

The road less travelled: inquiring into followership as a means of developing leadership capability

From Danny Chesterman

Have you ever felt that we may be in danger of becoming habituated to exploring leadership through the eyes of the leader? What happens when we approach leadership through the eyes of the follower? The quotations and questions below may provide you with some refreshingly different perspectives.....

1. *The problem for most of us is not that we don't influence other people, but that we do.*

People learn more from what you *actually* do than what you say you do, still less from what you suggest others do.

If you are a parent, which of your qualities have you noticed that your children follow? Have they chosen all your better qualities and left the rest behind? If your kids are anything like mine then probably not! Does your own perception of what you have passed on match what your partner sees?

So it is with managers. What we want people to follow may not be what they actually follow. As a leader/manager, do you know what it is that people follow in you? Are they drawn to your amazing charisma, the clarity of your vision? Or do they follow your predilection for starting things and not finishing them?

If you don't know what people follow in you, would it be worth finding out?

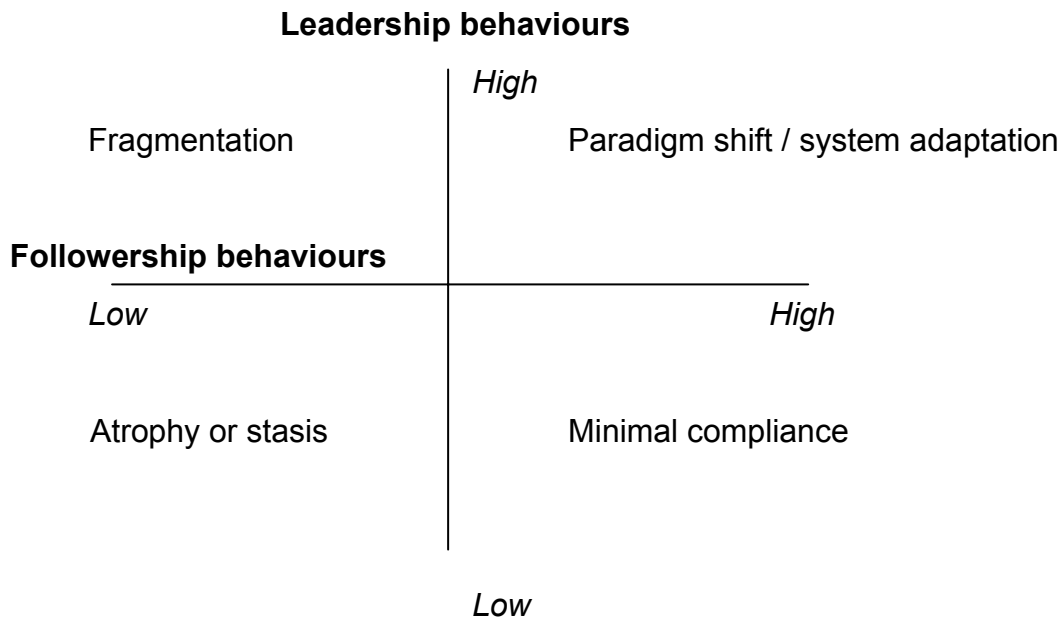
2. *Followers who tell the truth, and leaders who listen to it, are an unbeatable combination... perhaps the ultimate irony is that the follower willing to speak out shows precisely the kind of initiative that leadership is made of (Warren Bennis).*

When was the last time you heard your staff voice their truth in a way that fundamentally challenged one of your assumptions about 'how things are'? Did you manage to stay curious about it despite your life experience thus far? If you can't remember such a challenge, how would you know if you were deafened by your own truth?

3. *If there is anything that the nineties have taught us, it is that most people are both leaders and followers (Kelley, The Power of Followership).*

The best organisations combine excellence in both leadership and followership. Organisations that have little of either atrophy or stagnate. Organisations that have plenty of leadership but low esteem for followership fragment. Those who have high investment in followership but little in leadership develop compliance cultures. But

organisations that combine the best of both can achieve paradigm shifts...open up new markets, discover new ways of doing things, and transcend the dilemmas that otherwise imprison us.



What kind of followership is necessary for you to deliver your organisation’s mission? What are the followership competencies that you need for tomorrow? What would you regard as exemplary followership behaviours? Douglas Smith lists five key followership behaviours:

- Asking questions instead of giving answers
- Providing opportunities for others to lead you
- Doing real work in support of others instead of only the reverse
- Becoming a matchmaker instead of a central switch
- Seeking a common consensus instead of a superficial agreement

How are these different depending on whether you ask people at the top, middle or bottom of your organisation?

4. Lodging leadership functions in leaders may actually undermine the very goals that leaders are supposed to achieve (Virginia Vansderslice, Separating Leaders from Leadership).

The same is true if you lodge followership functions solely in followers. To discover how effective your leadership team ask those whom they seek to lead, here’s a simple framework for generating some data:

Who are you following?	What are you following?
When are you following?	Why are you following?

What are you choosing **not** to follow? Why?

5. *Followers and leaders both orbit around the purpose; followers do not orbit around the leader (Ira Chaleff, The Courageous Follower; Standing Up To and For Our Leaders).*

If you left tomorrow, which of your legacies would other people continue to follow, the footprint on the sand? What is the highest purpose that you yourself are following?

6. *Top leaders who hope to set the energies and performance of people on fire through rich, promising visions must know when to follow their people's interpretation of those visions in order to truly benefit from the creativity and meaning that any vision-driven enterprise requires (Douglas Smith, The Leader of the Future).*

When, as a senior manager, did you last take time to discover what others in your organisation are doing that you feel inspired to follow? If you haven't been inspired by your staff recently, where are you looking?

In many respects following has got a bad name, and it's time we repaired the damage. Take a moment at your next team meeting and ask those present to write down what they associate with the words followers and following. What do you notice about the associations that have been made? If the associations are distinctly negative, what is this saying about the sort of expectations your organisation has about leadership?

If you want to know what leadership talent you have in your organisation, the conventional approach would be to have experts run leadership assessment centres. The trouble with these is that they can invite an over-emphasis on just one part of the leadership /followership equation, and some contestable predictions about how these competencies fit future leadership needs. Would another way be to take a diagonal slice of your organisation and invite them to set up an action inquiry to discover what people are already following?

Danny.chesterman@bathconsultancygroup.com

01622 747228