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CEO INSIDER

"Followers" get a bad rap. Here's why they shouldn't.

 Sherri Malouf, PhD  CEO Insider  January 12, 2021



Blind followers, mindless drones, brainless idiots, yes men, weak-minded, and the uninformed definitely give being a follower a bad rap. These attributes don't even fully capture the negative side of poor followership, as followers can also backstab, undermine, betray, and malign their leaders.

In comparison, here's a definition of a *follower* as proffered by Merriam-Webster:

a: one in the service of another: retainer

b: one that follows the opinions or teachings of another

c: one that imitates another

Follower has synonyms, for example an adherent suggests a close and persistent attachment, a disciple implies devoted allegiance, and partisan can mean one who gives full loyalty and support to another.

Let's define what we mean by *follower* as it relates to organizations. Pieces of each of these descriptions are helpful. I like the idea of a follower being in service to another and being supportive and loyal. Having allegiance and a close attachment are also good qualities.

Researching implicit follower theories, Thomas Sy (2010) found that leaders have unconscious beliefs and idealized images of what makes a good follower. Sy's research showed that ideal followers would be:

- industrious: hardworking, productive, going above and beyond,
- enthusiastic: excited, outgoing, happy, and
- a good citizen: loyal, reliable, and a team player.

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Due to the brain's efficiency, we have an unconscious checklist (or an idealized image) that quickly evaluates people to determine if they are valuable to us and then we make, again, unconscious decisions on how to deal with them. If a leader determines that a specific follower meets at least some of these criteria, then they may choose to coach the follower in an attempt to develop the remaining criteria. However, if a follower is lacking in many of these qualities, the leader may, without confirming these unconscious assumptions, just write the person off and not help them any more than is required until the person moves on.

The mistake many leaders and followers make is in not developing solid relationships with each other to determine if the unconscious assumptions are accurate or not. Yes, there are idealized leader models too!

Without followers, there are no leaders. And without leaders, followers are lost.

Obviously, each needs the other, but the reality of workplace relationships is pretty grim. First, it is a forced relationship. In other words, we may never have relationships with any of the people we work with if we didn't have the job. The personalities and interests may be divergent and the common ground may be thin, e.g. we work for the same company.

Working for the same company rarely provides enough glue to inspire people to work through the challenges of developing strong and close relationships. On top of that, we have the issue of power and how people vary dramatically in their reactions to authority – whether they are using it or submitting to it. Then, we also have a wide variety of personal issues that sometimes play out in the workplace. How do we navigate this psychological, emotional, and social maze to create solid relationships at work?

Fortunately, as we become more conscious, we can make choices about followers and leaders that are not driven by these unconscious requirements or psychological baggage. While doing research for [Science and the Leader-Follower Relationship](#), I asked leaders and followers what would be the impact of improving the quality of the leader-follower relationship, and they said they would be more productive, happier, and less stressed.

Relationships drive everything that happens in organizations. Decisions are made based on business needs, but many of these decisions and the interpretation of information are driven by influence and the quality of relationships.

If we are serious about improving the relationship between leaders and followers, then an assessment of the quality of that relationship would be powerful. But how do you assess something that is unconscious? Based on many years of research and over thirty years of experience in global training and consulting, I have developed a validated tool that not only measures the quality of the relationship, but statistically analyzes some of the common unconscious elements we have around relationships. It's a simple 15-minute online assessment tool that asks people how they think typical workplace situations would play out in their organization. Then, each person answers seven questions about the quality of their relationship with a specific leader or follower. It's anonymous and is best done with at least 200 people to be able to have valid statistical results. Once the survey results are available to the organization, it is time to have conversations about what is driving the relationship quality and what needs to change.

It's not the followers or the leaders who should get a bad rap; it's our inability to understand and address the poor relationship between them. We do not need more leadership models, instead, we need to learn how to create and nurture the power of close relationships between leaders and followers.

Written by [Sherri Malouf, Ph.D.](#)



Sherri Malouf, PhD 

Sherri Malouf, PhD is the President of Situation Management Systems, Inc., a leadership training consultancy. She is the author of [Science And The Leader-Follower Relationship](#). [Sherri Malouf](#) is an opinion columnist for the CEOWORLD magazine. Follow her on [LinkedIn](#).

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