achieved. Providing clarity of direction enables followers to manage their own behaviors and track their own progress. In addition, it provides a basis for understanding leader decisions regarding bonuses, salary increases, or promotions. Another aspect of clarifying direction is helping followers see how their own individual project role jobs fit in the larger context of the team, project, and the enterprise.

- **Frequent, Specific, and Immediate Feedback.** Effective leaders see feedback as a route to improvement and development, not as something to dread or fear. When a leader provides feedback, it signals that the leader cares about the follower's growth and career development and wants to help the person achieve his or her potential.
- **Coaching to Develop Potential.** Coaching takes feedback a step further to help followers upgrade their skills and enhance their career development. Coaching is a method of directing or facilitating a follower with the aim of improving specific skills or achieving a specific development goal, such as developing time management skills, enhancing personal productivity, or preparing for new responsibilities. Rather than telling followers what to do, directing and controlling their behavior, and judging their performance, which is a traditional management role, coaching involves empowering followers to explore, helping them understand and learn, providing support, and removing obstacles that stand in the way of their ability to grow and excel.

## Summary

- The important role of followership in organizations is increasingly recognized. People are followers more often than leaders, and effective leaders and followers share similar characteristics. An effective follower is both independent and active in the organization. Being an effective follower depends on not becoming alienated, conforming, passive, or a pragmatic survivor.
- Effective followership is not always easy. Effective followers display the courage to assume responsibility, to challenge their leaders, to participate in transformation, to serve others, and to leave the organization when necessary. Strategies for being an effective follower include being a resource, helping the leader be a good leader, building a relationship with the leader, and viewing the leader realistically.
- Leaders want followers who are positive and self-motivated, who take action to get things done, who accept responsibility, and who excel at required tasks. Followers want both their leaders and their colleagues to be honest and competent. However, they want their leaders also to be forward-thinking and inspirational. The two latter traits distinguish the role of leader from follower. Followers want to be led, not controlled. They also want leaders to create an environment that enables people to contribute their best. Three specific ways leaders enhance the abilities and contributions of followers are by offering clarity of direction, giving honest, constructive feedback, and providing coaching.
- Followers need feedback that is timely and specific, focuses on performance rather than the person, and focuses on the future rather than dragging up mistakes of the past. Leaders can use coaching to help followers improve specific skills or achieve a specific development goal.

## References

1. Gallup: *The State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights For U.S. Business Leaders: Gallup, Inc. 2013*
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Kellerman, B. (2008). *Followership: how followers are creating change and changing leaders* (1st ed.). Boston, MA: Harvard Business
5. Kelley, R. E. (1988). In Praise of Followers. *Harvard Business Review*, 66(6), 142-148.
6. Kelley, R. (2008). Rethinking followership. *The art of followership: how great followers create great leaders and organizations* (1st ed., pp. 5-15). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
7. Bennis, W. (2010). Art of Followership. *Leadership Excellence*, 27(1), 3-4
8. Kelly, Op.cit.,2008
9. Kelly, Op.cit.,2008
10. Chaleff, I. (2008) *Creating New Ways of Following. The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., Pp 67-87). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
11. *Ibid*: p. 87
12. *Ibid*: p. 82
13. *Ibid*: p. 71
14. Op.cit., Kellerman

## About the Author



### **Lawrence V. Suda**

Palatine Group / Management Worlds

New York, USA

**Lawrence Suda** is the CEO and an Officer at Palatine group/Management Worlds, Inc. with over 30 years project and program management consulting and training experience to numerous government and private sector companies. The Palatine Group/Management Worlds specializes in creating computer-based simulations for project management and leadership training. Larry's career emphasis is on organization behavior, project management, operations management, strategic management and enterprise-wide project management for leading companies and government agencies throughout the world, including: NASA, US Navy, Departments of Commerce, Treasury, Energy, Health & Human Services , Agriculture, DAU and others and in the private sector to such companies as General Electric, Proctor & Gamble, ALCOA, URS, Verizon, Boeing, Lockheed/Martin, Hewlett-Packard, Perot Systems, PPG Industries, United States Steel and others. Before founding Palatine Group/Management Worlds, Larry worked in the private and public sectors at the US Environmental Protection Agency and was an Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland. Mr. Suda is a frequent speaker at PMI and IPMA Conferences in the United States and Europe and has led workshops for PMI's Seminars World in various locations around the World. He is an adjunct professor at Drexel University teaching Global Project Leadership. He can be contacted at [lsuda@thepalatinegroup.com](mailto:lsuda@thepalatinegroup.com).