

Dr. Peter Newton & Associates, Fifty California Street, Ste. 1500, San Francisco, CA 94111 ♦ 510 220-1952
pmnewton@mac.com. www.peternewtonassociates.com

Following Leaders

Perhaps because we miss the fathers of our childhoods—the fathers we had, or imagined we had, or wished we had had-- a mystique bordering on longing surrounds the subject of leadership. At a symposium of business consultants, an otherwise thoughtful organizational psychologist exclaimed that he had “a passion for leadership!” Really? Had he forgotten that Hitler was, for a time, an effective leader as were Stalin and Mao, not to mention Jim Jones?

Despite these and a host of other famous examples of destructive leaders, the glorification continues unabated. Meanwhile, we speak of followers as if only a passive, subservient person would willingly accept such a role. Jack Welch liked to say that if you are not the lead dog, the view never changes. In Welch’s canine homily, leadership is not only exalted, followership is reduced to a disgusting abasement. Welch did not mention that if there is only a lead dog, the sled wont move, or that the differences between enterprises led and staffed by people and sleds pulled by dogs are so great as to make the analogy useless. Mr. Welch also failed to tell us how a leader with this conception of followers gains their support. Was he imagining that everyone who cooperates with leaders is content to be anally fixated?

Who, it might be asked instead, but a person with a mood disorder and a pathological need to dominate others

would want to lead every group he or she is in?

Competent Followership

Aided however uncertainly by a substantial literature on the attributes and practices of great leaders, there is little help to be found on being a good follower or on competent followership. If we can get past the feeling of embarrassment at even being interested in such a problem, it may prove instructive to look into the matter.

A competent follower is someone who understands the task being pursued, values it, has requisite skills, and predicates his behavior on helping to achieve the goal. Influencing and supporting responsible leadership is part of the follower’s competence. Some people know intuitively how to do this. Others need directives. Below, I offer some based upon my experience consulting with work groups and their leaders, leading groups myself, and attempting, quite imperfectly, to be a good follower in others. Followers can use the list to measure and sharpen their skills. Leaders can use it to evaluate the kind of support they are getting.

Practices for Competent Followers

1. Attend meetings scrupulously. Take group participation as a serious matter that requires the same high level of responsibility given to other aspects of your work. Particularly in groups under 12, which is the size of most work groups, the absence of a member hurts a group's morale by suggesting, at least in effect, that the work of the group is unimportant. Absences also disrupt continuity and tend to slow momentum.

If you can't be at a meeting, transmit your thoughts on the agenda to the leader in advance. If the leader does not prepare and circulate agendas, help the leader to understand their importance.

2. Arrive on time and prepared to advance or improve the agenda. This requires thought beforehand. Some people show up at company meetings in the same vacant, spectatorial and delinquent state of mind as students attending a high school assembly. Do not be one of them.

3. As you sit in a meeting, ask yourself what contribution you can make, including being silent, that will best move the group forward in pursuit of its task. This is called sophisticated role behavior and is the mark of a mature, disciplined worker. Naïve role behavior consists in contributing simply because you feel impelled to, or failing to contribute because you feel disinclined.

Avoid the illusion that the meeting is a suitable stage for displays of cleverness and other charming personal qualities or one suitable for catharsis of anger and pique.

4. Avoid confronting the leader in public. An individual leading a meeting is in a very vulnerable position. He or she is outnumbered and exposed to confusing crosscurrents of group sentiment and argument. A leader's capacity to use aggressive criticism in this situation is very limited. Wherever possible, a constructive follower saves the corrective conversation for a respectful discussion in private.

5. Ask yourself what pairings, including rivalries with other followers, you are engaged in, within the meeting and without, that subdivide the group and undermine the leader or make his or her work more difficult.

It is a curious phenomenon that members who smirk, gesture, joke and whisper with others in the group believe themselves to be invisible. In reality, this sort of childish behavior is obvious and highly distracting to the person leading the meeting and trying to get work done. It is one example of the kind of regression that individuals in groups undergo if their adult sense of task dedication lags, and if the groups are not well led.

A lack of clarity about the meeting's task or its importance may be the culprit in promoting this sort of regression. So may a lack of clear time boundaries for the meeting. It is the responsibility of leadership to define tasks and establish boundaries. Should the leader fail to do so, a member can help by asking at the beginning of the meeting for a clarification of its purpose and its



"Are we to imagine that to be a good follower, one must be anally fixated?"

ending time. If the response is, “to touch base,” or “we will take as long as necessary to finish the work,” a member should be apprised that the leader does not understand the importance of task clarity or its dependence on well-managed boundaries. Such a leader stands in need of a private, educative conference with a more sophisticated member or a coach.

6. Develop empathy for the leader. Realize that the pressure on the leader’s role far exceeds that on your own. Understand that while you must only meet the requirements of your own role, the leader is responsible for everything that happens in his or her system.

Consistent practice of these suggestions by followers will strengthen leaders and enhance overall task performance. But it may seem that I am asking creative people to behave as though they were without personality. Where is the fun? The fun resides in the satisfaction of being a contributing member of a group that realizes a worthwhile goal.

Of course, some leaders do not deserve support. The ends they pursue are destructive or their methods corrupt. When leaderly irresponsibility reaches intolerable levels, a subordinate must consider ways to remove him or resignation.

Most leaders fall in a middle range. They are not very good at leading, but they try hard and are genuinely concerned about their members and the enterprise as a whole. Keep in

mind that you would have trouble performing their roles, too, and that the causes of their incompetence often originate at organizational levels above them. For example, even where the leader is CEO, his or her work may be seriously compromised by a board chair.

While you anguish and wax eloquent to colleagues about the incompetence of your leader, suspect that the disappointment of your need to have admirable leaders is balanced by the gratification of your wish to see them fail. It is the latter that a competent follower learns to subordinate in the service of task performance.

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