

3×5 LEADERSHIP

SEPTEMBER 29, 2017

Followership: A Missing Consideration That Is Limiting Your Leadership Ability

1 Comment





By Zachary Mierva

It's time to outright admit: leaders in the Army struggle with a crucial and fundamental aspect of our profession: **following**. More importantly, leaders in the Army generally fail at facilitating good followers to improve their organizations. That's how we end up with situations like **Dr. Wong's alarming report** about the Army "lying to ourselves" and leaders feeling forced to be dishonest in their reporting. This is an important topic that few people are willing to discuss and a lot of leaders fail to leverage. However, this is a necessary conversation that needs to be addressed.

Followership has a strangely negative connotation in the Army, primarily because everything we do is predicated on the notion that "you're a leader 24/7." David Berg discusses in his chapter, *Resurrecting the Muse: Followership in Organizations* (which is part of *The Psychodynamics of Leadership*), that executives devalue the follower role, despite the fact that nearly everyone who is a leader is ALSO a follower in varying capacities. For example, a company commander leads a unit of roughly 100 Soldiers. He or she is the leader with 100 followers. However, that leader is also a follower falling subordinate to a battalion commander, brigade commander, division commander, the list goes on. The problem we face is that we fail to understand what a good follower should do, and how we can nurture followers in our organizations to strengthen, empower, and provide authority to them.

Followers, and more precisely *good* followers, are the subordinates within our organizations who assist leaders to keep control of a situation by telling the truth by communicating failures, problems, and successes. Unfortunately, most organizations embrace the idea that good followers are blind and loyal conformists. This causes significant issues, as outlined by the organizational psychologist, Margaret Rioch, who discusses that when followers who don't feel their opinion is valued will defer all authority to the leader, making the leader the sole authority and decision maker. Why should the follower care if the leader won't listen anyway? This is all too common in our formations. If we, as leaders, cannot give our followers the ability to provide candid and professional feedback that they feel will be considered, then we run the risk of alienating our subordinates and reducing their initiative and creativity.

The greatest risk from devaluing followership in its truest form is that we build clones of ourselves and perceive that they are "good followers." Cloning leads to groupthink, and groupthink leads to disaster. We tend to select those we've had positive interactions with in the past, and that chiefly occurs when they've agreed with our decision making. Rarely, if ever, will you select a person for a role because they disagreed with a decision you made, regardless of whether or not it was for the betterment of the organization.

For Leaders

So, if we're not great at followership, how can we fix it? One of my former brigade commanders gave me this excellent article to read (Forbes, *Five Leadership Lessons from James T. Kirk*), which

encompassed his leadership philosophy in a nutshell. While Star Trek's James T. Kirk may not seem like the best role model, the leadership lessons gleaned from this article are helpful, and lesson two is the most important to our discussion about followership. By creating a team of advisors with different worldviews, not only do you get a diverse set of opinions, but you can build a team of people willing to give candid feedback and advice regardless of the situation. The key point in team creation is to select members who complement the skills of the leader, not simply mirror them. Some necessary elements are: Skills, Views, Experience, Identity, Background, Emotional makeup, and Group memberships.

For Followers

So, followers, what can we do; how can we improve our influence and impact, though potentially void of a formal leadership role? This fundamentally boils down to one idea: telling the truth. We need to have a voice to correct a wrong. We must step up our discourse when appropriate. That's not to say everyone needs to become a devil's advocate at every chance. Learning to pick your battles can help build credibility, and conversely always being the squeaky wheel is likely to get you replaced, not greased. You must find your voice, and have the courage to tell the truth to the leader, even when it is uncomfortable. Through using tact and highlighting a weakness in the organization or plan and demonstrating a desire to correct the issue, you become a good follower.

With that being said, to conclude, the leader **MUST** be willing to listen to followers, even if it hurts. Nobody likes to have salt thrown on a

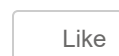
wound, whether or not you know it's there. But if you are completely unwilling to allow discourse with trusted personnel (key staff members, subordinate commanders, etc), then how can you truly improve your team? It is absolutely necessary that we look at ourselves, both up and down the chain, to ensure that we're making the most of our subordinates, and providing our leaders the accurate information to facilitate their decision making.

Zach Mierva is an Armor officer and currently a graduate student at Columbia University. Following earning his degree in Organizational Psychology & Leadership, he will serve as a Cadet company Tactical Officer at the United States Military Academy. Zach's thoughts are his own and do not reflect that of the USMA, US Army, or Department of Defense. You can follow Zach on Twitter: [@ZMierva](#).

Do you value the content of this post? [Subscribe to 3×5 Leadership](#) to receive email notifications of new content! You can also follow on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

[Picture credit](#)

Share this:



Be the first to like this.

1 Comment

Pingback: [A Final 3x5 Leadership Reflection on 2017...and A Look Toward 2018! | 3x5 Leadership](#)

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

PREVIOUS

Which Leadership is Most Effective: Analyzing Transformational & Servant Leadership

NEXT

The Lost Art of Giving (Negative) Feedback

FOLLOW 3x5 LEADERSHIP!



3×5 LEADERSHIP SOCIAL MEDIA



POPULAR POSTS



[Followership: A Missing Consideration That Is Limiting Your Leadership Ability](#)



[Leaders Are Readers Part VII: Your Responsibility to Inspire Others](#)



[Leadership By Wandering Around](#)



[Counseling the 33%: An Approach to One-on-One Development](#)

BOOKS I'M CURRENTLY READING

Be Transformed (John 13-21): Christ's Triumph Means Your Transformation

by Warren W. Wiersbe



Be Determined (Nehemiah): Standing Firm in the Face of Opposition

by Warren W. Wiersbe



Good Strategy Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters

by Richard P. Rumelt



Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent Into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death
by Jim Frederick

The Patton Mind
by Roger H. Nye



3×5 LEADERSHIP SOCIAL MEDIA

BLOG VISITS

69,950 views

THE 3×5 LEADERSHIP COMMUNITY

777 leaders subscribe to 3×5 Leadership via email. Join the 3×5 Leadership community!

SEARCH 3×5 LEADERSHIP

Blog at WordPress.com.