

WANT TO LEAD ?
LEARN TO
WILLINGLY
FOLLOW
FIRST...

Vidusha Nathavitharana

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PROLOGUE

“The problem with you Baby (yep - my mom called me Baby - in fact, still does!) is that you want to lead before you can follow” chided my mother when I was just 15 years old, listening to me grumble and complain about the way one of the associations I was part of, was being run. I hated how things were done, and wanted to change everything about it - starting with the office bearers (who in my mind, were mere benchwarmers!). Having heard my rant, my mother sat and told me ‘First learn to follow, baby. Contribute - to the best of your ability - and ensure you help them make a success of things.’

I was too angry to listen then. ‘What a load of crap,’ I thought to myself, and told myself I didn’t need to ‘follow’ anything or anyone: especially a bunch of buffoons like that!

A few years (and many frustrations) later, I was absolutely exasperated with the way another initiative in College was going on - and once again, my mother sat me down, and uttered the same words. A little older, and also a bit more subdued, I did ponder on it this time and told myself ‘I will do my best regardless’ of the person in charge, because I absolutely loved the work itself as well as the ‘cause’ the society was undertaking. This made a huge difference in how I was perceived and, more importantly, how I actually saw things around me. Instinctively, the moment I switched my ‘attitude’ and ‘decided’ to be willing to follow, I went about things quite differently and it made a world of a difference in my output as well. I ended up as the President of the Club in my final year, and the lessons learnt stuck with me.

Many years later, I was sitting at a leadership seminar and once again, I had forgotten the golden principle my mother taught me as a young student. I was enthralled with leadership - and I was eager to lead, but I had not spent enough time truly following. My eagerness and haste in wanting to lead led me to make a mess out of many things, and it soon dawned on me that I was being led by my ego more than my passion for the work per se. Once again, the shift in 'attitude' enabled me to see a whole different world and not only helped me grow, but also to truly understand the 'meaning' of the 'message' my mother tried to give me as a young adult.

The lessons never left me, even when I was growing steadily in my career; my mother's words always rang through my mind: and I would always willingly serve first - and lead after. This made all the difference, both in my career, and also, later on, as a father...

This is how I came to understand 'following' and much, much later on, whenever we ran training programs on leadership; 'followership' was something I always brought in. The book that you are about to read is the culmination of many years of introspections on this, and finally connecting the dots...

1.

WHY BEING A FOLLOWER AND WILLINGLY FOLLOWING NEED TO BE DIFFERENTIATED

Do you want to be a leader, or do you want to be a follower? The question was rhetorical, and we waited in mesmerised silence for the next sentence to come...

'I want to be a leader; to hell with being a follower' I remember thinking to myself... 'Who wants to be a follower in the first place?' I asked myself and I smiled incredulously when the speaker bellowed into the mic.

'NEVER be a follower! ALWAYS be a LEADER!'

The crowd roared with thunderous applause and the programme had the desired effect. We ALL wanted to be leaders, we ALL wanted to do great things... we ALL were truly pumped up...

I remember that day like it was yesterday - because that was the first ever leadership training I attended.

'Followership' has always had a bad rap. NO ONE wants to be a follower - EVERYONE wants to be a leader.

Though the Mahatma Gandhi quotes get floated around social media like the Che Guevara t-shirts and blue jeans during the hippie revolution, no one REALLY takes it seriously. After all, followers merely do what they are told - ha? LEADERS are the ones who have to 'take the calls.' So, is it any wonder that an entire chorus of 'I want to be a leader' echoes a packed auditorium when the question is asked?

Therein lies the first major hurdle to jump...

WE NEED TO DIFFERENTIATE FOLLOWERS AND WILLINGLY FOLLOWING.

Followers can be following for a whole heap of reasons. Within hierarchical organisations, most employees are held at the proverbial gun point or lured by the promise of a fat bonus or that juicy promotion. To get the job done, all these 'tactics' are fine: but, that is quite different to 'Willingly Following.'

Most managers are happy with simple compliance. There is no requirement for conviction, no requirement for understanding and or genuine support; as long as the job is done - who cares what the motivation was? Most 'pseudo leaders' take the same attitude and I guess, rightly so, because results are all that most organisations hope for.

However, IF you are truly interested in developing leaders within an organisation, then you need to appreciate the fact that it starts with learning to follow and not "merely following."

Learning to follow is a conscious and often rather profound decision to make. It is not something you do 'by the way' or under 'compulsion' - you willingly follow out of conviction, out of absolute trust and absolute faith. Maybe such superlatives can be considered naive in a Machiavellian sense, but it is what it is, and 'good' leaders are expected to be holding higher ideals than the 'rest of us' (at least - that's the hope!)

So, the question of 'getting' someone to follow does not really arise once you have DECIDED you WANT TO FOLLOW, and this makes all the difference.

See, the onus of 'inspiring others to follow' may well be a leader's prerogative, but the onus of 'willing followership' is very much the onus of each individual within the organisation. It is a decision that each person MUST make if they want to become active participants in the organisational imperative, rather than merely being an 'employee' who works for a wage.

This fundamental difference is not a simple one because this is the starting point of the leadership journey. The willingness and the ability (the willingness MUST precede gaining the abilities - which is a lifelong undertaking) to be part of something bigger than YOURSELF is the pivotal cornerstone of being a good (or great) leader. If there is no willingness to follow, then there really isn't much room for growth as a leader. If you simply become a follower, rather than making the conscious decision to follow, all you are doing is the proverbial 'sucking up' that many resort to, in order to further their careers.

A. Firstly -before anything else- you must be willing to consider yourself less important than the task in front of you.

B. Secondly, you must be willing to support (and honestly support) someone else's 'agenda' because you understand it's either better, or more important than whatever you come up with.

C. Thirdly, you must be able to differentiate between 'liking someone' and 'working with someone', which is the basic principle behind being 'professional'.

D. Finally, you are expected to ensure you do your very best, irrespective of how others work/perform. You will have a standard for yourself - rather than pegging the standard as a comparative to what you see in others. You will commit - and you will do good on your commitment.

If you can live by these four principles, what you are demonstrating is 'Willing Followership'. This requires conviction and a deep sense of 'duty.' The parallels to leadership should be quite obvious - but let's get to that in a different chapter. What is relevant for now is to understand that 'Willing Followership' is different to simply 'following': a distinction which, if you miss, you miss everything about being able to follow (and thereby, being a leader too!).

2.

FOLLOW WHO OR FOLLOW WHAT?

The biggest ‘twist’ is about whether you follow a person or you follow a ‘vision’ or ‘cause.’

See, followers are those who follow a PERSON. However, you CAN ‘follow’ a ‘cause’ as well. You really don’t need a PERSON to convince you of the merits of a Vision or a Cause or a Purpose. So, the start of Willing Followership actually stems from believing in the cause - or the vision - or the purpose of the organisation.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with liking or respecting someone - or being awed by a person – and therefore ‘following’ him or her. In fact, it is greatly helpful if the conviction in the cause and the faith in the person actually meet!

However, being willing to follow becomes so much easier when WHAT you follow precedes WHO you follow. People come and go; generally, the core purpose remains a lot longer. So, in an organisational setting, being convinced of the purpose and the vision is a lot more important than merely following the ‘leader.’

Ultimately, you work for an organisation and not for a person. A distinction many fail to make-and many leaders never really distinguish between - mostly for their own self interests. This is the reason we see a mass exodus of people leaving when the

'boss' leaves and also, why there is a popular sentiment that 'people leave bosses - not organisations', when the 'boss' is bad.

The issue is that we have to always look at this from a leader-and-follower perspective. However, to truly follow, we need to take the personal aspect of things out of the equation as much as possible. No human being can be 'perfect' and relationships can have ups and downs all the time. So, if 'following' was purely dependent (or even mainly dependent on) the individual relationship, then the chances of being able to follow consistently across a long period of time are rather small. This is a huge impediment to learning to follow because you are then merely looking at how you can have a healthy relationship going - and nothing much else.

Following is, and needs to be, a much wider conversation and concept.

A good place to draw the distinction is in understanding how we come to follow a philosophy or a way of life. See, you are a Buddhist because you follow the 'Buddha's Way', not Buddha himself, and there is a big difference between the two. We may even argue whether or not what Siddhartha Gautama (as the Buddha was known before he attained enlightenment) did by 'abandoning' his wife and son and 'leaving' the house was a good or bad deed, and whether this makes him 'good or bad' in return. However, this has no effect on whether the precepts he espoused and the path he laid out for spiritual enlightenment is useful/purposeful, and thereby enabling our willing followership of the principles taught.

It is very possible to follow Buddhist philosophy even if you have no respect for the Buddha - purely by being convinced of the logical and intellectual wisdom the philosophy contains.

Similarly you may take up Stoic philosophy without ever knowing who the original Stoics were, nor really caring about it either. You can do the same with absolutely any cause. Think about it, to believe in taking up environmentalism or feminism, do you need to follow the original leaders of the movement - or do you just need to be convinced of the merits of the cause itself?

YOU DON'T NECESSARILY NEED TO LIKE THE LEADER TO FOLLOW THE CAUSE!

This, then, puts a huge ownership on the individual to 'be involved' in what the organisation is trying to achieve overall, rather than simply waiting to be instructed or relying on the 'leader' to give direction, the individual needs to be actively seeking ways to add value, contribute, proactively engage and also, find ways to make things possible. This is a rather big step - towards personally committing to become a partner in the cause, the direction, in the vision and in the purpose.

Being 'fully involved' also means being able to challenge the status quo when required; and being confident enough to do so. Merely complying or 'following orders' is not the same as 'Willingly Following' the cause and herein lies the challenging aspect. 'Willingly Following' the cause means being able to 'lock horns' for the right reasons without it being about the person or the position. Being able to call it out -especially if the wrong decisions are being made - and being able to argue your case without going down the route of politics, or making it personal and being able to be the single voice of dissent is an important distinction. See, if you were willingly following the cause / direction / purpose, you will want whoever is leading the cause/direction/purpose to succeed, because if he/she fails, then the entire cause/direction/purpose fails with it.

As such, being able to 'convince' and 'influence' your leaders to make the right decisions - even if they are not the most popular ones - is essential. Being the person to steer the leader in the right direction is essential if you follow willingly - because you don't come at it from a personal perspective, but rather, from a professional perspective. Being able to take that call - even if it means being ostracised for doing so - is essential if you want to follow - and follow right.

YOU NEED TO BE WILLING AND ABLE TO TAKE A STANCE WHEN REQUIRED, EVEN IF IT MEANS YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE WHO SEES IT THAT WAY...

Once again, this sounds awfully a lot like a leader, and that is exactly the point. If you follow and you truly believe in the cause/purpose, then you must be willing and able to stand up for it, irrespective of the personal cost. The key is that there is enough trust in you as a person and also as a person who acts in the best interest of the organisation overall - which is the attribute that will enable you to be 'heard.' Great followers will not allow their leaders to fail, and with them, the cause/purpose. They will ensure leaders are 'on track.'

Following the 'leader' without following the cause/purpose first is a huge mistake. Leaders are EXPECTED to make that distinction when they encourage followership - the idea is NOT to be LOYAL to the person, but rather to the CAUSE/PURPOSE. Being loyal to a person and not the institution is not going to serve any purpose, unless the leader's cause/

purpose and the organisational purpose is one and the same. Though IDEALLY this ought to be the case, it often isn't so in practical organisational settings, which is why it is CRITICAL that when you DECIDE to follow, you understand you need to follow the cause/purpose first, and the leader afterwards. If ever there is a choice to be made, it must be a simple choice, and your 'loyalties' should never waver from the overall purpose.

Ultimately, your loyalties to your superiors/leaders should never be at the COST of the purpose, no matter how much you love/respect/honour your superiors/leaders.

BEING DISLOYAL TO THE CAUSE BECAUSE YOU WANT TO BE LOYAL TO THE PERSON IS A CLEAR SIGN THAT YOU HAVE NOT UNDERSTOOD WHAT FOLLOWING IS ALL ABOUT...

Following isn't an easy task. Everyone assumes it should come naturally and that it is far simpler than actually leading, but nothing can be further from the truth. The truest test of leadership is actually being able to follow first.

Learning to follow means that you understand, first and foremost, that it is a SKILL that ought to be learnt. It also means that you also understand that it will require a lot of time - and effort, as is the case for all skills.

The question is: is it worth it?

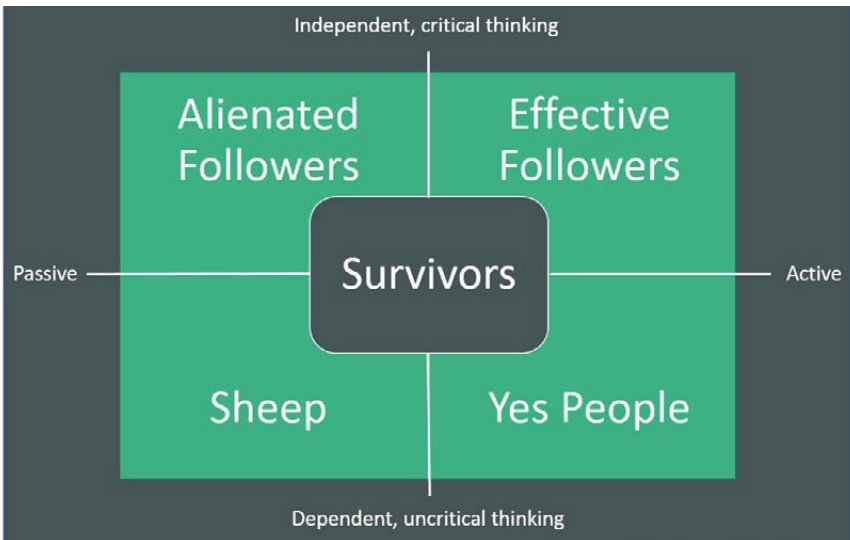
The question of whether it is worthwhile or not is anchored to what you want. If you want to simply grow in your title and not in your role as a leader, then following honestly doesn't really come into play in the broader sense: simple compliance will do. However, if you are serious about leading, and leading well, then learning to follow becomes an essential skill to gain.

3.

TYPES OF FOLLOWERS AND WHY ONLY A FEW TYPES TRULY FOLLOW

There have been a few models put forward to look at the type of followers there are inside an organisation and looking at any one of them demonstrates the fact that not all of the ‘followers’ truly ‘follow.’

This model from Robert E Kelley is a great place to start.

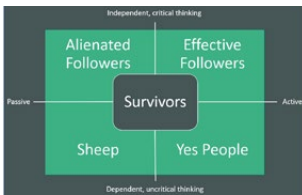


Notice that only ‘Effective Followers’ are actually ‘following’; the others merely ‘exist’ inside the organisation, and some folks like the ‘alienated followers’ can actually be counterproductive overall.

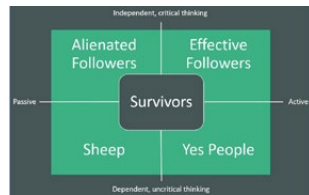
There are similar models in leadership literature and almost all of them focus PURELY on the relationship within the organisation, with relationship to the leader as the primary anchor. As such, possibly a more focused look at following needs to be considered, and thereby the different type of followers as well.

Let's first group followers into two broad categories: those who are 'loyal' to the 'cause' and those who are 'loyal' to the leader. This is a rather simplistic way of looking at the different types of followers, but it allows you to understand that there are two fundamentally different 'sets' of followers based on where their loyalties lie.

Now, if you 'superimpose' the Kelley Model or any other model into this 'dimension', see what happens:



Loyal to the Leader



Loyal to the 'Cause'

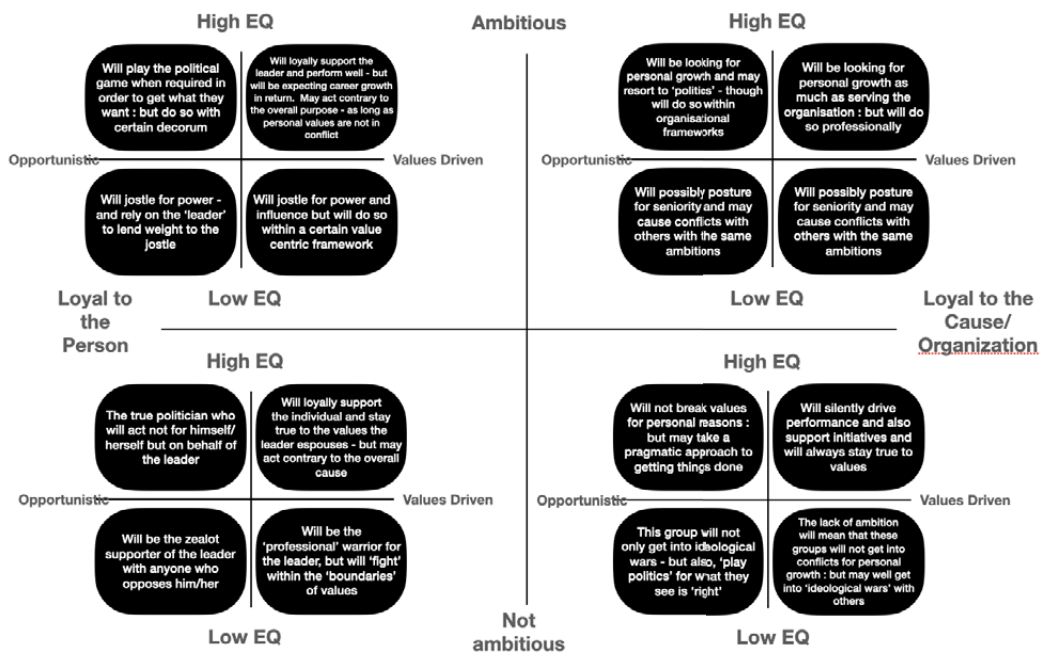
Now you tend to understand the 'difference' in even the 'effective follower' on the two ends of the spectrum. One is effective, simply based on a relationship with the leader, and the other is effective because they do what needs to be done. However, in a traditional sense, the 'effective follower' who is loyal to the cause may well become a 'problem' for the leader personally - and may never be seen as an 'effective' follower UNLESS they are trusted and are loyal to the individual leader concerned as well.

1 For example the Potter and Rozenbach Model and the Curphy Followership Model: available with details on: <https://www.slideshare.net/NathanLizotteLMSWc-c/sw611-leadersrole-in-change-group-presentation-part-2>

Similarly, the 'sheep' that are 'loyal to the cause' end of the spectrum may be perfectly fine as they are. They are deeply convinced about the cause, will follow instructions very well and though passive, they are brilliant workhorses overall who work TOWARDS THE CAUSE, which makes them a hell of a lot more value-adding than those on the 'loyal to the leader' end of the spectrum UNLESS the leader himself is loyal to the cause. These 'sheep' on the 'loyal to the cause' spectrum will be 'non-confrontational' even if the leader steers off course, and possibly simply plod on towards the overall cause regardless.

The same distinction can be made across the board for all the 'types' of followers and seeing it this way offers a completely different approach to following than simply looking at the relationship with the leader angle. It also offers a completely different nuance to how we need to look at followers overall - because don't forget, being 'alienated' because they don't believe in the cause and being 'alienated' because they don't believe in the leader are two very different things and require two very different responses.

So, maybe an alternative typology is required to explore this perspective. The key, I believe, is to bring the EQ dimension into the equation and draw a distinction between this and 'political ambition' within the organisation as primary dimensions.



This type of referencing helps us understand the types of followers that exist inside organisations with a lot more focus on the different dimensions at play, rather than taking a two-dimensional approach to followership. However, the purpose of this typology is not to 'brand' the different types of followers (which is why it was intentionally not done to begin with) but to look at it from the perspective of what WE can do as individuals to understand what WE need to do to become better followers overall...

See, the 'traditional' understanding of followership is to 'support' the leader, and that is just not enough. To be a good follower and learning to follow are two very different mindsets, as we have already discussed. So, rather than looking at the typologies - irrespective of the depth it goes to, we need to flip it and understand what makes a good follower from the perspective of our own volition.

So, let's look at the simplest dimensions and work itself from there...

**LOYAL TO THE
CAUSE**

**IDEALLY
LOYAL TO BOTH
AND ASSISTING THE
LEADER 'STAY THE
COURSE'**

**LOYAL TO THE
LEADER**

This, I believe, is the most important facet of a great follower in that they are able to be absolutely loyal to the cause, and also win enough trust from their leaders to be able to challenge them when required, so as to ensure that the leaders don't stray from the cause. This ability is what helps you as an individual understand the dual role you have to play, in that you need to follow the cause and be able to support the overall organisation, while not allowing leaders to feel threatened by you either.

**'TYPES' OF FOLLOWERS ARE A GREAT
WAY TO UNDERSTAND THAT NOT ALL
FOLLOWERS TRULY FOLLOW ...**

**HOWEVER; IT DOES NOT OFFER AN
APPRECIATION OF WHAT AN
INDIVIDUAL IS SUPPOSED TO DO TO
'FOLLOW'**

To truly 'follow', you must not have to 'choose' between the two dimensions, which oftentimes you may well have to, but the truest test of being ABLE to follow is that you are able to be the 'link' between the two - whenever the two become polarities. This 'role' of a follower is critical within an organisation not only to ensure organisational objectives are met, but to ensure that leaders don't become counterproductive to the overall purpose of the organisation.

4.

THE COMPETENCIES REQUIRED TO FOLLOW 'RIGHT'

Rather than looking at the type of followers that actually exist, it might be a better idea to look at the type of followers we OUGHT to have. So, let's start there, and then look at the competencies we need to grow in order to develop these types of individuals who willingly follow.

We are making two assumptions here, given that we are looking at 'growing' willing followers, rather than looking at things as they are:

A. Firstly, we assume that these individuals are already convinced of the cause and are fully on board with the 'agenda'.

B. Secondly, we assume they don't have any 'major issues' with their superiors/leaders (or vice versa).

The reason for making these assumptions is that these two aspects have been covered at length in the previous chapters, and revisiting it seems a repetition. The idea is to be able to grow on that predisposition and look at how we can help individuals become better followers in the manner in which they would add the best value to the overall organisation.

So, in order for the ‘assumptions’ to hold true, we need to have the most fundamental building blocks of competencies in place.

**BEING TRUE TO
YOURSELF**

**TO ENSURE THAT YOU ARE ‘FOLLOWING’ THE
ORGANISATIONAL VALUE SETS**

**EMOTIONAL
INTELLIGENCE**

**TO ENABLE THE INDIVIDUAL TO WORK WITH
OTHERS WITH LESS FRICTION AND ‘CONFLICT’**

PROFESSIONALISM

**SO THAT THE INDIVIDUAL CAN DISCERN BETWEEN
‘LIKING’ A PERSON/LEADER AND BEING ABLE TO WORK
WITH THEM IN AN ORGANISATIONAL SETTING**

Living Values, EQ and Professionalism become the three core competencies anyone who aspires to be a willing follower needs to develop.

Being able to truly be in sync with the organisational values enables the individual to work seamlessly around the challenges that are bound to take place, and make decisions with ease because your ‘North Point’ is very clear when the values are in sync. Being able to be fully on board on the values (which would be stemming from the overall purpose of the organisation) enables the individual to pursue the organisational purpose without having any doubts or misgivings, which is critical to ‘willingly follow’ the set direction. The bigger question is whether you can ‘learn’ to align to the values or not and the answer is yes, you can in that you make a conscious DECISION whether they are values you agree with or not. If they are NOT in sync with your personal values, you have a simple choice (yet a rather profound one) to make. You can either adjust your own thinking or you can honestly move out of the organisation.

IF you decide to 'stick around' you have MADE THE CHOICE NOT TO FOLLOW. This is the starting point of everything else that follows as a follower. This ability to be true to yourself: and be honest about it is CRITICAL if you want to LEARN how to FOLLOW.

Once that BIG decision is made, then the most essential skill to develop is that of emotional intelligence. The case for emotional intelligence has been made quite affirmatively by the works of Daniel Goleman, and it is sufficient to say that unless you LEARN emotional intelligence early on, it becomes difficult for you to navigate the relationships you will have with others: which is ultimately the cornerstone of your ability to willingly follow. You REALLY CAN'T 'willingly follow' anything unless you are able to make sense of your own emotions and unless you are able to foster healthy relationships with others around you. Remember - you don't follow a cause in isolation: you do so with others too, and your ability to work with others is an essential skill you need to invest your time and energy in.

Finally, you need to be able to develop 'professionalism', which is your ability to understand that you have a job of work to do, irrespective of how you FEEL about a person or a situation. Being able to be emotionally intelligent is critical for this, but it isn't enough: you need to understand that you are there for a purpose first - and everything else second. Provided that you are not doing anything against the core values and the purpose, being able to go beyond how you feel and do what needs to be done is critical in your ability to follow 'right.' If you are bound to how you feel (especially towards a leader), then you can never quite do what is needed to ensure the organisation succeeds.

So, these three building blocks become essential for you to truly follow. Once this is out of the way, you need to develop a few other competencies to become a person who follows and also, adds value.

ABILITY TO TEACH AND COACH OTHERS

**ABILITY TO HAVE CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE THINKING
AND OFFER SOLUTIONS**

ABILITY TO NETWORK AND FORM ALLIANCES

ABILITY TO INFLUENCE OTHERS

INTERNAL CUSTOMER SERVICE MINDSET

A SENSE OF URGENCY

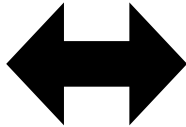
PROACTIVITY

TECHNICAL COMPETENCY

**THESE SOFT
SKILLS BASED
COMPETENCIES
HELP AN
INDIVIDUAL WORK
SEAMLESSLY WITH
OTHERS AND
NAVIGATE
POLITICS**

**THESE AUXILIARY
COMPETENCIES
ENABLE THE
INDIVIDUAL BEING
A GOOD
INDIVIDUAL
CONTRIBUTOR**

**EMOTIONAL
INTELLIGENCE**



PROFESSIONALISM

**BEING TRUE TO YOURSELF : AND BEING
CONGRUENT WITH ORGANISATIONAL VALUES/ETHOS/
PURPOSE**

**THESE CORE
COMPETENCIES
BUILD ESSENTIAL
TRUST FOR THE
FOLLOWER**

Before anything else, you need to build personal and professional trust, which is where the core competencies kick in. Without trust being established, it is impossible to follow.

However, trust without being able to PERFORM is irrelevant in an organisational setting. The next set of competencies is there, in order for anyone to become a truly competent individual contributor.

Technical competency is often overlooked in management: and many argue that 'management' and 'leadership' do NOT require technical competency. Though 'ideologically' this is true, you DO need to know your basics in order for YOU to do YOUR JOB right when you start out and though it becomes less important as you become more senior inside a hierarchy, it is not to say you shouldn't have it. Technical skill is the foundation of all other competencies, and 'knowing' (TRULY knowing) your job becomes essential for you to make good on the promises you make. So, take the time to understand your job properly and learn the technical aspects of the job well.

One of the most important attributes you need to have if you want to contribute effectively is to ensure you are PROACTIVE and get 'involved' in things, rather than waiting for someone to instruct you. If you are waiting to be TOLD - then you really aren't a good follower. Good followers need to have a near 'sixth sense' for what needs to be done for the cause as well as for the superior/leader, and instinctively get on with it. It is impossible (at least, rather laborious) for everything to be told instructionally: and it takes a hell of a lot of time to do it too. So, rather than waiting to be told, learn to be proactive.

The other competency to develop is to have a sense of urgency. A good follower should not be lethargic. Good followers ought to be 'impatient' to get things done. This is not to mean that you go about doing things without structure or haphazardly - rather, that everything you do is with a sense of urgency, knowing that the 'cause' is of utmost importance. This sense of urgency often becomes infectious as does the lack of it. So, whatever you do, do it with a sense of urgency.

Finally, the competency is what many followers miss. Ultimately, as much as the 'job' is 'done', it needs to be 'done right.' See, whether it is done right or not, is not for YOU to decide: it should be decided by the person who is entrusting the task to you. So you need to be able to learn how to ask questions rather than assume things - and understand WHAT needs to be done; also, most importantly - HOW they want it done. Being able to have an 'internal customer service mindset' is critically important to ensure you are giving others what THEY want rather than what YOU think is important/pertinent.

These four competencies; technical ability, proactivity, a sense of urgency and an internal customer service mind-set; enables you to become a superlative individual contributor - and this adds to the level of professional trust one has in you. As a person who becomes a willing follower, being able to be 'relied' on becomes critically important, in order to be given more responsibilities, and this in turn increases your ability to impact the overall organisation and its cause, much better.

The final set of competencies is to enable a follower to work with others: leaders, followers and everyone in between.

**THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE IS FIRST
LEARNT AS A FOLLOWER - NEVER AS A
LEADER.**

The first, and possibly the most critical skill/competency to learn is to be able to influence others. Being able to influence is important - because if you follow a cause – rather than a ‘person’ per se: you may not necessarily have the authority levels to impact the cause the way you should/want to. So, being able to influence is the first step towards being able to steer direction, and also, create impact - both as an individual as well as a collective. Being able to influence key decision makers becomes imperative if you want to be effective as a follower.

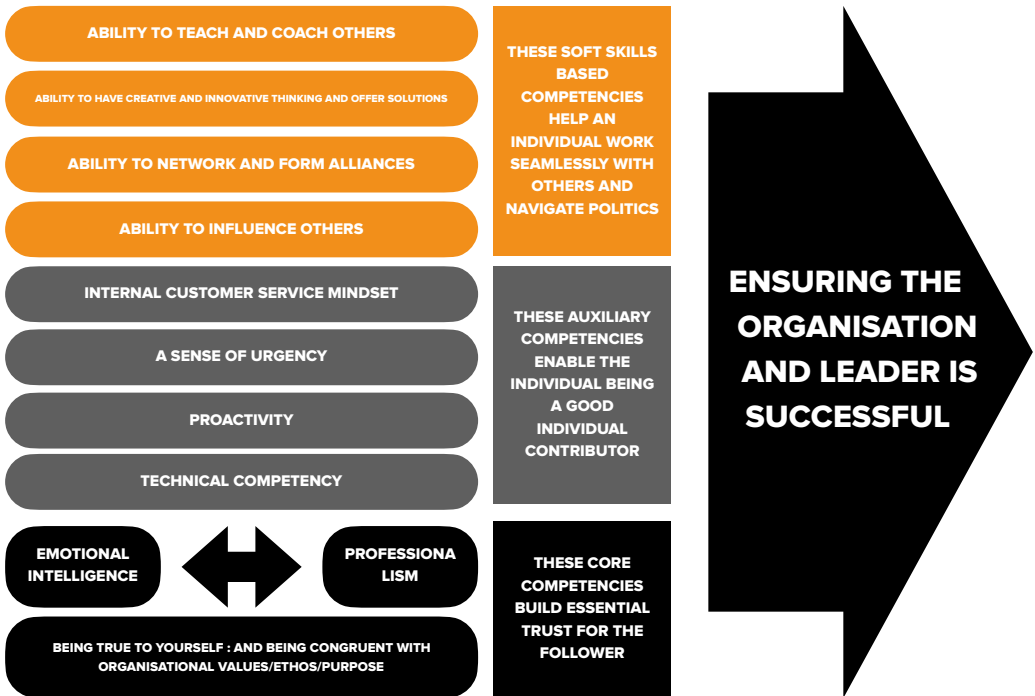
To increase the ability to influence, as well as to draw on the support and help required to get things done, the ability to network and also, create alliances is another important competency to develop. Key networks and alliances are important in ensuring the right decisions are taken, bad decisions are overruled and fundamental shifts to the overall organisational ethos or direction are not dramatically changed without proper insight and thought.

The creativity and innovation aspect now comes in, to be able to offer fresh solutions, be able to look beyond the problems and find ways around them. Good followers are able to avoid getting bogged down by the problem per se: and offer solutions even when resources and limitations are there. This ability to think anew and look at things creatively, enables a follower to see things others may not see; and be relied upon to ‘add value’, both to others they work with, as well as the organisation overall.

Finally, the ability to teach and coach others becomes an important skill to be able to help others who may struggle with their performance and also, at times, to reverse-mentor leaders who may lack essential technical skills. It is important to be able to be both knowledgeable about the subject matter and also be able to become a coach/teacher - this also helps to establish a huge amount of trust and confidence in you as an individual.

See, when you have these essential competencies, what you become is an essential part of the hegemony of people who are committed to make things happen, and ensure the organisational imperative is done. THIS is the crux of 'Willing Followership' ; rather than simply 'following' - it is about truly adding value - and being able to go beyond yourself and contribute - positively - towards the overall organisational objectives.

The ultimate litmus test of following is whether the 'leader' and the 'organisation' are both better off because of you, and that they are successful. IF you are able to contribute towards this, then, your job as a follower is done.



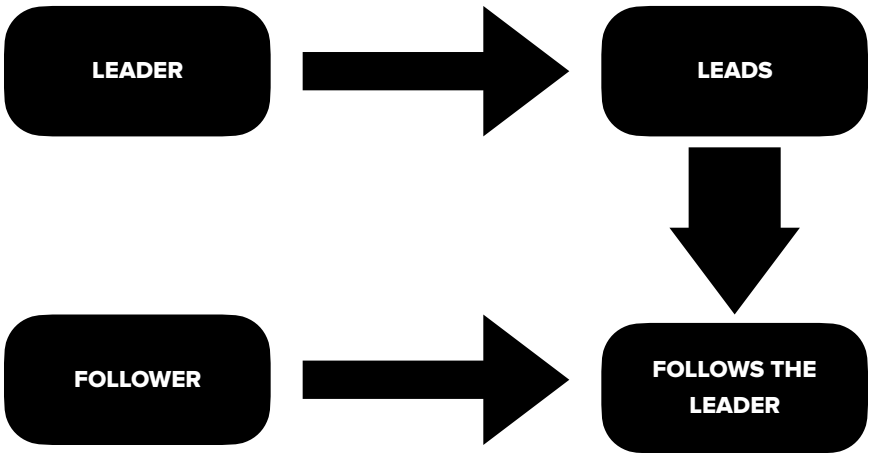
5.

FOLLOWING AS A PRECURSOR TO LEADING: AND WHY IT MATTERS

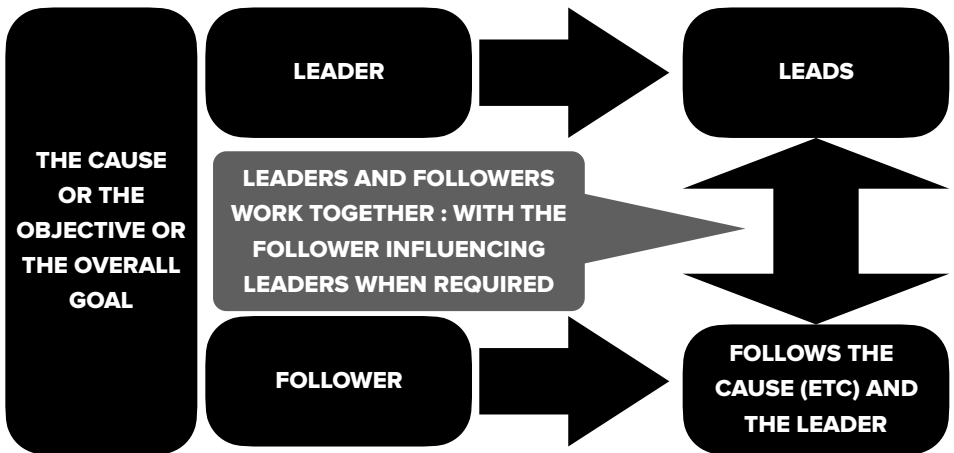
Want to lead? Learn to follow first” was a phrase immortalised by Mahatma Gandhi, and though it has been looked upon as a perspective of ‘servant leadership’, it has never quite been explored from the perspective of following itself. However, the statement is a truly profound one and upon deeper observation, you realise that being a good follower and being a good leader actually require the same attributes and mind-sets : hence the reason for the profound statement - LEARN to follow FIRST.

LEARNING TO FOLLOW MUST BECOME A PREREQUISITE FOR CHOOSING LEADERS. THE GREATEST LEADERS ARE ALWAYS WILLING FOLLOWERS TOO.

The fundamental error is in us differentiating leading and following as two very different things - - from the perspective of leader and follower, in that it is personified rather than looked upon as an activity.



This is how we generally look at the relationship between leaders and followers. However, what needs to happen is quite different...



This interdependency can only be created if the follower is not simply following the leader but rather, is an active contributor towards the overall goal/objective/cause in their own right. It is NOT a simple top-down relationship: and it is often an interdependency that is based on both trust as well as professional conduct. IF leaders and followers become a purely hierarchical arrangement it loses the entire impact: both for leaders and followers alike.

It needs to be acknowledged that for this to come to fruition within an organisation you DO need a certain level of enlightened leader as well, and this is where the statement Gandhi made becomes so important.... Imagine leaders were followers FIRST: and are chosen BECAUSE of their followership: then, and only then, can we have the type of leaders who will embrace the interrelationship between leader and follower.

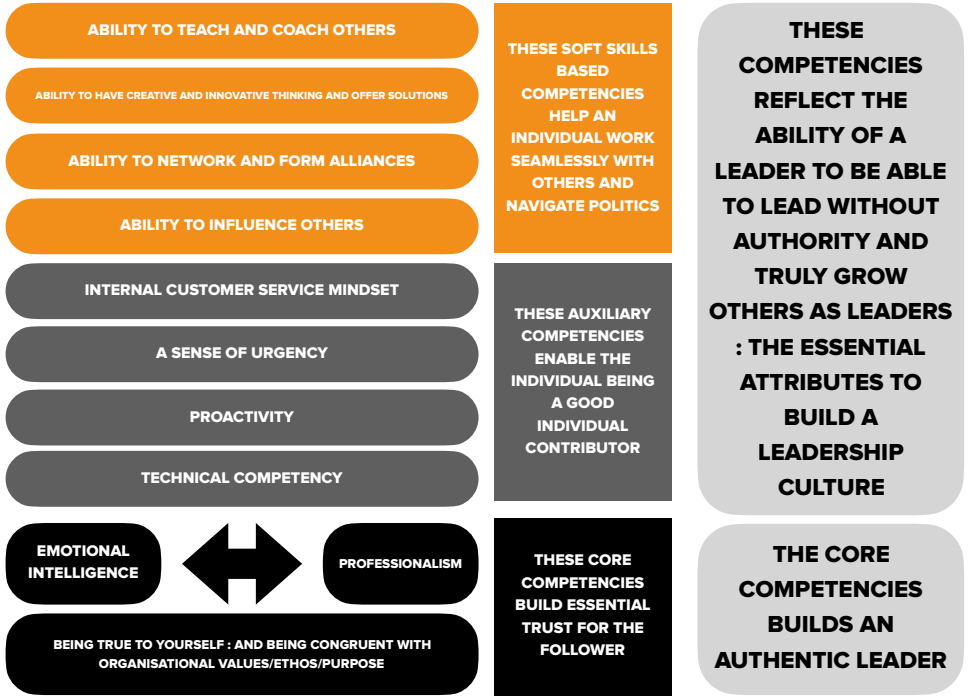
Take a look at the parallels between the followership competencies and the leadership competencies, and you will realise they are almost one and the same: though the contexts may be different...



These core competencies are what will help a leader become someone beyond EGO and become AUTHENTIC as a leader. Being true to YOURSELF and being able to be congruent with the organisational values, and making a conscious CHOICE to stay true to them makes the leader someone others trust. Emotional Intelligence and the ability to be PROFESSIONAL helps the leader become someone who is both respected and someone worthy of emulating. Given that trust is established with the values lived, and the leader becomes someone others look up to, FOLLOWING the leader becomes synonymous with following the CAUSE - and as such, followers never have to really make a 'choice' between the two.

Whenever a leader strays - either from the values of from making the right decisions, the followers CAN point these out - and they will be welcome, because the leaders are professional, and also emotionally intelligent - and INVESTED in the cause - rather than in their own agendas.

This is why it is CRITICAL for leaders to be followers first.



Ultimately, leadership and followership are essentially two sides of the same coin. The role of a leader in steering an organisation towards common objectives is well understood and does not need to be reiterated, but the support that followers should offer - not only to the leader, but also to the overall purpose itself is often underrated and often overlooked. UNLESS the two work in tandem, the results one expects will not possibly come through.

It is absolutely essential to ensure that leaders understand this and that leaders don't look at themselves as mere golfed managers and rely on the authority-based instructional approach to get things done - which can never be understood if you merely got 'promoted' into a position of power (such as a manager) and then be expected to lead. LEADERS need to be groomed based on having been followers first - and this is the ONLY way to ensure that the leaders and the followers are 'speaking the same language' and can synchronise the way they work (because it is based on common competencies).

UNLESS we choose leaders based on how good they were as followers, there is no organisational impetus for followers to be followers. If we make following simply about compliance to the leader, we breed leaders who perpetuate this ideology - and therein lies the vicious cycle.

So, when we build in HR frameworks that help organisations promote the 'right' candidates, what we need to be looking for is not to look for 'leadership potential', but the 'demonstrated capability as followers', because the competencies required to be a good follower are the EXACT same competencies required to be a great leader too.

It is important for organisations to shift the focus on teaching leadership skills to teaching followership skills. The fact that leaders must learn to follow, has been established thus far in the previous chapters, and if this is to hold true, why are we not teaching followership as a mandatory training facet, rather than simply training anyone and everyone for leadership.

Once again, the fundamental issue is that we seem to be thinking of following as a passive, almost instinctive reaction to leaders - when it is not. No matter how great the leader may be, the follower has to make a conscious decision whether to follow or not (both the leader and the cause).

TEACHING HOW TO FOLLOW NEEDS TO BECOME AS IMPORTANT AS TEACHING HOW TO LEAD

Unless this conscious shift takes place, we are doomed to forever treat following as a secondary activity - and a non-value adding one. However, if we DO make this a priority - and teach team members to be superlative followers, we have, without actually knowing it, also built a leadership pipeline.

6.

WHO NOT TO FOLLOW AND WHEN NOT TO FOLLOW

One key aspect of following is to understand when NOT to follow as well. As much as you make the conscious decision TO follow, you must be able to make the conscious decision when and who NOT to follow as well. It is only then that 'willing followership' becomes 'truly willing'.

This must be addressed with a bit of caution, because the knee-jerk reaction many have towards having a conflict with their superiors or an organisational policy and 'leaving' in absolute contempt is NOT what we are talking of here. Let's reiterate the 'professionalism' and related competencies we spoke of at length, in the earlier chapters. Good followers must be able to work BEYOND the personal conflicts as well as disagreements with company policy.

Being able to 'stomach' your personal feelings and bruised egos are a pre-requisite to follow effectively. Remember, it is NOT ABOUT YOU - it is ABOUT THE CAUSE - and being able to make that distinction is absolutely critical in the willingness to follow.

HOWEVER, EACH FOLLOWER NEEDS TO BE ABLE TO KNOW WHEN TO QUIT FOLLOWING - AND EITHER LEAVE OR SIMPLY CALL THINGS OUT.

Here are some key considerations in the decision to actually STOP following:

A. If you find that your personal values are completely in conflict with the organisational ethos, or the values of the organisation, then you must decide not to follow, unless you are ok to completely shift your own perspective. It is essential that you are not merely 'faking' this, and that you are not doing it simply to 'survive.'

B. If you find that the 'goal' or the 'purpose' that you signed up for has radically changed and it no longer is something you personally want to truly be part of, then you must be able to stop following, and walk away.

C. If you find that the way in which the goal is to be achieved is not congruent with your personal beliefs – even though you are completely on board with the objective itself, once again you need to decide to walk away.

A good follower is someone who is true to himself first, and to all others afterwards. Being able to be absolutely committed starts with you being absolutely certain it is worth it - and that you are completely on board with it. The constant gnawing at your conscience is not something that will help you: nor the cause you work for. So, do everyone a favour, and walk away.

Similarly, you need to be able to appreciate WHO not to follow also. This is also a simple choice if you know who you are, and what you are willing to do - and what you are not. One of the MAIN reasons we have toxic leaders within organisations is down to the fact that the 'followers' follow regardless and don't hold the leaders to higher ideals, standards and personal accountability.

A. Don't serve a leader who is not able to live values and who believes 'the ends justify ANY means.' For sure, there are always times when you need to make exceptions to rules, but then the exception should never become the rule. There are also certain lines you never cross no matter what, because those are deeply seated principles of humanity. So, if a leader is willing to become unscrupulous then it is time to stop following them.

B. If a leader is constantly requesting you to flirt with your personal values - and demanding that you do so because 'everyone else' is doing it - then that too is a sign, to either have that tough conversation or decide not to follow.

C. If a leader is not allowing you to grow, explore and truly be the best version of yourself - even when you have tried to have a healthy relationship with the person, this too is a good indication that this is not a leader who is worth following.

Being able to manage relationships is important, but it is equally important to understand when it just doesn't work.

Remember however, you OWE it, both to the organisation and to yourself to ensure YOU DO YOUR VERY BEST right up until the last day you are inside an organisation/unit/department. As long as you are there, you are duty bound to perform at your best, irrespective of how YOU ARE TREATED. This is the defining moment for you as a follower.

Being able to rise beyond the personal feelings, the heartache and the frustrations, and being able to 'bring your best self' to work on a daily basis is the foundation of great followership - as much as it is the foundation of great leadership. Ultimately, unless you can truly rise above everything else, and bring out your best - you truly are not fit to lead anyone else!

**REMEMBER: TWO WRONGS NEVER
MAKE A RIGHT!**

7.

MAKING LEADING AND FOLLOWING HAVE EQUAL STATUS

The ultimate objective, from an organisational perspective is this: to be able to understand that leading and following are of equal importance, and to ensure that both are focused on, from the outset.

Unless organisations VALUE followers as much as leaders, followership as much as leadership, and establish built-in frameworks to enable this to happen, chances are we'll always have this dichotomy between two intertwined relationships and principles. Leadership without followership is useless, and willing followership without great leadership is also merely a wonderful concept: one without the other is honestly meaningless.

WE NEED LEADERS WHO CAN FOLLOW: AND FOLLOWERS WHO CAN LEAD

What organisations need are those who can move between leading and following effortlessly - and it starts with learning to follow - not learning to lead. Being able to humble yourself to the service of others starts early and will remain with you. It is neither something you can 'acquire' simply because you get promoted nor something you can wait until you are promoted to learn. Not that you CAN'T learn these later on in your career, but it is so much easier to actually install early on and allow them to grow with you.

A culture of leadership is only possible if this coexistence is in play. Leaders need to grow more leaders - in that, willing followers must be able to take on leadership roles, and leaders must be willing to let go of their 'leadership role' to foster this. Followers can step up only if there is an opportunity to grow - and a willingness of leaders to allow leadership to become a collective exercise. Leaders will only appreciate this if they have learnt to follow first, because you appreciate the fact that leading is not a solo exercise if you have followed to begin with and your ability to keep your ego at bay is already in place.

ORGANISATIONS NEED TO FOSTER LEADING AND FOLLOWING SIMULTANEOUSLY

The overall policy and procedural frameworks within an organisation needs to assist in the creation of this culture. You cannot have a policy framework anchored to title and seniority and expect leadership to spawn out of it. Building egalitarian and merit-based structures and also, 'space' for leaders and followers to interplay becomes of paramount importance. Organisations need to make the DEMAND that leaders must follow first, and establish protocols just for that purpose.

EPILOGUE

Following is, possibly, way harder than leading. At least leadership sounds sexy. Being a leader is encouraged and thought well of. Wanting to follow is almost a degradation to the human spirit...

Nothing can be further from the truth. The biggest problem with some leaders is that they have never learnt to follow first. Had they been taught to, we would have a very different breed of leaders within our organisations - and in society at large.

It is about time we put this right - and bring following as a serious course of study - and a precursor and necessary 'skill' before any leadership position is bestowed upon an individual. Leadership is far too precious to be left to the egotistical and the downright narcissist. Leaders will NEVER learn to be true leaders unless they have humbly served first.

The hope: in fact the ONLY hope of this book is to enable - especially organisations - to understand that we need to grow followers first, and that in doing so, we will automatically grow leaders. The paradox is not lost on me, but if you read the book, you will understand it is not paradoxical at all and in fact, quite amazingly, it is absolutely complimentary.

We have spent far too much of our time trying to build leaders without building the essential skills to follow first. It is time we made amends and corrected this rather big mistake!



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Vidusha is currently the Destiny Architect at High5 Consultancy and Training and also the organization's founder member. His areas of expertise lies with strategy facilitation, HR strategy development and Leadership Training. He has conducted assignments in 15 countries regionally and consulted for the World Bank, the UN as well as some of the top corporates in Sri Lanka and the Region. He is also a member of the board of directors for Chrysalis, a social enterprise working to empower women and youth by fostering inclusive growth in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.