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Is leadership enough to run a project?
by Angelica Larios
Advisory

Is leadership enough to run a project? The importance of followership [1]

By Angelica Larios, DSL, MBA, PMP

Introduction

Leadership is a concept that has gained focus in the last decades; most people are intrigued by the features that leaders possess and want to develop leaders to accomplish goals and grow companies and institutions. Project managers have been equaled to leaders in the project management arena, and there is a significant focus on developing their soft skills and leadership to improve the results of each project and deliver benefits for business purposes.

Project management is a crucial element in every organization. It is a process that helps the team to work together and achieve the desired results. The project leader is responsible for leading and guiding the team to reach their goal. However, leadership does not always produce desired results, and there are times when followership plays a significant role in project management.

We study great leaders, executives, and project managers from the past and present and spend vast amounts of time and money looking for leaders to hire and trying to cultivate leadership in our employees. There is no discussion against this argument of trying to find the best of the best in such enthusiasm. Leaders are greatly valued. But in the search so zealously for better leaders, we tend to lose sight of the people these leaders will lead.

However, it is often forgotten that the leadership comes together with a group of followers willing to follow the leader for the common goal and benefit. In other words, leadership alone cannot exist because it is a condition of leadership to have a counterpart. Leadership is an essential aspect of project management, but it cannot be effective without followership. The followership provides support and guidance to the leader, which ultimately helps them achieve their goals.

Who is the follower?

A follower is someone who supports or follows the lead of another person. A leader leads, and a follower follows. Leaders are responsible for making decisions and providing direction for their team members to follow. A follower's job is to support the leader through their work by following instructions, completing tasks, and reporting back on progress.

A follower is someone who supports a leader or an authority figure. Followership in project management is the process of following and supporting the leader to achieve a

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goal. Followership can be seen as a complement to leadership, where it provides support for the leader and helps them make decisions.

However, it results that most of the time, follower and leader, are roles everybody plays. Whether in an organization, institution, company, project, or even in our social or familiar environments, none is the leader all the time; most of us play as followers in one or multiple areas. So is a complementary leadership role, what followership is meant to be.

So, as we understand and discuss the vital importance of playing a good follower role as part of a complementary relationship with leadership, it is interesting that several authors have already studied different types of followers.

We can be aware of these types and try to be the best follower we can be according to each situation we face. But also, if we are lucky enough to be in charge of a project and be called a project manager or project leader, we have to identify which type of followers we have and think of mechanisms to make them give the best.

Types of followers

Kellerman (2008) defines "followers as 'subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line. Yet, followers are neither homogenous nor uniform." Kellerman's book (2008) provides a loose typology, which can be positioned along a range, indicating the grade of engagement by followers, encompassing five primary kinds:

•   **Isolates**: completely detached and lack interest individuals who keep out of sight, seldom respond to leaders, dislike interferences from above, and reinforce the status quo by default. Little caution for their leaders and do not particularly respond to them. These are frequently found in large corporations, where they do their jobs and keep their heads below the parapet.

•   **Bystanders**: spectators who follow passively and let events unfold with little participation while accepting control from above. Bystanders detach from the organization, watching from the sidelines as a witness. They go along indifferently, but they offer little active support.

•   **Participants**: attached individuals who typically care about their organization and assist their leader with their endeavor or time when they commit to their vision and views. Contributors keep about the organization and try to make an impact. If they acknowledge the leader, they will support them. If they disagree, they will oppose them.

•   **Activists** are eager, energetic, and deeply engaged individuals working for the cause and the leader. Champions feel more strongly about their organizations and leaders and act accordingly. When supportive, they are eager, energetic, and engaged.

•   **Die-hards**: individuals displaying the highest levels of engagement with the organization or their cause; all-consuming supporters exhibit total and absolute

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engagement. Diehards are, as their name implies. They are followers, ordinary people, prepared to die if necessary for their cause, whether an individual, an idea or both. Diehards are deeply devoted to their leaders; in contrast, they are ready to disconnect them from places of power, authority, and influence by any means necessary. Diehards are defined by their dedication and willingness to risk life and limb.

According to Kelley (1988, 1992), there is another way to look into followers and their types.

• **Passive or sheep**: Sheep are passive and uncritical, lacking initiative and a sense of responsibility. They complete the tasks given them and pause.

• **Yes, People**: are an enthusiastic but equally indolent team. Dependent on the leader's inspiration, they can be militant deferential or even servile.

• **Survivors**: who continuously sample the wind and live by the slogan "better safe than sorry." They are adept at surviving change.

• **Alienated**: Alienated Followers are critical and independent in their thinking but passive in carrying out their roles.

• **Effective** Followers think by themselves and carry out their responsibilities and assignments with energy and assertiveness. Because they are risk-takers, bootstrappers, and independent fixers, they frequently get high ratings from coworkers and supervisors. Followership of this type can be a positive and acceptable choice for parts or all of our lives—a source of pride and fulfillment.

Chaleff (2008) worked and developed a tool of self-assessment as a follower, which is a great help in trying to self-identified and improve. The classification suggested by Chaleff (2008) is as follows.

• **Partner**: Partners like to be treated as equals to the leader, although they respect the leader's position. Thus, they are strong supporters but will provide intellectual challenges they deem necessary.

• **Implementer**: Implementers are the majority workhorses of organizations, taking orders and completing them with real questions.

• **Resource**: Resources do what is requested of them, but little more. They are blindly obedient but lack the intelligence or courage to provide a challenge.

• **Individualist**: Individualists are not easy followers and will tend to think for themselves and prefer to do as they want.

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The Qualities of Followers

After several studies and reviews, Kelley (1988) offers a shared number of essential qualities effective followers have, such as:

1. They manage themselves well.

2. They are committed to the organization and a purpose, principle, or person outside themselves.

3. They build their competence and focus their efforts on maximum impact.

4. They are courageous, honest, and credible.

After reviewing the typology of leadership, it can easily be deducted which followers are more in need of a team and to build organizations aligned with the qualities of followership. In essence, what we admire or desire from a leader or project manager is what he describes as qualities for a follower, representing a paradox.

Self-Management. Good followers are people to whom a leader can safely delegate responsibility, people who anticipate needs at their level of competence and authority. Paradoxically, the key to being an effective follower is to think for oneself, exercise control and independence, and work without close supervision.

Effective followers see themselves as the equivalents of the leaders they follow. They are more apt to openly disagree with leadership and less likely to be intimidated by hierarchy and organizational structure. At the same time, they can see that the people they follow are, in turn, following the lead of others, and they try to appreciate the goals and needs of the team and the organization.

Self-managed followers give their organizations a significant cost advantage because they eliminate much of the need for elaborate supervisory control systems that, in any case, often lower morale. In successful organizations, people looking for the right profile of employee or follower conducted interviews looking for experience and capacities—initiative, teamwork, independent thinking of all kinds—and then revamped its orientation program to emphasize self-management. At the executive level, role-playing was introduced into the interview process: how you disagree with your boss and prioritize your in-basket after a vacation. As a result of this change, employee turnover has dropped dramatically, the need for supervisors has decreased, and administrative costs have decreased.

Commitment. Effective followers are committed to something—a cause, a product, an organization, an idea—caring for their lives and careers. Some leaders misinterpret this commitment. Seeing their authority acknowledged, they mistake loyalty to a goal for allegiance to themselves. But the fact is that many influential followers see leaders merely as co-adventurers on a worthy crusade. If they suspect their leader of flagging

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commitment or conflicting motives, they may withdraw their support by changing jobs or by contriving to change leaders.

Competence and Focus. Claiming committed incompetence is still incompetence, effective followers master skills that will be useful to their organizations. They generally hold higher performance standards than the work environment requires, and continuing education is second nature to them, a staple in their professional development.

Courage. Influential followers are credible, honest, and courageous. They establish themselves as independent, critical thinkers whose knowledge judgment and can be trusted. They give credit where credit is due, admitting mistakes and sharing successes. They form their views and ethical standards and stand up for their beliefs.

Insightful, candid, and fearless, they can keep leaders and colleagues honest and informed. Of course, the other side of the coin is that they can also cause significant trouble for a leader with questionable ethics.

Conclusion

Followership is not a person but a role, and what distinguishes followers from leaders is not intelligence or character but their role. As it was pointed out in this article, influential followers and effective leaders are often the same people playing different parts at different hours of the day. Both followers and leaders are sides of the same coin, both are equally needed, and no good terms have been ever achieved only by followers or only by leaders.

"Followership dominates our lives and organizations, but not our thinking, because our preoccupation with leadership keeps us from considering the nature and the importance of the follower." (Keller, 1988).

What distinguishes an effective from an ineffective follower is enthusiastic, intelligent, and self-reliant participation—without star billing—in pursuing an organizational goal. Effective followers differ in their motivations for following and in their perceptions of the role.

The operative definitions are roughly these: people who are effective in the lead role have the vision to set corporate goals and strategies, the interpersonal skills to achieve consensus, the verbal capacity to communicate enthusiasm to large and diverse groups of individuals, the organizational talent to coordinate disparate efforts, and, above all, the desire to lead.

People who are effective in the follower role have the vision to see both the forest and the trees. The social capacity to work well with others, the strength of character to flourish without heroic status, and the moral and psychological balance between pursuing personal and corporate goals at no cost. Or, above all, the desire to participate in a team effort to accomplish some greater common purpose.

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For projects to succeed, are a need for equity of efficient leaders and followers capable of self-managed and orient efforts for the good of the project. To leave aside the self-egoism and the desire to shine and be a superstar to be a team player, resolver, and critical thinker. All these qualities must balance resources and rates for people involved in projects and organizations.

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About the Author

Angelica Larios, DSL, MBA, PMP

Mexico City, Mexico

Angelica Larios, DSL, MBA, PMP, is a project manager with more than 20 years of experience in implementing software projects related to business intelligence, planning and budgeting, and financial consolidation solutions based on software applications to support the business decision process. She is the owner of ALACONTEC, an I.T. consulting company founded in Latin America. She has held several professional positions in private and public organizations, such as the Health Ministry in Mexico as an I.T. director and a business manager for several Mexican firms.

She holds a master's degree in business administration and a bachelor's degree in computer science from the National University of Mexico (UNAM), in addition to her studies in project management and her Project Management Professional (PMP)® certification, which have helped her to consolidate her career and have a better understanding of what businesses and projects need nowadays. She is a doctor in strategic leadership at Regent University, VA; she has been a volunteer since 2007, starting in the local Mexico chapter, being Past President, and in several positions within PMI (CMAG, VBAC, EMAG) that support the PMI Global Operations. Angelica has been elected as a member of BOD of the ILA (International Leadership Association) (2021-2024).

Angelica can be contacted at angelica.larios@gmail.com.

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