

Followership: An Essential Component of Leadership



Leadership is a word everyone is very familiar with, and it is a concept that is ingrained in officers' minds from the time they enter the law enforcement profession. For many officers, leadership becomes even more important as they progress through the ranks, at which point many seek leadership training, read leadership books and papers, and listen to leadership lectures and chats. It seems that current and future law enforcement leaders are bombarded and preoccupied with the concept of leadership to the point that it becomes synonymous with success. It is clearly communicated that leadership matters and that great leadership will result in more motivated employees and, hence, better productivity and outcomes for their organizations. The truth is, leadership does matter, and a poor leader—or a good leader with poor leadership skills—can destroy an organization. Leadership is important at every level of an organization, especially at the top, where more significant and complex decisions are made. This is why so many organizations, both public and private, seemingly spend a lot of time and money making sure their executives, managers, and supervisors get the latest and most comprehensive leadership skills training possible. In fact, according to the Society for Human Resource Management, in 2013, U.S. organizations boosted leadership development spending by an average of 14 percent, totaling an estimated \$15.5

billion.¹ These figures are staggering, yet they reflect the culture many organizations have adopted: leadership centered.

Merriam-Webster defines leadership as “the power or ability to lead other people.”² In other words, a leader is someone who can influence others. This is the definition many people and training programs focus on. As such, most leadership training teaches trainees how to become better leaders or how to successfully influence others. However, when one contemplates leadership, there is another component that is commonly overlooked: in order to be a leader, one must have followers.

When was the last time you attended a followership class or read an article about followers (rather than leaders)? Most people have never done either, which can be a problem for organizations. In fact, the lack of awareness and understanding of followership skills can result in many people losing their jobs or getting pushed aside.³ So how important is followership? Apparently, it’s important enough that the U.S. military has incorporated followership into its leadership training approach.⁴ The military has a three-pronged process to develop leaders. First, they identify those people with the skills and traits of good leaders. Second, they teach those people leadership skills. Third, they teach them about followership. If this is already being done in other organizations where rank and leadership are of great importance, like the U.S. military, shouldn’t law enforcement consider doing the same?

Followership is not a new concept. In November 1988, Robert Kelley wrote “In Praise of Followers” for the prestigious *Harvard Business Review*. In this piece, Kelley made the case that in searching so zealously for better leaders, organizations tend to lose sight of the people these leaders will lead. He puts this in context by saying that “[w]ithout his armies, after all, Napoleon was just a man with grandiose ambitions.”⁵ Most people can agree that, even though Napoleon, was not a “good” leader based on his personal agendas, he was a great tactician and an effective leader. Napoleon was able to lead men into battle, even if they knew they would face certain doom, as evidenced by the Battle of Waterloo. One could argue that Napoleon had great leadership skills, but the true source of Napoleon’s power came from his followers. Consequently, the power leaders have is not going to come from within themselves, but rather from those who follow the leaders.

Every individual is both a follower and a leader every single day. Even those who lead a group or organization is led by someone else. For instance, police chiefs are, by virtue of their job, leaders, but they are also followers. All police executives have someone to report to, whether it is a city or county manager, a mayor, or other elected officials or boards—and this dichotomy is something that must be understood in order for leaders to improve. In other words, leaders need to not only understand and recognize the

concept of followership, but also recognize their role as followers.

According to Kelley, there are five types of followers, who are grouped by a combination of their critical thinking and their passive or active conduct.

1. Sheep: passive, uncritical, and lack initiative or sense of responsibility
2. Yes People: depend on the leader for inspiration and are aggressively deferential
3. Alienated Followers: critical thinkers who are passive and cynical
4. Survivor: go with the flow and survive change well
5. Effective Followers: independent thinkers and problem-solvers, risk takers, and responsible enough to succeed without strong leadership

As these descriptions clearly demonstrate, effective followers are the ones that must be cultivated—and the ones leaders should strive to be.⁶

An effective follower is distinguished by his or her enthusiasm, intelligence, and self-reliant participation in the pursuit of an organizational goal. Effective followers differ in their motivations for following and in their perceptions of their role as followers. Some choose followership as their primary role at work and serve as team players who take satisfaction in helping to further a cause; an idea; a product; a service; or, more rarely, a person.⁷ However, despite differing motivations, effective followers share a number of characteristics, according to Kelley:

1. They manage themselves well.
2. They are committed to the organization and to a purpose, principle, or person outside themselves.
3. They build their competence and focus their efforts for maximum impact.
4. They are courageous, honest, and credible.⁸

Not surprisingly, the above four qualities of effective followers are also commonly identified as qualities of effective leaders. Followership and leadership are interdependent, and effective leaders and effective followers will share traits. Knowing this, it is imperative that leaders provide their followers with the right tools and training to become, first and foremost, effective followers. Once individuals are effective followers, their development into effective leaders of the organization will be smoother. Conversely leaders must take the time to recognize that they are followers, as well, and work on becoming effective followers themselves—and, if needed, be able to step into the breach and “lead up.” Leaders must look every now and then to be sure someone’s following them. If no one is behind a leader, he or she is not leading, but

merely going for a walk. ♦

Notes:

¹Dori Meinert, “Leadership Development Spending Is Up,” Executive Briefing, *HR Magazine* (Jul 22, 2014), <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/0814-execbrief.aspx> (accessed November 21, 2016).

²*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “leadership.”

³Marc Hurwitz and Samantha Hurwitz, *Leadership Is Half the Story: A Fresh Look at Followership, Leadership, and Collaboration* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2015), xvii.

⁴*Ibid.*, 33.

⁵Robert Kelley, “In Praise of Followers,” *Harvard Business Review* (November 1988), <https://hbr.org/1988/11/in-praise-of-followers> (accessed November 21, 2016).

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

Chief **Luis Soler** is a 20-year veteran who currently serves as chief of police for Crowley, Texas, a first-ring suburb of Ft. Worth. The Crowley Police Department is a full-service state-accredited agency with a staff of 56. Chief Soler currently serves on the IACP’s Police Administration Committee and has been a national instructor for the IACP’s Leading by Legacy course, as well as an advisor/consultant for the IACP’s Smaller Department Section. He holds a master’s degree in law enforcement management from Aspen University and a bachelor’s degree in business management from Cornell University. Prior to joining Crowley, Chief Soler served for over a decade within the ranks of the Austin, Texas, Police Department.