

## Followership

We are preoccupied with leadership. The tabloids stalk elected officials and personalities in search of indiscretion. We commemorate our dead leaders to the point of deification. Corporations are forever running leadership seminars and our own dental organizations try to boost involvement through leadership development. We are almost obsessed with the concept, indefinable as it may be.

Most of us are leaders at some time in our lives, but let's face it, for most of our years, in most of what we do, we follow. This is true even for our most beloved and great leaders. Why is it then, that so little emphasis is placed on being good followers? Why is it that we are obsessed with the qualities of leaders when followers outnumber them many times over? It may be because no one is really sure what it means to be a follower.

In antiquity, being a follower was simpler if not always easier — the gap between leader and follower was clearly defined by wealth, divine right, or education. One followed and the rules were clear, though often unforgiving! Today, in many parts of the world, followers are easy to come by, but with few qualifications. Poverty, social upheaval, and dissatisfaction with the social condition put followers in great supply.

I'm the first to admit I'm not sure what it means to be a follower. Sometimes it means being a fan, sometimes a critic. (When it comes to dentistry, it almost always costs money!) I do know I'll never join a fan club, make a pilgrimage to Graceland on Elvis' birthday or light a candle at a famous grave. And I know for sure I'll never have the passion of a Branch Davidian! On the other hand, I vote, write my legislators now and again, volunteer, learn the issues and participate when I can in the work of the group. When called to lead, I usually go. I'd like to believe that those behaviors are closer to what it means to be a good follower.

Are there any rules for being a good follower? Probably not, but here are some thoughts to ponder. They've seemed to work for us as a society and nation.

*Participate.* To follow is an action verb. Maybe what characterizes a good follower is involvement in whatever the activity is. Nothing is more frustrating to a leader than to lead with less than a majority mandate — an ever-increasing phenomenon in our country's political arenas. Apathy breeds more than contempt, it encourages corruption, prejudice, and ultimately, the demise of the social structure. A good follower is also a good participant!

*Know the issues.* Do those who follow look to leaders

to shape their views or do leaders represent the views of the group? Few of us bred in modern democracy would dispute that the latter is the case, but without an educated followership, what can we expect? Political action committees can bring out the worst cases of issue-impotence, when checkbooks substitute for logical and thoughtful (although not necessarily popular) arguments on important issues. A good follower is both critic and advocate.

*Question authority.* The image of leadership is too often tending the flock, rather than leading the pack. The role of leadership is to embody the collective voice. Leadership should not be easy, but we too often make it so pleasurable that it becomes a career. Perhaps worse, some leaders begin to think they're better at it than anyone else — they begin to confuse longevity with competence. While we tire of watching or reading about this- and that-gate, of indictments and the many indiscretions of our leaders, these illuminations do serve to remind people that leaders are just that...people. A good follower asks why.

*Support principles not principals.* The Holocaust, My Lai, and the invasion of Kuwait are extreme examples of followership gone awry, when the people unquestioningly followed leaders rather than principle or morality. In organized society, groups bond together around principles — principles that are shared by diverse elements of that society. The leader may be a fountain of inspiration, but the body of followers must remain the well.

*Be ready to lead.* A good follower is a leader waiting to be. Our political system has to a great degree degenerated into a process in which we choose a leader by exclusion, not by acclamation. While it may be naive to believe that an unlimited pool of worthy leaders await election, it is possible and healthy to develop leaders with a willingness to serve. It is a sign of vitality when an organization has difficulty narrowing its choice of new leaders; it is a sign of illness when its choices are few or none at all.

*Recent recollections of the heroics of men and women in World War II crystallize the essence of followership. Today, as then, we rely upon the greatness of those who follow. They are the pyramid from which leaders point the way. If we would pay more attention to what it means to follow, then leadership might just take care of itself.*

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