



## Follow the Leader

Followership is a vital yet underrated competency, so why not develop training for it?

BY SHERRI MALOUF

**O**rganizations all too often put great focus on training for leaders, while followers may get some technical training and perhaps a two-day course on being a team leader. What about training workers to be great followers—without creating a company of yes-people? Imagine the impact that could have on your company.

### What is a good follower?

Professor Thomas Sy found that leaders have unconscious beliefs and idealized images of what makes a good follower. Sy's results from 1,362 participants across five studies and seven samples revealed that leaders' ideal followers are:



- Industrious (hardworking, productive, going above and beyond)
- Enthusiastic (excited, outgoing, happy)
- Good citizens (loyal, reliable, and a team player)

So, what does that mean?

When it comes to relationships, people create what are formally called schemas or mental models. Mental models help us organize information about ourselves and other people. These mental models can be about people in general or about specific individuals. For example, followers expect leaders to be dedicated, dynamic, and sensitive. Likewise, leaders expect followers to be hard-working, productive, enthusiastic, and loyal.

We can have multiple models about one person that we use in different situations. Some mental models even contain a script. Think about your close relationships. Do you have the same disagreement with a significant other again and again? That's because you have thoughts and feelings about yourself, the other person, and how the conversation should go that guide how you react—even if your reaction is unwarranted. Interactions in established relationships are often unintentional, uncontrolled, and not consciously implemented.

A person's experiences and socialization create unconscious mental models. While useful at times, they can be unproductive to work relationships. The brain is conservative; it does not want to create a new model for each interaction. So, in the interest of efficiency and energy conservation, it chooses automatic pathways that work most of the time. Paying attention is hard work, and doing so uses valuable energy that the brain needs for other functions.

How effectively people match their leader's unconscious mental models of a good follower's attributes can be either devastating or rewarding. Some leaders may immediately dismiss peo-

ple who are different or weird (we are all weird to somebody). Think about how many diamonds in the rough get passed over because they don't fit a leader's mental model. Then, too, remember that individual leaders' mental models about followers are most likely different. Going above and beyond may be critical to one leader, while being loyal may be more important to another.

## Employers must define good followership at the organizational level.

On top of that, few organizations have a general competency model of what it means to be a good follower. That leaves unwritten rules to guide employees on acceptable and unacceptable followership behaviors.

### Lead the charge

L&D practitioners, in concert with organizational leaders, can help change that narrative. Although changing leaders' biases can be a challenge, doing so is an essential first step to weave good followership into the fabric of a company's culture. What would be the purpose of establishing what good followership is when a leader's unconscious mental models take precedent? Leaders must become cognizant of their biases, whether conscious or unconscious.

To bring those biases to the surface, arrange peer group discussions so that leaders can openly discuss their expectations of followers. (Specially designed questionnaires also can raise awareness of biases.) Once defined and supported through mechanisms such as competencies and feedback processes, those biases can change. Start small with a moti-

vated group of staff, because small successes are the foundation of larger organizational change.

### What followership training looks like

Good followership looks different at every company, and so should the training. To develop followership training, determine what competencies fit the definition of a good follower at your organization.

You like the idea of a hard worker? What does your company need to do so that everyone buys into that notion? What does being productive look like at your company? A person can achieve the label of being productive only when they are clear about what's expected of them. That same principle applies to followership. While Sy's findings are a great starting point, they are far too general—employers must define good followership at the organizational level.

A big piece of training good followership begins with developing self-leadership: self-confidence, courage, being grounded, and being clear about their leader's expectations. The organizational culture needs to create a space for those types of followers. You can recognize them by their willingness to support others, work results, organizational connections and network, and commitment to the company mission.

Followers dealing with negative leader behaviors must develop strong self-leadership and courage. Employers often promote leaders for their technical ability and not for people skills, so leaders can be



bullies, psychologically abusive, and arrogant and lack self-control. For individuals who have been taught to fear and revere authority, it may take the same amount of self-leadership training and courage for them to talk to a kind leader.

Train followers to understand the hierarchies by which they need to navigate and teach them how to determine the best people with whom to authentically cultivate good relationships. Ultimately, good followership is relationship management in a forced social setting. Not only should good followers nurture organic and lateral relationships that develop by happenstance, but it's important to instill in followers the importance of identifying people with whom they can work to achieve organizational goals.

It's simple organizational networking theory: Good followers realize and understand that they need strong relationships with a wide range of people, starting with their leaders.

### Secrets to managing up

Self-confidence is a key component of managing upwardly, and training in that area of followership can be a course on its own. What gives followers self-confidence is knowing their employer values them and having the capability to influence others.

Influence training—which at its core holds that influence is a combination of achieving objectives and maintaining or building relationships—teaches followers how to manage impact and equips them with skills to tackle tough relationship issues. That is essentially human development, which is also a key component to building strong and capable followers.

Many organizations these days just want to check off the boxes instead of carefully looking at what makes a good human development course. Good influence training

programs develop emotional intelligence, which does not happen overnight. Practice is essential.

Respect is another important piece of the followership training puzzle. Good relationships between followers and leaders hinge on respect. It is up to organizational leaders to define the expectations around respect.

## Followers can be greater followers when they feel respected.

Start simple: Don't interrupt others, be on time, listen when someone is speaking and respond to their point, be inclusive, and don't talk about people behind their backs. Without respect, it's easy for leaders and followers to fall into the us-versus-them chasm that is wide and bottomless.

When people genuinely feel respected, leader-follower relationships are easier to manage, there is less stress, and the work gets done. Followers can be greater followers when they feel respected. Yet, in many organizations, respect training does not happen.

Further, a little bit of empathy from leaders goes a long way in demonstrating respect and establishing respectful relationships. In his book *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, Matthew Lieberman writes that "Empathy is arguably the pinnacle of our social cognitive achievements—the peak of the social brain."

To be better empathizers, leaders must quiet their egos, remain grounded and centered, and be open to the other. Empathy requires self-control and the ability to listen, which can be challenging for some. However, it's all part of the current leadership movement of being mindful and accepting.

### Strength in numbers

If you want to build a workforce of strong followers and leaders at your company, support them in their development as good human beings. Leaders who cultivate authentic relationships are respectful and empathetic. Likewise, followers who are trained to influence and manage their

own impact have no qualms about taking responsibility for their half of the quality of the relationship.

When employers decide that it's time again to invest in human development and stop accepting high performance as an excuse for bad behavior in either leaders or followers, they will see engagement numbers shift. I interviewed more than a dozen people and asked, "What would be the impact if the relationship between leaders and followers was improved?" Not one person said that things would get worse. Instead, they all said that they would be more productive, happier, and less stressed.

If you're not doing so already, now is the time to invest in people and develop a culture of good followership at your company. Good followership is being able to create authentic relationships and navigate in a forced social setting, also known as an organization. That is a vital and underrated ability. When you train someone to be a great follower, you increase the possibility that they will then become a great leader.

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