



## **Beyond Leadership: The Need for Effective Followership**

**Micheal D. Robinson**

For many years the world has been captivated with leaders, leading, and the process that is leadership; and for good reason. Leaders are, more often than not, the ones in the spotlight for their organizations during both good and bad times. A fact that has led many leadership scholars and practitioners to believe, “everything rises and falls on leadership” (Dr. John C. Maxwell). However, the longer and harder we look at leadership the more we realize that the success a leader enjoys in his or her role depends greatly on the skills, abilities, and knowledge of those who follow the leader. It was Dr. Rusty Ricketson who said, “We have already seen that the interdependence between leader and follower is much too complicated to rely upon the idea that everything rises or falls on leadership”. If we are to be effective as Hyphen leaders in this generation and in generations to come we must endeavor to understand the need for followers and how to nurture effective followership.

In 1988, former Air Force Lieutenant General Dr. Robert Kelley wrote an article for the Harvard Business Review entitled *In Praise of Followers*. The article would serve as an intellectual rebuke to leadership scholars and practitioners for years of failing to consider followers. In his article Dr. Kelley declared, “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”. Dr. Kelley is absolutely correct in his thinking and this should serve as an eye opener for all leaders, especially those of us serving the Kingdom of God where we are all called to be followers. While the Bible provides wonderful examples of effective leaders, affords us the opportunity to learn characteristics that help us grow as leaders, and offers us infallible words of wisdom that edify us, we must never forget that the Bible was written by followers, to followers, on how to effectively follow Jesus.

So how can we as leaders avoid the mistake of overlooking those who follow us? How do we effectively nurture a follower first culture as modeled by Jesus? How do we remove the single lens monocle of leadership that we’ve used for so many years to measure success; and replace it with the double-lensed spectacles of leadership and followership needed to have a holistic approach to ministry? The answer to each of these questions is by educating ourselves on the role of the follower that we fill on a daily basis. This will in turn allow us to consider those who follow our lead as we march boldly toward Jesus. Let us begin this transformation from leader followers to follower leaders by gaining a better understanding of the different types of followers we come into contact with every day.

First we have the sheep followership style. Characteristics of this followership style include (a) being passive in their thinking and engagement, (b) lacking individual motivation, and (c) being exceedingly dependent on the leader. According to scholars, followers at this level of followership are borderline completely dependent on the leader for their thinking. These are the people you think about on your way to work in the morning asking yourself questions like, what am I going have \_\_\_\_\_ do today? Now, whoever's name you read into that sentence is your sheep style follower 😊. However, I don't want it to sound as if these followers don't have value because they do. While they may take up more of your emotional, mental, and physical energy than other followers, in a healthy working environment these followers are the ones you should be developing.



These are the ones who need you the most. Developing them for the Lord is a great honor. Remember what Jesus instructed Peter to do after he answered the question, “lovest thou me more than these?” Feed my sheep.

Second comes the yes man followership style. As you may have surmised from the name, followers who use this followership style almost always agree with the leader. Characteristics of this followership style include (a) the follower allowing leaders to do most of their thinking, (b) being positive and supportive to the leader no matter what, and (c) showing a desire to always be on “the leaders side”. Now I’m aware that if there is one followership style I don’t need to go in depth on in this article it’s this one. We’ve likely all been around this kind of follower before nevertheless, there is value in this followership style. Yes men or women style followers give confidence to their leader through support. It is also best to keep in mind that they do require their leader to do most of their thinking so their “yes” doesn’t always mean they are sycophants. More often than not it shows that they don’t have a better suggestion so they agree with what is presented. When considered from this perspective these followers can bring a lot of positive energy to the team unlike the next followership style.

**Side Note:** It wouldn’t be wise for one to evaluate their effectiveness or lack thereof as a leader with the feedback of this follower or the next one.

Next up is the alienated followership style. Characteristics of this followership style include followers (a) doing their own thinking, but from a predominantly negative perspective, (b) rarely contributing to the positive momentum of the group, and (c) making decisions based on their beliefs as opposed to reality. After hearing this list of characteristics most leaders tell me, “I wouldn’t want that kind of follower on my team”. My response to such leaders is always, it’s impossible not to have that kind of follower on your team because it would appear that you are one! Before ever hearing the value these followers can bring to a team they complete steps A and C in one sentence. Alienated followers do bring a lot of negative energy to the table, but these followers also make us take a hard look at the decisions we make. Their disagreement, while uncomfortable at times, does force us to evaluate the impact our decisions will have on followers who think like they do.

I always find it humorous when leaders tell me that they don’t care for yes followers or alienated followers. In essence they are telling me they don’t care for followers who agree or disagree with the decisions they make as leaders. I’m not taking shots at such leadership styles, but it’s worth saying that the days of people following leaders blindly with no opinion have passed. In a day where leaders of the highest offices in our land and the world have repeatedly abused their authority, people have decided to follow on purpose. To leaders who are accustomed to autocratic leadership styles, which are still needed in some situations, I’d present that the act of asking questions is not in itself rebellion. It is the result of being misled for far too long and learning from past mistakes.

So as a follower I ask that you please not be offended at our questions. With the same breath I ask followers to understand every situation doesn’t need to be resolved through participative leadership. Your leader doesn’t have to consult with you about every decision he or she makes. Leaders and followers have a strong relationship because of the common purpose they serve, which in our case is Jesus. If you ever find yourself following a leader because of the authority that comes with being associated with them, the shine you get by being on their team, or how good they make you feel when you complete big assignments then the common purpose has changed; and because of that the leader follower relationship will suffer.



Ok, I'm off my soapbox. It is important to remember that alienated followers often believe that they are the only ones courageous enough to stand up to the leader; and thus their negative energy is justified. This is a flawed mindset. Courageous followership is having the courage to respectfully stand up to your leader if need be and the courage to stand up FOR your leader respectfully. Neither action is to be accompanied by negative energy.

Next is the pragmatic followership style better known as the proverbial fence rider. This followership style is characterized by (a) minimal level of independent thinking, (b) engagement that depends on the status quo or group momentum, and (c) a lack of critical thinking skills. This follower is one who never makes a decision before knowing what the majority thinks. They won't be the first onboard to try something new, but they won't let the boat leave the harbor without being onboard either. This follower is great at informing the leader of the group's current climate or status quo. This person can give a leader an adequate assessment of where the majority of the group is at any given moment allowing the leader to make necessary adjustments in the group or evaluate the level of buy-in within the group.

Last, but not least is the star follower. These followers are characterized by (a) an ability to think for themselves, (b) a willingness to bring constructive energy to the team even when their feedback is criticism, and (c) being actively involved in challenging their peers and leader. These followers are so skilled at following that they are often referred to as the leader's right hand. In a group setting these followers serve as proxy leaders that other followers go to with their opinions when they can't, or due to lack of confidence won't, speak directly to the leader. These followers know why they're here, are committed to that why, and are willing to help others become who they are called to be as they serve the leader.

While this is not an exhaustive list of followership styles it is an important list for hyphen leaders to know. Having a solid working knowledge of these followership styles affords us the opportunity to develop strategies capable of leading more effectively. Aside from understanding the followership styles of your team members it is important to know your own followership style. Understanding the follower style that you use the most can shed a lot of light on why you make the decisions you make as a leader. I challenge you to take a holistic look at yourself, your team, and the people under your leadership to understand both how and why you all follow. I often ask leaders the following question after conducting a followership development course with them. If you had to build a five man or woman team comprised of a combination of the followership styles presented today, which followers would you choose? For example, (1) sheep style follower, (2) alienated followers, (1) pragmatic follower, and (1) star follower. I ask you the same question.

I encourage you, above all else, to engage in dialogue with other leaders about their choices. It is my sincere hope that this article helps you in some way. God bless.