

Entering the leadership void: Developing effective followers

Darren Dalcher

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Many conversations about improvement, enhancement, governance, progress and the future inevitably resort to addressing leadership issues. Leadership is increasingly viewed as an essential life skill, a practical ability to guide other individuals, a team, an organisation, or even a country, towards a better future, an improved position or a defined outcome.

But where do we find examples of great leaders?

Traditionally, archetypal samples would emerge from either the political or the business arena, but in recent years both have been found wanting. Yet, as we face ever more complex and uncertain dilemmas and increasingly vexing wicked problems, there appears to be an even greater need to identify and follow strong and powerful leaders.

What worked before?

Great leadership is sometimes measured in terms of the followers that it engenders. This may well be a dangerous idea. Former US Speaker of the House, Ohio Congressman John Boehner asserted back in 2015 that '*a leader without followers is simply a man taking a walk*'. General George S. Patton had an even more direct approach in mind when he proclaimed '*Lead me, follow me, or get out of my way.*'

Ironically, despite the plethora of publications exploring effective leadership, relatively little has been written about the role of effective followership. In a private conversation with a leading architect and chief executive of the infrastructure and construction part of the London 2012 Olympic games, he expressed an exasperation that we teach leadership and tell people what they ought to be doing, but we hardly ever "teach" followership as we implicitly assume that following is easy, or well understood. According to Robert Kelley (1992) only 20% of the success of organisations is traced to the leader, while in practice 80% of the credit should be going to followers. Yet somehow the role of the follower is less recognised and appears less glamorous.

Kellerman (2008; p. xix) defines followers as '*subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line*'. Yet, followers are neither homogenous nor uniform. Kellerman's book (2008) offers a fluid typology, which can be positioned along a spectrum, indicating the rank or level of engagement by followers, encompassing five main types:

- *Isolates*: utterly detached and disinterested individuals who keep a low profile, rarely respond to leaders, resent interferences from above, and reinforce the status quo by default
- *Bystanders*: observers who follow passively and let events unfold with little participation, while accepting control from above
- *Participants*: engaged individuals who typically care about their organisation and support their leader with their effort or time when they agree with their vision and views
- *Activists*: eager, energetic and deeply engaged individuals working for the cause and the leader
- *Die-hards*: individuals displaying the highest levels of engagement with the organisation or their cause; all consuming supporters exhibiting total and absolute engagement

Good followers therefore actively support effective and ethical leaders. It is thus expected that 'good followers' would also respond appropriately to bad leaders in the interest of the greater cause and the wider organisation. Kellerman's chief concern is about mindless, or unquestioning followers and their impact. Based on historical events, die-hards may agitate and activists may follow blindly and encourage participants to take part, while bystanders may simply allow events, however painful or harrowing, to take place, whilst others choose to ignore the entire scene. Historical precedents offer some credibility to the notion of mapping the level of engagement and participation (Kellerman, 2004). They also seem to suggest that bystanders and other participants may tolerate, or even embrace harmful actions with little, if any, questioning (see for example, Dalcher 2016 for a summary, or Zimbardo, 2007, for more detail). The direct implication is that followership needs to be taken more seriously; it also needs to encompass some sober responsibilities.

Beyond toxic leadership

Equating leaders with 'traditional' leadership theory, as we often do, is only seeing a limited part of the picture. The notion of leaders who can do no wrong, has been tarnished by less than responsible business and political leaders and a series of environmental and business crises. Toxic or destructive leadership seems to thrive on three essential ingredients: destructive leaders, susceptible followers and conducive environments (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007). Recent evidence suggests that leaders can no longer assume unwavering loyalty and trust. Nor can leaders take it for granted that followers will continue to exhibit unquestioning behaviours.

Nonetheless, hierarchical structures continue to imply that wisdom, and insights, always descend from above, reflecting Plato's preference for larger than life philosopher-kings endowed with charm, vision and forcefulness as rulers. Modern society affords a greater belief in the power of groups and in the ability of collections of individuals to get together, participate, engage, identify new concerns and propose alternative courses of action (Dalcher, 2015). But what is their remit? And what is their scope for doing right?

Keith Grint (2000) offers a panoramic view of multiple successful leaders, encompassing profiles of political and military figures such as Horatio Nelson, business tycoons such as Richard Branson and Henry Ford and other well-recognised historical figures including Florence Nightingale and Martin Luther King. While the book may well celebrate their successes, Grint opts instead to feature their propensity to fail and make mistakes. What appears to distinguish those we regard as successful leaders is their cadre of followers who support and cover up for them. Grint therefore concludes, that '*the trick of the leader is to develop followers who privately resolve the problems leaders have caused or cannot resolve, but publicly deny their intervention.*' (Grint, 2000; p. 420)

In subsequent work, Keith Grint (2010) invokes Karl Popper as a proponent of an alternative and counter-intuitive approach that focuses on the inherent weakness of leaders and the need to inhibit, restrain and accommodate such deficit:

'Karl Popper provides a firmer foundation for this in his assumption that, just as we can only disprove rather than prove scientific theories, so we should adopt mechanisms that inhibit leaders rather than surrender ourselves to them.' (Grint, 2010; p. 101)

Interpreting the writing with a contemporary lens implies an intellectual revolution in the way we view and react to leaders and leadership. It calls for moral and responsible judgement thereby transforming the more transactional nature of the association between superior and subjects into an ethically and morally meaningful relationship.

Popper is thus cognisant of the potential risk of not deploying fully engaged, forever questioning and scrupulously uncompromising followers:

'Otherwise, although omniscient leaders are a figment of irresponsible followers' minds and utopian recruiters' fervid imaginations, when subordinates question their leader's direction or skill these (in)subordinates are usually replaced by those 'more aligned with the current strategic thinking' – otherwise known as yes people. In turn, such subordinates become transformed into irresponsible followers whose advice to their leader is often limited to destructive consent: they may know that their leader is wrong, but there are all kinds of reasons not to say as much, hence they consent to the destruction of their own leader and possibly their own organization too.' (Grint, 2010; p. 101-2)

Popper consequently holds followers responsible for their actions, and not least for not exercising their ability to inhibit the shortcomings and errors of their leaders. In an about face reversal of the hierarchical assumption of a free license to simply follow orders from leaders, he thereby engenders groups and individuals with responsibility to correct the course of leaders as constructive dissenters. This position offers an informed participative role as surely therein lie the true roots of effective followership embedded within an implicit social and moral contract between the leader and her true followers.

Rejecting the typical question of *Who should rule?* as the fundamental question of political theory, Popper advances the alternative position of: '*How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?*' (Popper 1945; 121).

The simple reframing places followers in a much more critical position, emphasising their role in securing and maintaining the enduring success of their mission, team, kingdom or empire. Drawing on Popper's proposition, good followership can thus be redefined around the ability to correct, steer and guide the leader towards securing improved outcomes, better alignment and more informed consent through the creative power of the wider group or community. This could perhaps be done by invoking the principles of teaming (for further information, see, Dalcher, 2018), by resorting to building greater trust (Dalcher, 2017), or through the use of social media, which seems to be creating a shift in the balance of power between leaders and followers (Kellerman, 2012).

Empowering followers

Similar sentiment can be found elsewhere within the discipline with Warren Bennis ruefully proclaiming '*If I had to reduce the responsibilities of a good follower to a single rule, it would be to speak truth to power.*' (Bennis, in, Riggio et al, 2008; p. xxv).

Ira Chaleff (2009) concludes from his extensive research that many significant failures, disasters and mishaps could have been avoided, prevented or mitigated if those lower in the hierarchy were successful at communicating the risks they were seeing in the system to their leaders. The *courageous follower* is his model that endeavours to make followers active partners who continuously scan and monitor the environment, and their leader, whilst feeling empowered to speak to and influence the hierarchy. The new aspects proposed through the work, suggest a multitude of courageous actions at the root of the interaction of leader-follower dynamics, including:

- The courage to assume responsibility (for themselves and the organisation, and to discover or create opportunities to fulfil their potential and maximise their value to the organisation in accordance with the common purpose and needs)
- The courage to serve (their leader and the organisation and pursue the common purpose)
- The courage to challenge (and stand up, and give voice to discomfort)
- The courage to participate in transformation (and champion the need for change)
- The courage to take moral action, and
- The courage to speak to the hierarchy

Leaders in turn, are encouraged to engage in a more dynamic relationship and develop:

- The courage to listen to followers.

In a similar vein, Kelley (1992) reasons that organisations require *star followers*, who display active involvement, critical thinking, independence and a positive disposition to achieve their organisation's vision. They are often referred to as the 'go-to person' or the 'right-hand person' thereby enabling positive followership. The special characteristics of *star followers* are:

- They leverage their strengths to complement weaknesses that their leaders may have
- They approach every thing with a critical mindset and make forthright statements that may challenge or criticise the leaders' decision if it clashes with wider beliefs or organisational goals
- They subscribe to the organisation's goal and voluntarily cooperate and join in activities that support that cause, even if they are not directly responsible for the execution
- They have a challenging spirit; constantly seeking new improvements, taking on new challenges with ideas and providing insights to leaders

'In many ways great followership is harder than leadership. It has more dangers and fewer rewards., and it must routinely be exercised with much more subtlety. But great followership has never been more important, if only because of the seriousness of the global problems we face, and the fact that they must be solved collaboratively, not by leaders alone but by leaders working in tandem with able and dedicated followers.' (Bennis, in, Riggio et al, 2008; p. xxvi).

However, not many systems are designed with truly meaningful and responsible followership principles in mind...

Asking the impossible

Traditional systems often emphasise old-fashioned ways of thinking enshrined in habits, traditions and well-established and rehearsed practices. Additional protocols are often applied to maintain and sustain such systems and ensure the habits persist and endure.

Armies have long provided a fresh source of 'model leaders' ready to adore, analyse, or debate. The introduction to last month's article tells the story of a military leader forced to '*transit from a fixed and cumbersome traditional military hierarchy towards a set of dynamic teams operating as high performance teams*' (Dalcher, 2018; pp. 5-6), in order to counter evolving enemy capability. In this article, yet another senior commander is forced to reflect and review their processes and overarching philosophy and devise a novel approach to leadership in a very traditional and highly demanding environment.

David Marquet was an experienced US Navy officer when he was appointed captain of a nuclear powered submarine, the USS *Santa Fe* in 1999. The *Santa Fe* is a *Los Angeles* class nuclear-powered fast attack submarine; also known as the 688 class after the hull number of the lead vessel, the USS *Los Angeles*.

At the time of his appointment, Marquet was well steeped in old-fashioned leader-follower dogma, navy tradition and the highly hierarchical management structures. The structures stress accountability and technical competence and concentrate power, authority and control at the top. Moreover, the confined and stifling environment of a submarine offers a perfect setting for reinforcing a strict *leader-follower* protocols (Marquet, 2012).

Marquet readily concedes that when he took command, the *Santa Fe* was recognised as being at the bottom of the fleet, technically, operationally and emotionally, scoring extremely poorly in most measures of performance. Retention offers a good example, where in 1998, the ship reenlisted a mere three crewmembers; a sure sign that trouble was afoot.

Dogged by poor morale, poor performance, and the worst retention record in the fleet, Marquet took the first few weeks to get to know people and their jobs. His open-ended question to crew members upon meeting them for the first time, was '*what do you do on board?*'. The answer most typical of the hierarchy and the state of vessel was '*whatever they tell me to do*', which implies reticent acceptance of the structure and the inability to do much about it. It also indicates that initiative and good will had gradually vanished through the protocols of repressive top down control.

Perhaps the most telling and significant incident occurred during an early engineering drill when Marquet unknowingly gave a technically impossible order to increase to a non-existent speed. His most senior and highly experienced officer, who knew it was not possible, nonetheless still relayed the order. Noticing that the helmsman had not reached over to make any alterations, Marquet interrogated him and was informed that this class submarine did not have that particular setting.

Marquet proceeded to question his leading officer, who acknowledged that he also knew the setting did not exist. When asked why he carried through with the order, the officer retorted '*because you told me to*'.

This was the moment Marquet recognised that in a top-down command and control mode when the leader makes a decision, which in not challenged by subordinates who know better, the entire unit fails. Perhaps it is even more sobering, when the whole experience occurs inside a giant metallic tube with no real means of escape.

Marquet internal response to the episode was to vow to henceforth, never again give an order!

Marquet acknowledged that they were all in danger unless they fundamentally altered the way they do things. He did not want to continue operating with a herd of followers: he wanted his unit to be allowed to perform to their best ability. He therefore decided to take matters into his own hands and overhaul the prevailing culture in order to facilitate a more responsible, less hierarchical and better-informed structure.

Turn the ship around

Grint (2010; p. 19) asserts that there are three forms of authority: command, management and leadership. While this offers more of a simplistic heuristic rather than a situational assessment tool, it makes it possible to appraise a given scenario especially in terms of how decisions are made and what action gets implemented. Broadly, command structures emphasise the answers coming from above; management is concerned with organising processes; while leadership is largely focused on asking questions. This depiction generally matches Etzioni's (1961) typology of compliance, which distinguished between coercive, utilitarian (calculative), and normative compliance.

What Marquet witnessed was a typical command setting, where the orders, and the knowledge, flow from top down on a need to know basis. Indeed, when questioned about his decision to still carry out the order, the senior officer protested that the order may have contained 'secret or privileged' knowledge only available to the commanding officers (Marquest, 2012; p. 81).

Moving to a system of shared values and pushing for leadership at all levels would entail fundamental shifts in culture, approach and structure. Noting a thirst to do better (especially when you have earned the reputation of worst in class) and an eagerness to improve and change, Marquet embarked on a push to turn his system into a *leader-leader* model where actors are able to take responsibility for their actions and make their own decisions from a better informed position. Marquest's notion of a *leader-leader* relationship aims to build a resilient organisation, where every individual is both a leader and a true participant.

Obtaining buy-in from his team, Marquet proceeded to implement his new system. The situation was totally transformed within a single year. The vessel went from worst to best in most measures of performance, including the ability to retain sailors and officers. The *Santa Fe* also started winning awards as the best ship in its class and became the envy of the fleet. Moreover, management author and guru, Stephen Covey who visited the submarine in 2000, acknowledged that it was the most empowered organisation that he had ever visited (Covey, 2013).

The ingredients for successfully implementing the *leader-leader* culture were simple and involved three main pillars:

Give control: Pushing authority down the ranks, including to all functional areas, where the real experts are based.

Increase competence: Introducing assurances of competency and knowledge in that process, to ensure that decisions are fully thought-through.

Improve organisational clarity: Establishing an assurance around clarity, so that all crew are clear of the bigger picture when making those decisions.

The three pillars enable local decisions to be made, whilst continuing to be informed by operational necessities and strategic goals. With the strategic insights shared with the different functions, they are able to make decisions, prioritise and identify key trade-offs that work for the global best. Statements such as '*our mission requires we submerge now before reaching the Oman waters to avoid detection*' can be utilised to frame all priorities and other decisions. After all, while getting the strategic goals wrong can affect the bottom line in most organisations, on a submarine at the bottom of the ocean, the implications could be far more dire, as people may die and the entire unit and vessel may be destroyed.

The way forward: I intend to...

Marquet acknowledged the need for individuals to make decisions. Rather than have the entire crew wait on him to reach a consensus, he decided to step back and give people the space to reflect and deliberate. All he was asking for was for people to make the best decision they could and to indicate their intent.

He recognised the value of the phrase '*I intend to...*' as a powerful mechanism for control as it shifts the ownership of the plan to the proposer. *I intend to* is an empowered phrase emphasising intent and understanding of what needs to be done. Rather than seek permission or ask a question, it offers a viable and reasoned way forward complete with a rationale and a synopsis of what measures and considerations have been included. For instance, an intent statement provides the following information and indicates that the intent has been well thought out and rigorously planned:

'Captain, I intend to submerge the ship. We are in water we own, water depth has been checked and is four hundred feet, all men are below, the ship is rigged for a dive, and I've certified my watch team.' (Marquet, 2012, p. 82).

The approach enacted by Marquet has become better known as intent-based leadership, which enables followers and team members to assume responsibility, consider the range of potential actions and options, make a preferred choice and act according to their authority. Intent-based leadership puts the onus on individuals to consider actions, implications and mitigating steps. Over time, participants are able to take control by considering what information would be useful for the leader in order to formally acknowledge the intent. This is done initially by trying to guess the potential questions, and making sure every thing is ready. In due course, actors progress to thinking what information they would need in the Captain's place and what checks and controls they would like to see employed, which they then duly proceed to exercise, thereby further improving the quality of the information and the checks and procedures applied to it.

Marquet's ideas brought about radical change to the design of a very traditional, regimented, highly controlled, and change resistant organisation. His approach tries to develop everyone to become a responsible and valued leader. The *leader-*

leader perspective elevates subordinates to the level of full participants with valued insights, and empowers them to enhance, improve and grow.

Letting go is one of the most difficult things in life, whether in the workplace, or with children. But giving people, and indeed children, scope to improve makes them stay longer and even return. Marquet's colleagues became very reluctant to transfer from his command. But his methods also created many excellent officers and leaders who continued to share the philosophy and approach with their new subordinates making new generations of leaders.

A key feature of the new approach was not to move the information to authority, but instead to shift the authority to the information. The impacts of the change were quite pronounced, and included:

- Alleviating the pressure on leaders to know all the answers
- Employing the real experts in judging and deliberating
- Encouraging individuals to take responsibility and accountability for their work
- Engaging the wider team
- Avoiding misinformed verdicts coming from the top down
- Preventing people from following bad orders
- Promoting mentorship, development and growth
- Enabling the entire organisation to become more responsive and resilient
- Developing pride in the work
- Strengthening accountability and responsibility

Ultimately, the captain still determines where the ship should go, but he or she can do so, with the help of an informed and supportive crew, and hopefully with the knowledge that the team of experts are better deployed to make strategic decisions, and correct any misapprehensions and shortcomings to deliver continued and exceptional performance.

Followers become more influential

Some old leadership ideas no longer seem to apply. Robert Heller makes a forceful case for change by blaming CEOs for clinging to outmoded 'boss' centred hierarchies. His message is simple: Reinvent management or perish (Heller, 1995).

The original notion of followers as passive recipients of leadership from powerful and influential bosses clearly needs replacing. A people-focused approach might engender a softer perception of followers as moderators of leadership who recognise the leader's role but are able to respond in a more transactional fashion by influencing the relationship through their own characteristics, however, this notion fails to recognise the constructive role of followers.

The transformation achieved by Marquet aboard the *Santa Fe* re-establishes the need to focus on the people at the core of change. Achieving and delivering require bringing people along. New management ideas and concepts would therefore need to take account of the role of people and the wider context within which they operate.

By positioning all individual followers as empowered potential leaders, Marquet was able to achieve a wider organisational transformation resulting in significantly increased effectiveness levels. Leadership thus became a shared occupation through engaged and empowered followership. Over time, individuals were able to respond to new opportunities, grow and develop, through a co-production of emerging leadership.

However, developing more nuanced and distributed leadership capable of variation, new insights and creativity requires brave and inspired new types of leaders able to embrace new ways of thinking and operating, and happy to share some of the spoils and glories of leadership.

Postheroic leadership is here

The age of heroic leaders may be over. The case of the *Santa Fe* seems to affirm that 'traditional' leadership (coupled with tight control structures and strict environments) with an emphasis on a powerful figurehead with absolute authority and final decision making powers can wreak havoc and embed and engender entrenched unthinking followership within the rest of the organisation. And yet, Kellerman (2018) observes that leadership education, training and development still fall far short failing to recognise new trends and respond to emerging opportunities and are therefore in need of a major overhaul. One of the reasons for the apparent lack of progress, is the use of the word 'leadership' and the general inability to define or understand it (ibid.; 3).

Leadership as position (Grint, 2010) is generally in decline, especially as power, control and authority become less pertinent. Position may come from vertical hierarchy, privilege or birth but modern societies tend to challenge such entitlements. Fletcher (2004) confirms that traditional 'power over' models are gradually being replaced by 'power with' emphasising relationships and collaborations.

The fundamental assumption of the 'few controlling the many' underpinning dated leadership models, also seems to have passed its sell by date. Marc and Samantha Hurwitz (2015) point out that leadership is only half the story, especially as the majority of the actual value within corporations is generated by teams and they therefore make a case for rethinking the relationship between leadership, followership and collaboration. No individual is smarter and more knowledgeable than everyone within a connected community and hence new modes and models of collaboration are essential to securing continued engagement and future success.

In the post-heroic age everyone does leadership; it is not a top down construct. Instead, leaders rise to address specific aspects they are concerned with. Followers are essential to the success of organisations. In a team, or wider organisational setting, establishing decent followership that can support, curtail deviations, reduce inefficiencies and improve leadership is essential to the ability to sustain delivery, align with strategy and improve decision making capability. Moving forward, the relationship between leaders and followers is recognised as mutually beneficial and continuous as people may alter positions.

Indeed, Joseph Raelin proposes that '*in the twenty-first century organization, we need to establish communities where everyone shares the experience of serving as a leader, not sequentially, but concurrently and collectively*'. (Raelin; 2003; xi)

The key characteristics of postheroic leadership (adapted from, Fletcher, 2004) can be summarised as:

- **Leadership as practice:** Leadership can be viewed as shared practices that are enacted by people at all levels; the practices are distributed throughout the organisation
- **Leadership as social process:** Leadership is a dynamic, multidirectional, collective activity, with human interactions at its core
- **Leadership as learning:** The social interactions embedded in leadership result in learning and growth for the organisation as well as the individuals involved; the outcomes of interaction include mutual learning, greater collective understanding and the resulting positive action

Repositioning leadership and followership

Old style leadership thinking ascribes leaders with recognition and glory for success whilst ignoring the role and contributions of followers. Postheroic leadership is also about learning to celebrate the contributions of all participants. Yet, success is not just about glory. The success enjoyed by Marquet aboard the *Santa Fe* may stem from his ability to anticipate and propagate the conditions and expectations of postheroic leadership epoch. It is worth pulling out and emphasising three key factors:

- **People:** The approach to developing the *leader-leader* model accentuated the personal, human and people-centric nature of management and leadership; it also relied on building relationships, setting expectations, communicating, developing and mentoring
- **Emancipation:** The approach enabled individuals to operate and specialise according to their expectations; rather than simply empower, it liberated and emancipated experts and novices alike, creating a transformed set of meaningful relationships
- **Development:** The approach to develop individuals and enable them to carry out their enhanced duties allowed space for growth and development; it also fostered the *psychological safety* needed to encourage the team to share personal insights, feelings, thoughts and

concerns – a key factor recognised by Google as essential to forming effective teams (see, Dalcher, 2018; pp. 4-5)

The factors change our perception of leadership hinting at the need for a new definition embracing the development of followers and the role of social meaningful relationships. Marquet himself proposes that Leadership should be defined as: '*embedding the capacity for greatness in the people and practices of an organization, and decoupling it from the personality of the leader.*'

Leadership is not about the personality, identity, or even the position of the leader. As a people-centric approach it is focused on the development of supportive (occasionally in the critical sense) and supported followers.

In his introduction to Marquet's book Stephen Covey summarises leadership as follows: '*Leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves.*'

This again emphasises the developmental role of a good leader. However, we must not forget that the leader is also human and thus requires help, development and support to continue to achieve his/her own potential.

Maybe US President John F. Kennedy got it right when he observed, "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

Good leaders learn by doing. We are still not clear on how best to develop leaders. Perhaps leadership really comes to the fore when we don't know all of the answers and we need to learn and make sense of new circumstances. Yet, we persist in asking our leaders to guide us through unprecedented and more demanding contexts, with wider implications and dependencies. It certainly appears to be the case that in order to cope better, leaders need to learn to become leaders in situ, and they will continue to learn from their followers, who they empower to support them, and as they grow together and become a wider learning community, they can improve, develop and flourish progressively and symbiotically.

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