

Knowledge Base: Followership and Leadership - Are they two sides of the same coin? By Mick Foran - Bornhoffen Co-Manager

Bornhoffen describes itself as a Leadership Development Centre. Leadership is a very broad field of study and learning.

Leadership theorist James MacGregor Burns describes leadership as a collective process, a characteristic of the *relationship between individuals* rather than a property of individuals themselves.

In essence, leadership is about people making a positive difference or change for self, others, the environment and the community. That's pretty broad!

In 21st century Western culture, we see countless references to leadership. Leadership training, leadership books, courses for aspiring leaders, leadership awards, leadership quotes - leadership is talked about and often assumed to be the pathway that all of us should be on.

Less attention is given to the concept of 'followership'. One measure of the difference in profile between leadership and followership is Wikipedia. The Wikipedia entry for 'leadership' is pages long with many different links and references. The entry for 'followership' is a brief single page with few references. Generally speaking, 'followership' as a topic just doesn't seem to rate.

Perhaps part of the problem is the word itself.



The word 'follower' by itself has negative connotations of being docile, passive and making a lesser contribution. Dictionary.com defines a follower as a person or thing that follows, a person who follows another in regard to his or her ideas or belief; a disciple or adherent, an attendant, servant or retainer. These days, it's also a person who follows or subscribes to another's posts on a social-media website.

However, the fact is that no matter who you are, we are all going to be in a 'follower' role. Even if you take on a senior manager role within an organisation, you are going to have a higher manager that you report to. If you become the CEO, you will still be accountable to a Board. If you are a Chair of a Board, you will still be accountable to your members or shareholders. The Prime Minister of Australia is arguably the most senior and influential leadership role in the country. However, even the PM remains accountable to the voting public and, as we have seen in recent history, the members of their own political party.

So, no matter what different roles we play at different times, it is clear that we are going to be a follower, supporter or team member much of the time. If that's true, then we need to spend more time focusing on what attributes and skills makes a person effective in this role.

Robert Kelley describes four main qualities of effective followers. These include:

1 Self-Management
This refers to the ability to think critically, to be in control of one's actions, and work independently. It is important that followers manage themselves well as leaders are able to delegate tasks to these individuals.

2 Commitment
This refers to an individual being committed to the goal, vision, or cause of a group, team, or organization. This is an important quality of followers as it helps keep one's (and other member's) morale and energy levels high.

3 Competence
It is essential that individuals possess the skills and aptitudes necessary to complete the goal or task for the group, team, or organization. Individuals who rate high in this quality often hold skills higher than their average co-worker (or team member). Further, these individuals continue their pursuit of knowledge by upgrading their skills through classes and seminars.

4 Courage
Effective followers hold true to their beliefs and maintain and uphold ethical standards, even in the face of dishonest or corrupt superiors (leaders). These individuals are loyal, honest, and importantly, candid with their superiors.

No-one is the leader every time. Every organisation and group needs people who can work within teams to get the real work done. These people enable, back up and support the leader. Those people who understand the co-dependence of leadership and followership, and can consciously choose how they will contribute, have potential to provide enormous value to organisations and the community.

**What do you think about the word follower? Would you use a different word?
When do you perform the role of leader and when do you follow? Can you consciously move between the two roles?**

Source: Robert Kelly (1998) Harvard Business Review