



A CONCEPTUAL STUDY OF LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP

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Introduction

Leadership requires both leaders and followers to engage with and for each other. Leadership definitions vary tremendously and are not lacking for types and classifications (Northouse, 2016, p. 2). Equal to leadership is followership (Chaleff, 1996, p.16). One is not better than the other and one cannot exist without the other (Northouse, 2016, p.7). However, followership does not share equal representation to leadership in either scholarly writings, study, or in public discourse. In addition, the study of leadership through history is deep and changing. The study of followership is relatively recent and open for clear definition (Martin, 2015, p. 1).

Organizations will prosper when leaders and followers gain a better understanding of the complexities of both leadership and followership and how active engagement between the two is a fundamental characteristic when measuring organizational success and effectiveness. The following is a conceptual study of leadership, followership, and the relation between leaders and followers.

Leadership

To understand leadership, it is important to review a few conceptual definitions and the historical context as it relates to both leaders and followers. “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). By defining leadership as a process, Northouse implies it can be studied, dissected and learned. “When leadership is defined in this manner, it becomes available to everyone. It is not restricted to the formally designated leader in a group” (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). In addition, by placing the emphasis on process, Northouse takes the spotlight off of the leader. “Defining leadership as a process means that it is not a trait or characteristic that resides in the leader, but rather a transactional event that occurs between the leaders and the followers” (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). Therefore, the success of a leader is very dependent on the leadership process.

An alternative definition of leadership offered by Banks and Ledbetter (2004) stresses the importance of the leader:

In sum, then, leadership involves a person, group, or organization who shows the way in an area of life... and in doing so both influences and empowers enough people to bring about change in that area. Such leadership may be good or bad depending on the leader’s style and the content of what the leader is advocating. From a Christian point of view, it is only when the direction and the method are in line with God’s purposes, character, and ways of operating that godly leadership takes place. (p. 16-17)

In this definition, the emphasis is on the leader and their abilities and traits to influence. Is leadership best defined as a process as offered by Northouse or is it more focused on the characteristics of a leader as offered by Banks and Ledbetter? Both of these conceptual definitions of leadership agree on the primary outcome of leadership which is influence and that both leaders and followers are the transacting parties, but they differ on whether it is the process or the characteristics of the leader that best defines the influence and overall effectiveness of leadership. Again, these definitions are not at complete odds with each other, but the focus is different.

Definitions of leadership will continue to develop and change. “If leadership is to have a future, some important principles needs to be preserved. These principles can be illuminated by asking the right questions...Such questions are critical because they help leaders and organizations find and determine their direction” (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004, p. 130). Therefore, for leadership to thrive, debate on the definition of leadership needs to continue.

Historical Context of Leadership

The several different traditions of the church provide a basis for understanding how leadership both remained consistent and changed over centuries. “The church in its many ecclesiastical expressions has a long and rich tradition of leadership expressed both inside its own community and in the world community at large” (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004, p. 42). Leadership did not necessarily improve, but rather was a reflection of the overall condition and situation of the church at that time.

In the book of Acts, Paul had the enormous challenge of running not one church, but a loose network of many churches. He ran a dispersed leadership team. “Despite this, or rather because of Paul’s understanding of his ministry as rooted in the gospel and embodied in Christ, Paul operates in a highly consultative and collegial way” (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004, p. 42). By contrast, the Benedictine Order took a more centralized and formal view of leadership as it was focused on the sole responsibility they had for both preserving knowledge and leading the abbot (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004, p. 43).

Quakers take a totally different approach and opened up the leadership model in a major way. “No one is above anyone else, and the Spirit can speak through anyone at a Friend’s meeting...This model invites organizational leaders to use their positional power to promote dialogue” (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004, p. 46). Equality between leaders and followers is emphasized and leadership can be shared among people in the same group.

Building on this, the Pentecostal view is “the greatness of human leadership is measured by how well the leader is a follower of God” (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004, p. 46). The idea of leader as

first a follower gives us an entirely different perspective of leadership and affirms the study of followership.

Leadership in the Twentieth Century to Today

Moving away exclusively from looking at the church, modern leadership theories are exploding and transforming rapidly. Leadership concepts and perceptions continue to be in a state of change and on-going refinement. According to Lundy (2002):

The first half of the twentieth century was dominated by a management of thought that looked on employees as means to an end, resulting in authoritarian leadership. People were viewed as machines or instruments to be manipulated by their leaders for organizational ends. People-oriented as opposed to task-oriented theory dominated the last half century, however. (p. 63)

Leadership has changed dramatically in the last century opening up new paths of study and acceptance.

Followership

Followership is every bit as important as leadership and requires a willingness of individuals to follow a specific leader. Matthew 5: 18-19 (English Standard Version) states:

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And He said to them, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

The leader (Jesus) identified two potential followers, initiated contact, cast a vision for them, and they decided to follow. Followership was not forced on them. It was voluntary, willingly accepted which then placed them in a position to serve the organization.

Kelly (1988) discussed the idea that people spend the majority of their time in the role of a follower rather than a leader. “Organizations stand or fall partly on the basis of how well their leaders lead, but partly also on the basis of how well their followers follow” (Kelly, 1988, p. 2). Chaleff (2009) discusses the concept of stewardship for both leaders and followers. This supports Kelly’s position that the leader and follower are linked and critical to an organizations’ success.

Effective followership is an asset to both the leader and the organization. “A follower shares a common purpose with the leader, believes in what the organization is trying to accomplish, wants both the leader and organization to succeed, and works energetically to that end” (Chaleff, 2009, p. 15). The idea of followership as service aligns followers and leaders to a common mission – the success of the organization. This alignment is critical and reinforces the importance of followership being equal to leadership.

Leader and Followers

A quick study of the definitions of a leader yields a wide ranging, often conflicting and varied result just like the definition of leadership. It is easier to define the key difference between a leader and a follower than to give a comprehensive definition of either. “Although leaders and followers are closely linked, it is the leader who often initiates the relationship, creates the communication linkages, and carries the burden for maintaining the relationship” (Northouse 2016, p. 7). Thus, an individual in an organization who regularly initiates can be identified as a leader. Simply put, “leaders must set the example” (Kouzes & Posner, 2017 p. 14).

This does not mean that followers lack or are not critical, but rather play a different role. By contrast, followers represent the majority of individuals in an organization and they determine the effectiveness of leadership especially as it applies to organizational change. “If there is one generalization we make about leadership and change, it is this: No change can occur without willing and committed followers” (Bennis, 1999, p. 74). In addition, Kelly (1988) states the following:

Effective followers share a number of essential qualities: they manage themselves well; they are committed to the organization and to a purpose, principle, or person outside themselves; they build their competence and focus their efforts for maximum impact; they are courageous, honest and credible. (p. 4)

Effective engagement and interaction between leaders and followers is extremely important. Leaders and followers who do this well often prosper their organization and themselves.

Leaders must engage their followers to truly be a leader. “A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s)” (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p. 7). This abbreviated definition of a leader has four key actions taken by the leader as they relate to their followers: selects, equips, trains, and influences. This implies that leadership is not a passive activity, but rather filled with action requiring leaders to actively participate with their followers.

As an example, a soccer team taking the field of play would rarely follow a leader (coach) that does not engage members of the team. This engagement takes place well before a match through team tryouts, practice, and game day preparation. Then during the match, the coach, if truly the leader of the team, will be able to effectively engage and guide the team (followers) and they will follow.

Winston and Patterson (2006) define the process of selection as follows: “Before employees become followers of the leader(s), it is first necessary to bring employees into the organization” (p. 9). Leaders discern which employee (follower) should be part of the organization. Putting an organization together is the first interaction opportunity that a leader and follower will have with each other. These initial interactions are important and can be used by a leader to guide a follower. Northouse (2016) explains Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory as an approach that “conceptualizes leadership as a process that is centered on the interactions of leaders and followers” (p.137). Differences and similarities between leaders and followers are highlighted and used by the discerning leader to further connection and align a follower. Thus, the process of follower alignment to an organization has begun.

A soccer team without a field, uniforms or even a ball, no matter how motivated, will be unable to be effective as an organization. “Leaders equip followers by providing appropriate tools, equipment, and other resources so that the followers can be successful in their completion of their assigned tasks” (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p. 9). To be effective, followers must be supplied by their leaders with the proper resources at the right time.

A fully equipped but untrained soccer team, will look good only during the opening minute of play. “In addition to providing the necessary resources, leaders provide training for followers in order to improve the success of the followers in completing the tasks of the organization” (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p. 10). Followers poorly led will fail if not aligned and working as a team. Training comprises teaching, learning, work and effort. It is a great opportunity for leaders to engage in the process of leadership directly with followers one on one and in groups. The leadership process that Northouse describes can thrive during training.

“When new employees have similar values (alignment and or symmetry) as the organization, have access to requisite resources, and have the necessary training to do their jobs well, it is not difficult to influence the employee to accomplish the task” (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p.10). Influence over a follower is one level, but a true leader will have a lasting impact. “Think of the great leaders of government, business, education, and faith. Their influence far exceeds the organizations they led” (Maxwell, 2011, p. 236). An effective leader has influence with followers.

Conclusion

The study and implementation of both effective leadership and followership is critical for an organization to be successful. Effective leaders actively initiate and engage with followers. And effective followers receive the leadership and fulfill the mission of the organization. They coexist and rely on each other for success. As the study of leadership continues to develop, it will be even more important for increased investment in the study of followership especially in its relation to leadership.

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