



# FOLLOWERS MAKE BETTER LEADERS: PRESIDENT TRUMP PROVES IT

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## Abstract

President Trump is widely known as a leader who takes risks, does not fear media or peer condemnation, is quick to act, and settles scores. He is resilient, cannot be taken for granted and a winner despite all odds. Love him or hate him – he knows how to lead for success. So, what made him the leader that he is? He was first a follower. Not just any follower, but a hard-working, meticulous, and crafty apprentice of the early leaders in his life. This masterful follower became the powerful leader and the world will never be the same.

*Keywords: followers, leaders, followership, leadership, President Trump*

## Introduction

In the 2018 State of the Union Address, the 45th President of the United States, President Donald J. Trump stated: “We want every American to know the dignity of a hard day’s work.” That simple quote from a long speech sums up everything you need to know about what President Trump values as a leader: dignity and hard work. Political opponents know to get to

President Trump you attack what he values most which is his dignity and when he is faced with a problem he knows that hard work coupled with perseverance will lead to success. President Trump may have been born with a silver spoon, but he had to learn to be a leader. And this was done by first mastering the craft of being a successful follower. Now the world is his domain and he is the primary subject of every media outlet and political discussion – exactly where he wants to be. He has already won (even if only in his own eyes). Donald Trump is the world’s leader and his leadership is taking center stage. His leadership style is changing the world!

## Learning to Follow

President Trump was first a follower who then became a leader. He got to the top political leadership post in the world while bypassing the normal global leader development path. He has proven, whether you agree with his policies and behaviors or not, to be a successful leader.

Gwenda Blair coined the term “Donald Trump: Master Apprentice” in her 2005 book titled the same. She goes to great length in discussing how a young Donald Trump studied and learned from others especially from his father, Fred Trump. Donald Trump was born into a large and wealthy family, in the biggest city in America (New York), at the beginning of the baby boom, and at a time when America had the “world by its tail” having just coming off of a victorious world war. He was in the middle of the action and squarely in the middle of the pile.

To get the attention he longed for from his father, he had to compete with a lot, but mostly his father’s own ambitions. Fred Trump worked all of the time and was a very successful builder and real estate developer. He never stopped and daily modeled hard work to his family. Donald Trump learned early that working hard brings success and it might win his desperate need for gaining his father’s attention. Hard work wins.

However, as a teenage boy, he lacked the discipline and skills needed to work hard and follow in his fathers’ footsteps. Sensing this, Fred Trump sent the young, undisciplined boy away to a military academy. While there, he had a decision to make: rebel or learn to follow. Trump quickly chose the later when he observed the conditions at the academy during his first few weeks and

in meeting a true leader in Colonel Ted Dobias. He was not just any leader at the academy, but a leader that Trump could follow. The active decision of followers to choose to follow a leader has to occur. Donald Trump just found his first, non-family, leader to follow.

Dobias taught and encouraged competition, discipline, and hard work. All principles that Trump admired. They built upon what his father had begun to instill in him. He saw that both Dobias and his father were aligned in their thinking and that success could be gained in following these guiding principles. He did not follow out of obligation anymore, but out of true desire. He actively chose to follow. And as the follower, he thrived at the academy. He learned how to compete, work hard, but, most importantly, how to follow.

An important part of followership is learning what or who not to follow. His older brother was the apparent heir to his father's empire. Fred Jr. tried to dutifully follow, but his heart was not in it. He was not built to be a follower in the way his father defined it. He wanted to be a pilot and not a builder. This led to great disappointment and Trump's father made sure that his brother knew it. Fred Jr. was witty and had a sense of humor. His father despised this and told him that to succeed you need to be more of a "killer" not the "class clown." Trump watched his brother's steps carefully and saw how his father basically drove him out of his life. Fred Jr. would soon follow a downward spiral of heavy drinking. Failure was achieved and modeled before Trump's eyes through his brother's actions and his father's response. Trump committed to take up that killer instinct and aggressively follow his father's lead and example. He was all in and he would succeed at all costs, least he ends up like his brother – a failure in his father's eyes.

Learning to follow requires an active decision to follow a leader and what they value. It requires commitment and hard work. Successful followership espouses to model the leader and reject what they reject. Trump the leader is ruthless because he first followed a ruthless leader. Trump is calculated and wins at all costs because his father only admired winning. Trump rejects drinking because his father rejected his brother who drank. Trump learned to follow so well that he eventually surpassed the success of his father, the leader. Learning to follow is an important first step in learning to lead and Trump mastered it.

## Learning to Lead

Trump's long running TV show, the Apprentice, was an open laboratory on leadership and followership. It modeled the real world – one filled with different ideas, personalities, leadership styles and intense competition. Those that became the “Apprentice” modeled closely the values of Donald Trump, the leader. The apprentice hopefuls were competent, smart, and full of ideas. But, the ones that were most successful knew how to follow when they were on the team and how to impressively lead when given the chance. This was how Trump learned to lead by first serving in his father's business and then when given the chance to act with decisiveness and execute with precision.

Donald Trump followed his father daily and learned the details of the family business. It was not long before the follower would surpass the leader and become a leader themselves. Opportunity to lead came at the age of 26 when he was able to broker the sale of a struggling multi-million-dollar property and help save the family business. The apprentice was quickly becoming the master. He learned little details that made his father successful such as properly staging apartments to look more appealing for tenants to not panicking when last minute closings looked to fail. His father was a relentless, authoritative and authentic leader. And so is “The Donald.”

## Leadership in Action

Regardless if you love Trump or hate him, you have to admire his leadership skills in action around the world as he advances his agenda as President. In his now famous book, The Art of the Deal, Trump lays out precisely how he approaches life, deal making, and winning. Trump has developed into an unwavering leader and the world is having to change because of it. The recent move of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem is an example of his leadership in action. He saw an injustice because the U.S. promised over twenty years ago to move the embassy to Jerusalem and through several administrations failed to do so. He knew that moving the embassy would send a clear message to countries around the world. First, he said he was going to do it, second, he repeated it, third he ignored the negative publicity from around the world, fourth he doubled down on his decision, and fifth he did it with great fanfare.

Mission accomplished with that simple move. He persevered, despite significant world opposition, and provided leadership that goes much deeper than converting a simple consulate to an embassy. He showed the world he valued Israel, that his loyalties were with them, that the rest of the world better get on board, and that he will not waiver or negotiate away core principles to appease allies or enemies. His leadership style is to win and if you win too that is even better, but not necessary to achieving success. And this is why his global political opponents fear him the most – he does not care who he alienates or damages along the way – he is going to advance his agenda – just like his father did.

Despite his numerous personal shortcomings, the world has an authentic leader, a transformational leader, a situational (adaptive) leader and a transactional leader all rolled into one and the world is changing because of it. Trump's leadership style does not scream servant leadership or spiritual leadership, but he has key followers on his team that do. And every great leader has great followers that compliment them, are loyal, and supportive to the aspirations of the leader.

Trump rewards his first followers significantly – those that had the courage to jump in early with him and be on his team. They gave his leadership early credibility and he gives them opportunity. He promotes them, campaigns for them, and gives them positions in his administration. However, betraying his trust brings his wrath. Again, his leadership style often has winners and losers. His team wins, and if you are on it then you will win, and if not then you will lose. It is that simple.

Global leaders struggle with this style because their leadership is mostly about surviving not winning. Compromise and appeasement win in their world and their leadership styles reflect it. Trump is more like the Winston Churchill who stood alone in 1940 against Nazi Germany – unwavering, determined, and resolute. Trump is showing world leaders whether in politics or in business that authentic and authoritative leadership brings success in advancing an agenda.

Peter Northouse, in his classic book, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, discusses how the qualities of an effective leader have a transformative effect not just on followers, but also other

leaders. This is evident in Trump's administration (his direct followers) and in world leaders alike. His leadership is so strong and effective that they are having to adapt to his style rather than him adapting to theirs. By first being an extremely effective follower in difficult and competitive situations, he gained tremendous knowledge, skills and experience on leadership. Despite his well-documented shortcomings such as exaggeration, arrogance, self-centeredness, and morality, he is effective as a leader. This proves how strong and developed his leadership skills are to overcome all of these flaws.

President Donald J. Trump became the successful leader because he first he committed to and then learned how to follow. His shortcomings are well known, and he is not perfect. Global leaders take note – you are not changing him – his followership skills were better than yours and created the situations for him to develop into an amazing leader. Now his leadership will change how you lead and with that the world around us. Followers make better leaders and President Trump proves it.

## For More Information

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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