

Situational Dynamics of the Leader Follower Relationship

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Abstract

Only tyrants claim exclusive leadership dominion—and this behavior is not leadership, but rather oppression. Similarly, followership is not subservient, but rather engaging. Passive, acquiescent followership does a disservice both to leaders and teammates. In reality, leadership and followership roles interchange in healthy organizations. The requisite scenario questions are “Why?,” “When?,” and “How?” This article explores some practical aspects of the leader-follower relationship. It cites examples through history and uses a modern day parable of how situational dynamics affect the leader-follower relationship.

Introduction

Organizations depend on effective relationships among leaders and followers. Each has responsibilities to support the business in accomplishing its strategy. Despite this crucial necessity, both leaders and followers often struggle with mastering these proficiencies. Bestseller lists abound with successful leadership examples. However, this phenomenon may unintentionally promote three leadership misconceptions. The first is that leadership is limited to CEOs, or more generally, senior managers. The second misconception is the universal suitability of a “how to” manual. The third fallacy regards an assumed flawless string of successes, which lead to the corner office. All three points will be examined.

Who is a leader? The short answer is everyone. If everyone is a leader, then who is left to follow? The short answer is also everyone.^{1 2} Confused? Please continue.

Leadership versus Followership

Great CEOs achieve results through high performance teams. The CEO cannot possibly do everything. Delegation is required. Great leaders know they are not good at everything. They respond by hiring skilled professionals who both address CEO deficiencies and complement the CEO's strengths. Suppose the boss is a numbers whiz in a technologically innovative company. Hiring a strong Chief Technology Officer is an extension of delegated leadership. The need for leadership does not stop here though.

The Chief Technology Officer's span of control may include the new product development process, sales technical support, and customer technical support. Depending on the size of the company, these may be managed individually. Therefore, each function needs leadership. The need for leadership does not stop here either.

Each of the three itemized functions above requires staff resources. Quite likely, each function has a bevy of projects whose completion supports corporate strategy. Cross-functional teams may be the prudent approach for executing project deliverables.

Each cross-functional team member has a subject matter leadership role. For example, product development teams typically include someone from the manufacturing floor. Why? Two practical reasons among many will be offered. First, the design engineers will benefit from manufacturing adaptability feedback about the proposed product. Second, the manufacturing teammate enjoys insights for tooling and capacity planning.

Was followership overlooked? Hardly. The easiest place to make the point is at the team level. While each teammate provides subject matter leadership contributions, this same teammate must rely on the leadership of other teammates for their expertise. This is followership.

Followership is also relevant in more senior positions. Continuing the example, think about the relationship between the Chief Technology Officer and the Chief Marketing Officer. Before the Chief Technology Officer commits resources to a new product initiative, she relies on the Chief Marketing Officer's determination that there is a market for the product based on certain functional specifications and targeted price points. In turn, the Chief Marketing Officer models followership by reliance on the Chief Technology Officer's leadership to engineer a product of sufficient quality whose product cost meets the margin threshold.

The take-away is that most employees have both leadership and followership opportunities based on typical situations encountered in their business environment. In practical terms, these situations may obviate the position authority denoted by title.

Consider the anonymous, diminutive figure that stood in defiance of a tank in Tiananmen Square. Perhaps he had never led before. Those who observed his heroism did not contemplate his title. However, the situation inspired him to lead in immeasurable proportions. Furthermore, his situational leadership inspired followers in pursuit of human rights. Mild-mannered Rosa Parks demonstrated similar situational leadership on a segregated bus in Alabama. Arguably, Rosa Parks' example provided mentoring leadership to other Civil Rights activists, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Perhaps the case for situational leadership and followership is sufficiently made at this juncture—even if the label is not brandished on the business card. But why does it work? This answer is more elusive as the “how to” manual does not produce identical results across diverse venues. For example, Bob

Nardelli was one of the three finalists considered to succeed GE's legendary CEO, Jack Welch. When Jeff Immelt was named Welch's successor, Nardelli departed GE to lead Home Depot. Nardelli learned that leadership differentiators at General Electric had mixed results at Home Depot. Following his stint at Home Depot, Nardelli took the helm at Chrysler in an attempt to turnaround the struggling automaker. However, Nardelli's considerable skills did not keep Chrysler from seeking Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Variables and Examples

Vision, purpose, values, and strategy are good places to start to develop leadership and followership chemistry. Bossidy and Charan instruct leaders to focus on no more than three—and preferably one—strategic initiative.³ Drucker describes several leadership best practices to make strategic initiatives actionable: prioritization, planning, delegated responsibility, inclusion, and communication.⁴

Corporate action items become responsibilities of people. Pfeffer makes a compelling case that the leader-follower dynamic trumps all other performance variables, including type of industry, size of business, or age of business.⁵ Winston and Patterson attempted to create an integrated definition of leadership. They confirmed the complexity of leadership alchemy by identifying 90 significant variables whose emphasized mix must reconcile with the leadership scenario.⁶

Bennis writes that greatness is innate among followers. Bennis describes the coaxing benefits of leaders who show appreciation for exemplary follower results.⁷ Through a relationship built on trust and inclusion, the leader is the catalyst who unleashes follower potential. According to Stephen M.R. Covey, institutionalized trust pays competitive dividends just as the absence of trust inflicts “taxes” on company results.⁸

Trust seems simple enough in principle, but how do leaders earn trust? Bell imparts that trust starts with authenticity.⁹ Covey adds that trust is a function of credibility.¹⁰ By making commitments and delivering against expectations, credibility is methodically and incrementally earned over a period of time. Edwards Deming, Stephen R. Covey (the father of Stephen M.R. Covey), and Peter Drucker refer to the process of earning credibility as under-promising and over-delivering.^{11 12} This works within and across leader and follower roles. Covey warns that whereas trust creation is a slow process, trust decimation may occur with one careless act. Lencioni cites the absence of trust as the fundamental nemesis of team dynamics.¹³

Stephen R. Covey and Bob Whitman cite trust as one of the four core principles of doing well in a hostile environment.¹⁴ Consider the career saga of Lee Iacocca, credited with introducing the iconic Mustang at Ford during the early 1960s. Iacocca was recruited in 1978 by Chrysler to take the helm and save the company. Iacocca leveraged trust to engineer Chrysler's rejuvenation. Unprecedented in labor-management relations, Iacocca offered Douglas Frasier, president of the normally combative United Autoworkers Union, a seat on the board. Additionally, Iacocca demonstrated goodwill by taking a nominal salary as he asked for union concessions to cut operating costs. Iacocca also built customer trust with his marketing mantra, “If you can find a better car, buy it.”

Bell expounds on the servant leadership tenets by reminding practitioners that the best leaders not only develop their teams, but they also share the publicity and rewards of successes with their teams.¹⁵ Training and mentoring are vehicles through which leaders utilize trust to develop the potential of their teams. Training—or discipling—subordinates is mandatory. Leaders use discipling to teach subordinates how to follow. This includes cultivating the requisite skills for proficiency within the subordinate's span of control. This also includes training the subordinate when to ask for help. The follower must trust the

leader to impart knowledge in a way that is beneficial and respectful (i.e., praise publicly and correct privately). In short, leaders disciple followers in what they must know to be competent.

Whereas training may be directive, mentoring is elective. However, the rationale may not be clear. First, the leader offers mentoring because she believes specific followers may benefit from her insights in order to develop their inherent potential. Second, the receipt of mentoring is voluntary. The follower may elect to forego advice without reprisal. Mentoring is a gift that may be fully accepted, partially accepted, or fully rejected. Mentors recognize that leadership cannot be taught, but it may be learned. To wit, the mentor may be offering insights to enable the follower to avoid repeating painful lessons learned by the leader. This treasure trove includes soft skills and wisdom. Just as in the training scenario, trust is reciprocal, but for different reasons. The follower must trust the integrity of the mentor's motivations, and the leader must trust the follower to make a responsible decision—even if the decision rejects the counsel of the mentor.

People love winners. People like to work for winners. People like to be winners. However, it is unrealistic to win all of the time. In the entire history of Major League Baseball not one player in the Hall of Fame “won” even half the time at the plate. Ty Cobb's .366 is the highest lifetime batting average among those enshrined in Cooperstown.¹⁶ That means that Cobb “lost” more than 60% of the time at the plate.

History complements sports with phoenix-like examples. Joseph J. Ellis in *His Excellency* substantiated the character of George Washington.¹⁷ The father of the United States experienced years of military defeats before emerging victorious in the American Revolution. One of the most impressive examples of trust-building is captured by Doris Kearns Goodwin in her critically acclaimed book, *Team of Rivals*.¹⁸ Abraham Lincoln was the unlikely Republican Presidential nominee in 1860, edging out three seasoned contenders for the nomination, all of whom entered the convention with comparatively better prospects than Lincoln. None of the three felt Lincoln was remotely qualified to be their Commander in Chief, yet Lincoln persuaded them to serve in his cabinet upon his election. Over time, Lincoln's leadership earned their respect and trust. According to historian Shelby Foote, Lincoln's leadership both saved the union and transformed it from the United States “are” to the United States “is.”¹⁹ Lincoln's success was a function of the followership he developed among his former leadership rivals. Winston Churchill returned from virtual political exile to lead the United Kingdom in solitary Western resistance to Hitler before the Allies united to achieve victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. Nelson Mandela endured 27 years of imprisonment before leading South Africa past apartheid.

Industrial examples offer additional insights. David McCullough documents greatness emerging from failures in several books. In *The Path Between the Seas*, McCullough chronicles the engineering marvels of the Panama Canal.²⁰ The multitude of intrepid workers and engineers who descended on the isthmus not only overcame the failures of their French predecessors who slipped into bankruptcy, but also overcame conditions of chronic malaria that idled and killed thousands of laborers.

Thomas Edison's inventive legacy includes the General Electric Company.²¹ Edison failed many times trying to master the incandescent light. Edison described his failures in terms of ruling out options that did not work. Remember Lee Iacocca as an example of trust? Before he arrived at Chrysler, Henry Ford II fired the innovative genius.²² The Ford-Iacocca relationship failed—and to Ford Motor Company's detriment.

If losing, or failing, is a part of life, how does one experience failure as a leader or follower without becoming a failure? W. Randall Jones shed some light on the subject in *The Richest Man in Town*.²³ The book itemizes twelve commandments for the successes of the subjects he studied in towns across America. Three of Jones' commandments are particularly relevant for digesting failures en route to

success: risk failure in order to find success, reject failure as anything but a detour on the road to aspiration, and learn from other's failures.

One of Jones' colorful subjects is Hartley Peavey, founder and CEO of Peavey Electronics in Meridian, Mississippi. After hearing Bo Diddley play guitar at a concert in the 50's, Peavey aspired to be a professional musician. However, Peavey lacked the requisite talent. He failed. Peavey resolved to remain near musicians, and started his amplifier company. Today, Peavey Electronics is a dominant vendor for stage musicians. Peavey did not stop failing en route to even more success. He endeavored to apply his genius to a perfect set of drums. Although the sound was immaculate, drummers rejected the aesthetics of the set. Another failure. Peavey took it in stride and continues to succeed.

Old Testament Biblical history provides the capstone example of failure preparing a leader. Joseph, son of Jacob, survived being sold into slavery by his half-brothers.²⁴ Joseph eventually achieved a leadership role in a foreign land second only to Pharaoh. Joseph's odyssey positioned him to save his family from starvation. With a little poetic license, Joseph's story can be modernized and repositioned as the allegorical story of Joe, a Generation Y management trainee.

The Story of Joe

CEO Jake Israel showed unearned favoritism to Joe, a new hire in the most recent crop of MBAs entering the management training program. He and Joe hailed from the same snobbish school, where both were captains of the lacrosse team. Fellow trainees quickly grew envious of Mr. Israel's "fair haired boy." In Machiavellian fashion, they plotted to destroy Joe's career. Upon completing the training program, the young upstarts interviewed for assignments across the divisions of their multinational company. Joe's peers stroked his vanity to goad him into pursuing a stretch assignment in a country whose political system was decidedly unsympathetic to Western culture.

Unschooling in the host country's customs, Joe was the "ugly American." One day, in a fit of rage, a corrupt client for whom Joe was installing a complex operating system accused him of misappropriating funds. The result was his incarceration without due process. The company abandoned him for fear of losing other contracts in that country. The State Department ignored pleas from his family for help.

Joe occupied his time in prison studying host country culture. He taught curious fellow prisoners to speak and read English. Fortunately for him, they reciprocated. Joe even mastered the idioms of the language. He persuaded the commandant to let the prisoners start a garden. The detainees liked the idea of better food. The commandant saw it as a means to pocket allocated funds otherwise used to provide sustenance rations to the inmates.

Days blurred from weeks to months, and then to years. Among Joe's reflections, he wondered whether Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn ever felt his abandonment while unjustly imprisoned by the former Soviet Union. Almost imperceptibly, Israel's once despised "fair haired boy" matured. He learned to listen and think more critically. Joe became wise.

As luck would have it, the host country experienced a revolution. The prisoners were unceremoniously released. Joe wondered whether those liberated from the French Bastille felt similar exultation. He retained the name given to him by his jailors as this alias reminded him of the boyhood experience of Vito Corleone at Ellis Island in *The Godfather*. Joe was still young and decided that participation in nation-building would be exciting.

Joe was in the right place at the right time. He teamed with some political prisoners from his cell block who had a motley network of friends. Some were tradesmen. A couple had western educations. They formed a business that thrived beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Although not consciously, Joe assimilated the behaviors that the leadership gurus write about—the ones he dismissed as esoteric

nonsense in B-school. Amid the unbridled spontaneity of his early career, he hotly pursued instant gratification. In contrast, the “new” Joe was more contemplative and deliberate. He had embraced humility while imprisoned when there was nowhere to go but up. He knew how injustice felt and did not want his conscience haunted by repaying inequities with evil. Joe modeled behaviors described in Warren Bennis’ article, “The End of Leadership.”²⁵ Joe realized that he did not have to be the most intelligent person in his company. Rather, he had to attract talent, motivate the talent to achieve, and reward results produced by that talent. The “new” Joe was good at this.

Joe’s business began exporting. He eventually encountered global distribution opportunities, including buying a failed business from a bankruptcy trustee in the U.S.—his old company! He remained anonymous and closed the deal through surrogates. Joe flew to the U.S. for the press conference. When he walked onto the stage in front of the headquarters employees, his old rivals immediately recognized him and nearly vomited in horror. They were staring in the face of a man they knew would exact revenge for their mischief. However, the “new” Joe had no interest in petty distractions. Instead of settling old scores, he demonstrated the type of mercy he felt when freed from prison. No jobs were eliminated in the acquisition. Joe had become a servant leader.

Conclusion

In summary, good leadership will always be in demand. A variety of leadership opportunities will likely punctuate a person’s career. These opportunities may be disguised without rank and possibly possessing some intriguing detours. Moreover, leadership opportunities may appear after having first demonstrated good followership. Learning to follow a good leader prepares neophytes for their turn at the helm. This learning experience will definitely include disciplining, and may include mentoring. Both leaders and followers must tailor their tactics to situational realities. Fear of failure should not inhibit leaders or followers. In measured doses, failures are valuable learning opportunities. Successful servant leaders are disposed to “pay forward” to the next generation of leaders with disciplining and mentoring.

About the Author

John A. Lanier is founder and CEO of Middle Market Methods™ (www.middlemarketmethods.com), a consulting firm serving portfolio companies of middle market private equity firms. Lanier mentors clients with a “value creation road map” of leadership and process improvement solutions that “operationalize” the investment thesis. Lanier earned 6σ Master Black Belt certification at GE. He holds an MBA and is a doctoral candidate in Regent University’s Global Leadership and Entrepreneurship program.

Endnotes

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