

Leader or Follower? Both traits are important

“Time waste differs from material waste in that there can be no salvage.” -- Henry Ford

When it comes to Leadership, Leaders have assumed responsibilities, these responsibilities stay true forever through time and are applicable to any environment.

So good Leadership requires:

- A strong work ethic. We can't expect more from our people than we are willing to do ourselves.
- An attitude that we will do whatever it takes to get the job done. This communicates our high expectations and our pledge to the performance metrics we've committed to. (This, of course, requires no moral, ethical or illegal behaviors!)
- A "can do" attitude to challenge, and ultimately demonstrate a high energy level to smash, long-standing paradigms in the business. As Joel Barker says: Those who say it can't be done need to get out of the way of the people who are already doing it!
- A keen sense of urgency, a passion to run to the problems and a dedication to use good process, not heroics, to eliminate the root cause of problems.
- The discipline to work with a sense of priority. Think in Pareto (80-20 rule) terms to deal with the most significant few issues, i.e., the ones that have real impact/leverage to improve the business for customers, shareholders, employees.
- A sound time management system for daily use. Time is the only resource we all have the same amount of: 24 hours in a day. How effectively we use this scarce resource has a huge impact on our success or failure as a leader.
- The ability to lead by example. Be the model for the skills development necessary to change how people think, work and behave. Educate, train, mentor, communicate, develop your people.

Sometimes You Must Follow

What makes you a good follower is different than what makes you a good leader.

When to follow? Don't just stop leading, but make conscious choices of when to follow. In wartime or organizational crisis, you need a single decisive leader. But in peacetime, there are many reasons to follow. Someone else may be a subject-matter expert where that expertise is critical. For example, if you are getting government approval for a product, you probably want to follow someone who knows that process inside and out.

Another useful reason to follow is the development of others, certainly an important peacetime activity. To develop, they must often lead. And for them to lead, you cannot co-lead; you must follow. There is a massive difference between riding a bike with training wheels and riding without them.

“Successful people ask better questions and as a result, they get better answers”

Anthony Robbins

Where Lean Thoughts can become Reality

Leader or Follower

2) Make following transparent. Once you determine that you will indeed follow, you must make that fact highly transparent, both to the leader and to those who are also following.

In a formal process, a useful tool that unfortunately has often been misapplied is RACI. RACI stands for Responsible, Accountable, Consult, and Inform, and is used to gain high agreement on roles in a process or project. When you clearly define who the accountable leader will be, and that you're on the chart but not the leader, your followership will be transparent to all. A warning: Just leaving yourself off the chart is not sufficient as many may assume that you are playing Oz behind the curtain, pulling the levers.

In an informal process, transparency of followership is demonstrated through your behaviors. This ranges from where you sit at the table to dutifully doing your assignments, especially if those assignments are the least desirable tasks to be done. Allow people to see you following, and they will understand that you have accepted and even embraced your role.

3. Don't slip. This is the hardest of all. Good intentions and charts won't be enough. Sometimes only one slip is enough to throw confusion into the organization.

I had to learn to check myself into my designated role. I did that by frequently asking for direction ("What do you need me to do?") and taking on tasks clearly not meant for the man in charge. That's not the solution for everyone, but you must find what works for yourself to avoid slipping out of being a follower.

This is important because it is worse than not giving up the leader role in the first place. I know one leader who has told one of his directs that he is trusted and empowered to make decisions. That is until about twice a month when he overrules a decision already made. This resulted in the designated leader second-guessing himself and wondering what he is truly able to lead. If you really don't want to give it up, then don't pretend to give it up.

Remember that what makes you a good leader is different than what makes you a good follower. And if nothing else, by following you will learn more about how to lead.

When I explain the concept of standardization, people accept its benefits and importance. That is, until you ask them to follow a standard. Suddenly, standards are stifling and limit creativity.

Why the reversal? Because many of us would rather lead than be led. I've written and coached a great deal on leadership. But without followers, what's the point of leadership? Only a delusional person would think that they are the right leader for every situation. Therefore, occasionally we must follow and aspire to be a good follower.

Finally ...

"Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful." -- Albert Schweitzer

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