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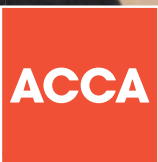
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Followership: your stepping stone

So you think you've got what it takes to be a great leader? The first step is to be an effective follower, as **Patrick O'Brien** explains in the first of a two-part guide

Many of us want to become better leaders. But what really sets the great leaders apart is their ability to achieve results. They do this by building teams that contain individual contributors (IC). ICs are like you and me and are known as followers.

The traditional model of management, put forward by Henri Fayol, vested power in the hands of the leader. Their role encompassed command and control, as they pulled the strings of the followers like a master puppeteer. As for the followers, their role was limited to that of passive, reflexive responders.

Fast forward 100 years and leadership has changed. The contemporary view now positions the 'transformational leader' at the heart of major change. Their focus is less on the means and more on the ends; significant outcomes dominate their thinking.

Transformational success is achieved by a team of energised, active and engaged followers. Truly great leaders know how to move followers beyond their own self-interests, to the greater good of their group, organisation, and even society.

So, assuming you already have aspirations to become a better leader, the best place to start is to first become a better follower.

Being a follower does not mean you follow blindly, without initiative, without question, without input. Rather, it means that you play an active and effective role in supporting your leader and your team in achieving the prescribed mission.

Imagine that it is your first day in a new job – an exciting position in a new company. You are presented with two different groups of people. On your right stands a smart, capable, enthusiastic and energetic group of

people. On your left sits a downtrodden, lazy, good-for-nothing, incapable bunch of losers who are more glum than glam.

Finally, imagine you are assigned your mission: to crew a rocket ship to the moon. Which group would you choose, and why? I would assume that you would pick the group on the right over the group on the left.

Active followership

It is good to start out with great expectations and pick the best route to success. Sadly, in the cold reality of practice, once teams comprising passive followers enter the fray, earlier desired ambitions soon fade and mediocrity is often the best that followers can deliver.

As a follower, then, you always have choices within your team.

On the one hand, some choose to enrol as passive, dependent team

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members. This behaviour can often be the result of an ineffective leader who still models the old militaristic 'command-and-control' manner of management.

On the other hand, those who get ahead more often embrace a more active, critical-thinking approach. In this way, they see themselves as co-creators in the success of the team and leader. They embrace the vision and work energetically to realise success.

Oscar Wilde captured the spirit of followership when he said: 'The aim of life is self-development. To realise one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for.' Followers choose to take ownership, developing themselves and the parts they play for team success.

Followership, then, is a humble form of 'self-leadership' for followers and dovetails into transformational leadership. In addition, the rising tide of evidence suggests that the right combination of team, leadership and followership is the amalgam for greater achievement and personal success.

That said, this is still a relatively new and well-kept secret. Tap into Google to find over a quarter of a billion results for leadership – about a thousand times more than for followership.

Mind shift

Followership is an active approach, not an alternative word for follower. It is not about passive plodding, dragging along like lead weights behind a leader's loudly barked orders. Nor is it about an uncritical mass, silently doing only what it is told without thought for outcomes or consequences.

Rather, followership is an intensely active state, where followers drive toward mission success, supporting their leader and their team. It's about mindful, constructive behaviours that immerse, engage and fully own and resolve problems that arise

along the way. Followership involves a mind shift – a process set in place when embracing a number of important behaviours.

Become fully aware of your leader's desires, your team's mission and the challenges. Know your strengths, what you can contribute and the roles that you can best play. Understanding both sides of this equation enables you to bridge the gaps in active ways.

It might seem easier to drop your head, avoid the gaze of those around you, point to the undefended or disappear. Don't. Instead, enrol in the mission, sign on to fully engage and achieve successful outcomes.

FOLLOWERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT PASSIVE PLODDING; RATHER, IT IS AN INTENSELY ACTIVE STATE WHERE FOLLOWERS DRIVE TOWARDS MISSION SUCCESS, SUPPORTING THEIR LEADER AND THEIR TEAM

Own your situation, whether or not you created it. Be proud of outcomes achieved, understanding that it is always possible to celebrate success, yet still maintain humility.

Followership demands stronger communication skills, so start out with a desire to listen. Conduct open and honest dialogue with the leader and team, building up positive interactions inside relationships based on trust. Have courage to give feedback to your leader, even to challenge if required. Avoid the 'weakness trap' of keeping your thoughts to yourself, risking everything by saying nothing.

Followership means pointing out the things that your leader cannot see, at appropriate times and in appropriate ways. Good followers are not sheep; leave silence to the lambs.

Influencing upwards

As an effective follower you know you aren't powerless but instead have influence. You know where your

influence arises, how to grow it and how to exercise it in positive, ethical ways that help your leader and the team succeed.

You understand that your influence stems more from performance than authority. You also see that growing expertise becomes core to greater influence; the better you perform, the more people listen; the more they listen, the more they seek your opinion; the more your opinion is heard, the more expertise you amass.

You also know that increased visibility puts you in places where more people take notice. You do not hide but instead take steps to ensure that you are heard more frequently, in

appropriate places and in appropriate ways, for the good of the team.

Although you are already embracing followership, you know that not everyone else 'gets it' yet. You also understand that its adoption is transformative, and recognise that it is at its most productive when it dovetails inside the team, alongside strong transformational leadership.

Full effectiveness is only achievable with a mind shift in others. You therefore take on board responsibility to model appropriate behaviours to your team members and leader.

In a forthcoming issue, we will cover five important leadership areas that complement followership. As leaders improve in these areas, they'll enhance their team's followership capability which, in turn, drives greater organisational achievement and personal success.

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