



# What Every Leader Needs to Know About Followers

by **Barbara Kellerman**

There is no leader without at least one follower—that's obvious. Yet the modern leadership is built on the proposition that leaders matter a great deal and followers hardly at all.

Good leadership is the stuff of countless courses, workshops, books, and articles. Everyone makes leaders tick—the charismatic ones, the retiring ones, and even the crooked ones. Good leadership is the stuff of nearly nothing. Most of the limited research and writing on subordinates has tended to be in the context of leaders' development rather than followers' or mistakenly assume that followers are the same. As a result, we hardly notice, for example, that followers who tag along mindlessly are who are deeply devoted.

In reality, the distinctions among followers in groups and organizations are every bit as complex as those among leaders. This is particularly true in business: In an era of flatter, networked organizations and cross-cultural teams, it's not always obvious who exactly is following (or, for that matter, who exactly is leading) an individual. Reporting relationships are shifting, and new talent-management tools and approaches are causing a host of changes—cultural and technological ones in particular—have influenced what subordinates do, especially in relation to their ostensible bosses.

It's long overdue for leaders to acknowledge the importance of understanding their followers and to explore the evolving dynamic between leaders and followers and offer a new typology for defining the differences among subordinates. These distinctions have critical implications for how leaders manage.

## **A Level Playing Field**

Followers can be defined by their behavior—doing what others want them to do. But for the purpose of this article, to avoid confusing what followers do with who they are, I define followers according to their rank and have less power, authority, and influence than their superiors. They generally go along with their superiors in higher positions. In the workplace, they may comply so as not to put money or stature at risk or they may comply to preserve collective stability and security—or simply because it's the easiest thing to do.

History tells us, however, that subordinates do not follow all the time. As the ideas of the Enli

eighteenth century, for instance, ordinary people (in industrialized societies especially) became landowners, and the like, and their expectations changed accordingly—as did their sense of continues. Increasingly, followers think of themselves as free agents, not as dependent upon often withholding support from bad leaders, throwing their weight behind good ones, and soon voices for those lower down in the social or organizational hierarchy.

Witness the gradual demise of communism (and totalitarianism) in the former Soviet Union, and consider the social and political upheavals, all of them antiauthority, in the United States and 1970s. Similarly, there has been a dispersion of power at the highest levels of American changes in the cultures and structures of corporations as well as the advance of new technology influence with a range of players, including boards, regulators, and shareholder activists. Executives monitor the activities of subordinates situated thousands of miles away. And knowledge workers use collaborative technologies to connect with colleagues and partners in other companies as done. The result is reminiscent of what management sage Peter Drucker suggested in his 1990s. In an era dominated by knowledge workers rather than manual workers, expertise can—and is an indicator of who is really leading and who is really following.

## Types of Followers

Over the years, only a handful of researchers have attempted to study, segment, and speak to various degrees, Harvard Business School professor Abraham Zaleznik, Carnegie Mellon and executive coach Ira Chaleff have all argued that leaders with even some understanding of what will be a great help to themselves, their followers, and their organizations. Each researcher further divides subordinates into different types. (See the sidebar “Distinguishing Marks: Three Other Follower

### Distinguishing Marks: Three Other Follower Typologies

While there is a landslide of materials out there dissecting and explaining the intricacies of leadership, devoted time and attention to the study of followers. Here are the exceptions.

#### 1

**Abraham Zaleznik.** In 1965, this Harvard Business School professor argued in these pages that the vertical authority relationship” matter to how organizations perform (see “The Dynamics of Authority” 1965). To distinguish among the different kinds of subordinates, he placed them along two axes (from those who want to control their superiors to those who want to be controlled by them), those who initiate and intrude to those who do little or nothing). Zaleznik further segmented these into three types which reflected his Freudian perspective on relationships: Impulsive (rebellious, sometimes compulsive (controlling but passive, in part because they feel guilty about privately wanting to submit to the control of the authority figure), and withdrawn (care little or not at all about v

accordingly).

Ten years later, Zalesnik coauthored *Power and the Corporate Mind* with Manfred F. R. Kets who know more about what makes their followers tick put themselves, their followers, and th advantageous position.

## 2

**Robert Kelley.** In 1992, Kelley, now an adjunct professor at Carnegie Mellon, published *The* essentially urged followers to follow not blindly but with deliberate forethought. He distingu according to factors such as motivation and behavior in the workplace and ended up with five Alienated followers think critically and independently but do not willingly participate in the group. Passive followers do not think critically and do not actively participate; they let their leaders Conformist followers do participate in their groups and organizations but are content simply followers are nearly perfect, or at least they perform well across the board. And pragmatic followers are fence, ranking in the middle in terms of independent thinking and level of activity.

## 3

**Ira Chaleff.** The author of the 1995 book *The Courageous Follower* was, like Robert Kelley, subordinates, encouraging them to actively support leaders they deemed good and to actively challenge bad. He classified subordinates according to the degree to which they supported leaders and challenged them. He came up with four different types of subordinates: implementers, part implementers, active implementers, and active challengers. Implementers are the most common, and leaders depend on them above all to get the work done. Active implementers strongly support their leaders, but they are also ready and willing to challenge them as a bit of a problem to leaders, because they tend to withhold support from people in positions of authority. Active challengers do an honest day's work for a few days' pay but don't go beyond the minimum expected of them.

Zalesnik classified subordinates into one of four types according to two sets of variables—do activity versus passivity. His research findings intended to inform corporate leaders in particular were more interested in the welfare of those lower down the corporate ladder. Their work was counteract what Kelley called the “leadership myth”—the idea that leaders are all-powerful and

Kelley classified subordinates into five types according to their levels of independence and activity in fostering “exemplary” followers—those who acted with “intelligence, independence, courage, and integrity.” These individuals are critical to the success of all groups and organizations, he argued. Meanwhile, Zalesnik classified subordinates into one of four categories based on the degree to which the follower supports the leader and the follower challenges the leader.

All three did pioneering work—and yet, as indicated, it seems to have had little impact on how relationships are perceived. In part, this is because of cultural, organizational, and technological changes in just the past few years. Manual laborers, for instance, have been replaced by younger, tech-savvy workers who are generally less disposed to be, in Zalesnik's parlance, "masochistic" or "withdrawn."

The most important point of all these typologies, however, is that leader-follower relationships and the era in which they are embedded, are more similar than they are different. Underlying them is some sort of deference. Segmenting followers, then, serves at least two broad purposes: In the first, it brings an order to groups and organizations that up to now has been largely lacking. In practice, it is also useful to discern who in the group or organization is doing what—and why.

## A New Typology

The typology I've developed after years of study and observation aligns followers on one, all-encompassing dimension: engagement. I categorize all followers according to where they fall along a continuum that ranges from "being absolutely nothing" to "being passionately committed and deeply involved." In this context, it's the follower's degree of involvement that largely determines the nature of the support they provide. This is especially true today: Because of the aforementioned changes in the cultures and structures of organizations, for instance, knowledge workers often care as much if not more about intrinsic factors—the quality of their relationships with their superiors, for instance, or their passion for the organization's mission—such as salary, titles, and other benefits.

A typology based on a single, simple metric—as opposed to the multiple rating factors used in traditional segmenting tools—offers leaders immediate information on whether and to what degree their followers are engaged. Consider: Do your followers participate actively in meetings and proceedings? Do they demonstrate curiosity, asking good questions, and generating new ideas? Or have they checked out—perhaps by being absent or keeping a close eye on the clock? I categorize followers as *isolates*, *bystanders*, *participants*, and *engaged*. I look at each type.

### **Isolates are completely detached.**

These followers are scarcely aware of what's going on around them. Moreover, they do not care about anything about them, or respond to them in any obvious way. Their alienation is, nevertheless, not passive. In fact, and doing nothing, these types of followers passively support the status quo and further strengthen the upper hand. As a result, isolates can drag down their groups or organizations.

Isolates are most likely to be found in large companies, where they can easily disappear in their departments, and divisions. Their attitudes and behaviors attract little or no notice from those in the organization as long as they do their jobs, even if only marginally well and with zero enthusiasm. Consider a design team at a large consumer goods company who dutifully completes his individual assign-

about the rest of the company's products and processes—he just needs to pay the bills. Or a voter—or, more accurately, nonvoter. In 2004, no fewer than 15 million Americans said they felt they were “not interested in the election” or were “not involved in politics.” Groups or organizations, especially if their numbers are high. Unwittingly, they impede improvement and slow change.

To mitigate the isolates' negative effect on companies, leaders and managers first need to ask questions: Do we have any isolates among us, and, if so, how many? Where are they? Why? These questions won't be easy given that isolates by their very nature are invisible to the top. Leaders need to acquire information from those at other levels of the organization by having informal managers and employees who seem lethargic or indifferent about their work, the group, or the

The next step, of course, is to take action. Depending on the reasons for alienation, there may be different solutions in the workplace. If it's a matter of job satisfaction, a training and development plan might be developed. If it's stress, a new schedule that allows for several days of work from home might be considered. Managers will need to consider the return from making such investments in isolates: If it will not pay off, they may ultimately decide to part ways with these followers. Employers that are satisfied with the status quo more might choose to keep these types of followers.

#### **Bystanders observe but do not participate.**

These free riders deliberately stand aside and disengage, both from their leaders and from the group. They may go along passively when it is in their self-interest to do so, but they are not internally motivated. Their withdrawal also amounts to tacit support for whoever and whatever constitutes the status quo.

Like isolates, bystanders can drag down the rest of the group or organization. But unlike isolates, they know what is going on around them; they just choose not to take the time, the trouble, or, to be fair, the risk to be involved. A notorious example from the public sector is people who refuse to intervene when they see wrongdoing—commonly referred to as the Genovese syndrome or the bystander effect. A corporate communications representative at a financial services company who goes along with the new CEO's recently announced strategy as some of her colleagues are being demoted or fired for pointing out inefficiencies in the new strategy would be to put her own career and reputation on the line at a time when the CEO is firing employees from “problem” ones.

There are bystanders everywhere—and, like isolates, they tend to go unnoticed, especially if they consciously choose to fly under the radar. In the workplace, silent but productive bystanders are managers who just want people to do as they are told—but they will inevitably disappoint those who actually care about the organization's mission. There are ways to bring bystanders along, however. Leaders need to determine the root causes of their alienation and offer appropriate intrinsic or extrinsic rewards, such as recognition of engagement, and, ultimately, their productivity. Bystanders, perhaps much more than isolates, respond to incentives.

**Participants are engaged in some way.**

Regardless of whether these followers clearly support their leaders and organizations or clear enough to invest some of what they have (time or money, for example) to try to make an impact. Scientists who developed the painkiller Vioxx: They felt personally invested in producing a best-seller to market—and defending it even in the face of later revelations that the drug could create health problems for users. They were driven by their own passions (ambition, innovation, creation, helping people, etc.).

When participants support their leaders and managers, they are highly coveted. They are the lifeblood of the workplace, for instance, they can make effective junior partners. When they disapprove of their leaders, however, or when they act as independent agents, the situation gets more complicated. For example, John Gilmartin, for instance, was not trained as either a physician or a scientist. So it was easy enough for his subordinates—the physicians and researchers championing Vioxx—to get ahead of their leader and cause the company a whole lot of trouble. (Vioxx was pulled from the market in 2004.)

Gilmartin could have done a much better job of communicating with and learning from these followers by bringing in experts from the outside to consult with him and his knowledge workers as Vioxx was marketed—and especially as it was being questioned. Indeed, if Gilmartin had understood their concerns a bit better, he might have been able to help his company avert public relations and legal disasters.

Although Gilmartin's subordinates acted as free agents, they supported him nonetheless—because of their attitudes and opinions. When it comes to participant followers, and to the other types of followers described later in this article, leaders need to watch them overall and pay particularly close attention to what their subordinates are for or against them. (The for-or-against question does not even come up for bystanders.)

**Activists feel strongly one way or another about their leaders and organizations, and they act accordingly.**

These followers are eager, energetic, and engaged. They are heavily invested in people and organizations, either on behalf of their leaders or to undermine and even unseat them.

When Paul Wolfowitz ran into trouble as president of the World Bank, for instance, it was the World Bank Group that led the charge against him. As soon as the news broke that Wolfowitz had intervened in a personal relationship with a woman with whom he was having a personal relationship, members of the World Bank Group issued a statement: "The President must acknowledge that his conduct has compromised the integrity of the World Bank Group and has destroyed the staff's trust in his leadership. He must act honorably and responsibly."

Activists who strongly support their leaders and managers can be important allies, whether they are or are not. Activists are not necessarily high in number, though, if only because their level of commitment is high.

and energy that most people find difficult to sustain. Of course, this same passion also mean considerable impact on a group or organization. Those activists who are as loyal as they are frequently in the leader or manager's inner circle—simply because they can be counted on to working hours to the mission as their superiors see it.

Some activist followers are effectively encouraged by their superiors to take matters into their own hands. At Best Buy, CEO Brad Anderson had consistently encouraged “bottom-up, stealth innovation”; human resource managers Jody Thompson and Cali Ressler were bold—and smart—enough to want to create policies that would enable a workplace without any fixed schedules—a “results only work environment” (ROWE). Best Buy employees at all levels of the organization—in the stores and at headquarters—were encouraged to work when and where they pleased, as long as their work got done. On their own, Thompson and Ressler had to make such a policy work, how exactly to measure results in the absence of set hours, how that might be required, and so forth. In 2003, they presented their ideas to several unit managers. In response to complaints from top performers about undesirable and unsustainable levels of stress in the workplace, they were open to hearing about ROWE—more important, they were willing to test it in their units. Work was done on a grassroots experiment, building strong support and acceptance in various departments, until it was rolled out companywide—after some parts of the company had already implemented the new policy. The HR managers rolled out companywide.

**Diehards are prepared to go down for their cause—whether it's an individual, an idea, or both.**

These followers may be deeply devoted to their leaders, or they may be strongly motivated to achieve a goal if necessary. They exhibit an all-consuming dedication to someone or something they deem worthy.

Diehard followers are rare; their all-encompassing commitment means they emerge only in times of crisis close to it. They can be either a strong asset to their leaders or managers or a dangerous liability. One example from the start was, arguably, Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels. As conditions in Germany were closing in, Goebbels remained close to the leader—straight through to the end: Shortly after Hitler's death, Goebbels took the most radical diehard-type step when he and his wife took their lives along with Hitler. Without Hitler, they considered life not worth living.

Of course, not all diehard followers are so extreme in their devotion. But they are willing, by choice, to sacrifice health and welfare in the service of their cause. Soldiers the world over, for instance, risk life and limb to protect and defend. They are trained and willing to follow nearly blindly the orders of their superiors to do absolutely to get the job done.

Sometimes diehards can be found in more ordinary circumstances, even in traditional organizations. Whistleblowers are a case in point. In fact, these diehards can and often do pay a high price for their unconventional behavior. In 2005, Greenhouse, a U.S. Army contracting official who criticized a large, noncompetitive government contract, was fired.

work being done in Iraq, was punished for being so outspoken. She had initially registered her concerns with the Army. When this had no effect, she testified in 2005 before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee as “the most blatant and improper contract abuse I have witnessed.” Incensed by her performance, the Army removed Greenhouse from her elite Senior Executive Service position.

As I mentioned earlier, attitudes and opinions do not matter much when we are talking about diehards. Do these followers support their leader? Or, rank notwithstanding, are they using their positions of power, authority, and influence? My typology suggests that good leaders are those who demonstrate their strong support or their vehement opposition. It’s not difficult to see especially activists and diehards wear their hearts on their sleeves.

### **Good and Bad Followers**

Certain character and personality traits are nearly always associated with being a good leader (e.g., judgment, for instance), as are particular skills and capacities (effective communication and collaboration). Given the different roles played by leaders and followers, what can reasonably be said about followers? More to the point, what distinguishes a good follower from a bad one? Here my typology can help.

First and foremost, there is this: Followers who do something are nearly always preferred to those who do not. Isolates and bystanders (little or no engagement, little or no action) don’t have much to say. Doing something is not, in and of itself, sufficient, especially in cases of bad leadership. On the other hand, “Chainsaw Al” Dunlap, former CEO of Scott Paper and Sunbeam, is one of a powerful leader who intimidated an executive who cultivated a culture of tyranny and misery while realizing success at Sunbeam. On the other hand, it’s the story of isolates and bystanders who were unwilling or unable to do anything. It’s also a tale of participants and activists who did something; trouble was they supported a leader who did not deserve it.

Or consider the extreme case of Darfur, which *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof has written about. There is enough blame to go around, including to those among us who have known about it but have done nothing to stop it. Kristof praises certain kinds of followers, however—participants without power, authority, and influence, did what they reasonably could to stop the murder of the 12-year-old from a small town in Oregon who, after seeing the film *Hotel Rwanda*, formed a business by selling eggs and washing cars. Another was the doctoral student who in his spare time befriended investors and made investments by foreign companies “underwrite the Sudanese genocide.”

Good followers will actively support a leader who is good (effective and ethical) and will actively oppose a leader who is bad (ineffective and unethical). Good followers invest time and energy in making informed judgments and what they espouse. Then they take the appropriate action. The senior editors and other

*Times*, for instance, certainly may have had problems with the way Howell Raines, then the editor, remade the venerable publication and may have chafed at his arrogant leadership style. The problem was Raines's mismanagement of the scandal involving wayward reporter Jayson Blair—an irreparable and lasting damage to an institution to which they were deeply committed and where credibility is

Conversely, bad followers will do nothing whatsoever to contribute to the group or organization of a leader who is good. Or they will actively support a leader who is bad. Clearly Chainsaw Al's I was. Most of the subordinates in his inner circle—those who were closest to him and who arguably were loyal professionally and financially, to oppose his ultimately destructive behavior—did nothing to tr

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Contrary to what the leadership industry would have you believe, the relationship between superior and subordinate is not one-sided. Nor are followers all one and the same—and they should not be treated as such. They act in their own self-interests, just as leaders do. And while they may lack authority, at least in the eyes of others, followers do not lack power and influence.

Spurred by cultural and technological advances, more and more followers are either challenging authority or circumventing it, simply circumventing them altogether. Participant, activist, and diehard followers invent their own rules. For instance, on their own now mass-send messages via e-mail, collect data using concealed cameras on various websites. Their work has motivated chains like McDonald's and Burger King to follow guidelines that include providing extra water, more wing room, and fresh air. Burger King went a step further and announced that it would buy eggs and pork only from suppliers that do not use animals in crates or cages.

As this example and countless others confirm, it's long overdue for academics and practitioners to revise their view of leadership—one that sees leaders and followers as inseparable, indivisible, and impacting each other.

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