

## Follow my leader? New followers, new leadership practices.

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- Workforce diversity and shifting inter-generational expectations demands letting go of 20th century leadership norms, ideas and practices.
- In the 21st century, there is a heightened expectation that leaders should understand and engage with their followers.
- Followership is often neglected in leadership research and development. In the public sector, this is especially worrying given changing demographics of staff and communities served.
- Fresh thinking is needed about what it is to lead, with followership front and centre.

Leadership development often focuses on psychometric profiles and descriptions of leadership styles or traits. However, leadership is at its heart about social relationships: there are no leaders without followers.

When I ask management development students to name leaders, they often offer the usual suspects: Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, and Donald Trump: leaders in public view. But when I ask them to name leaders who have influenced them in their lives, a different list emerges: teachers, family members, or a supportive boss. These are the leaders that they have been most profoundly affected by as followers.

Leadership development from a *deep* understanding of the followers' world is thin

on the ground. Follower experience is largely focused on what the leader is able to do for the follower, or obtain (either nicely or ruthlessly) from them.

At the same time, followers are changing. Two generations ago in the UK, most people at work were white and male. Women and BAME people are core to the workforce now. However looking upwards, followers do not always see senior leadership teams who look like, or really understand, them. Diversity of followership places important new demands on leaders.

## Understanding followers and their experiences at work

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Most organisations have recognised the importance of leadership training and development. However, occupying a leadership role is not the same as being a good, effective leader. Leaders in organisations should engage more deeply with the viewpoints and lived experience of followers.

For too long, it has been assumed that if leaders tick the boxes of completing training or getting experience, that good follower experience and performance will follow. But the nature of followers and their expectations are changing and will continue to change. Leadership policy and practice are often 'stuck' in a view that minimises the importance of follower characteristics and lived experience.

## Alternative ideas on leadership

There are some important ideas that might move leadership practice and the leadership development agenda forwards, positioning followers at the core.

The psychologist George Kelly said: *'While prestige and status may be common to nearly all leadership, psychologists will be badly fooled if they overlook the variety of leadership patterns because they hold one feature in common. Leaders perform any one of the variety of jobs that are recognised as leadership jobs'*. Kelly argued that there are a wide range of roles for leaders, shaped by the experiences and expectations of followers. Crucially, unless leaders were able to understand the world from the followers' view point, they were likely to be viewed as failing by followers.

James Spillane, an educational policy professor interested in failing schools, has argued strongly for a move away from conventional views of leadership. He argues that the 'command and control', male dominated roots of many leadership theories work less well for service and care work. In his view, leadership is a practice that is distributed. It is not the preserve of those in the middle or the top but runs from floor to board. Unless those in the leadership web work in a coordinated, coherent way, the outcomes will be poor. The implication of Spillane's ideas is that attention has to be paid to leaders and followers in a greater array of settings and implicitly, that there needs to be a greater diversity of leaders.

This kind of diversity thinking is underpinned by theorists like Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen. Sen argues that in order to address well-being and quality of life, individuals, groups and society should aspire that everyone, irrespective of their start in life, is able to pursue what they have reason to value, to fully function and flourish. These ideas can be core to leadership thinking and how best to enable followers.

Kelly, Spillane and Sen's insights point towards new directions for effective leadership practice in an increasingly diverse society.

## Ways forward

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Leadership development for the 21st century needs to acknowledge the root-and-branch changes in followership and their expectations. Leadership development needs a twin-track approach. One of these tracks, the classroom training element, is the most familiar. The second, evaluation of leadership policies and actual everyday practice to enhance leadership performance, is less common.

Where to start? Work organisations have annual surveys to 'get the views' of staff, but too often, they do not dig sufficiently deeply into people's everyday experiences. Without a strong evidence base of what life is really like for followers, there is no scope for new thinking around leader-follower relations.

But there are some practices which help to create robust insights into the lived experience of followers, the basis for improved leadership development practice. Two are explained below.

Firstly, there is good evidence that reverse mentoring – pairing junior employees with executive team members – is especially effective as it allows exchange of different viewpoints and expertise between leaders and followers. However, this kind of initiative should be supported by conversation training, as many leaders are fearful of talking about areas such as race. Conversation training will enable leaders and followers to learn how to listen,

understand and disagree, without being disagreeable or potentially, offensive.

Secondly, reviewing line manager and general Human Resources practices in detail. This should be done with close attention paid to real world experience and practice and its impact on followers and leaders. HR business partners are often mainly supportive of managers, the primary recipient of their services, which may distort managers' expectations of and impact on followers. Ordinary work done extraordinarily well is more useful than over-complicated, ill-informed training and development interventions, off-site or on.

This kind of review of practices needs to develop potentially workable solutions, pilot and review: there is no magic bullet.

Better leadership is dependent on a better understanding of followers – their views, expectations, and experiences. There are some helpful ways of thinking and practices to try, but ultimately no blueprint. The most important requirement is a willingness to do things differently and effectively to enable followers to work well, enhance their well-being and improve their sense of inclusion.

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