

MOL 600
Exploring Leadership
Fall 2020
Dr. Diane M. Wiater

Pre-Assignments

1. VIA Character Strengths Assessment

Register for and complete the free VIA Survey of Character Strengths. This survey consists of 120 items and can be completed in less than 30 minutes. Save and print your results.

Please have your results available when we meet for the first class on September 5, 2020.

Access the survey through this link: <http://www.viacharacter.org>

2. Read and be prepared to discuss the following article:

Arena, M.J., & Uhl-Bien, M. (2016). Complexity leadership theory: Shifting from human capital to social capital, *People + Strategy*, 39(2), 22-27.

This article is attached.

Questions to consider:

- What is defining about complexity leadership theory?
- Identify 3 things in the article that strike your curiosity. What makes it so?
- What from the article have you experienced in practice? Be prepared to share more about the story.

3. Read and be prepared to discuss the following article:

Kelley, R., (1988). In Praise of Followers, *Harvard Business Review*, November 1988

This article is attached.

4. Read and be prepared to discuss in class on Sept. 3, Chapters 1-3 in Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

5. Reflective Leadership Essay (10%)

Due: Post to Blackboard by the end of day, September 12, 2020.

Write a 900 - 1,200 word essay, double-spaced with 1-inch margins, as designated below.

This paper is included in the Pre-Assignment work so that you can engage meaningful reflection and begin writing. This essay is autobiographical, inviting you to consider the “data” through your life that has informed and shaped your present leader self. You are asked to reflect on the personal meaning of past (reaching back to your earliest memories of meaning) and present experiences that you identify as formative in your leader path. Consider what and who have inspired your personal and professional leader development, including the shaping of values, interests, goals, choices, etc. Your integration in work, community, family, and other relevant contexts may inform your writing. Please write in first person narrative.



Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting from Human Capital to Social Capital

By Michael J. Arena and Mary Uhl-Bien

For the past decade or more, HR professionals have dedicated much of their efforts to optimizing human capital strategies in an effort to win the war on talent—building out comprehensive talent management systems, validating leadership competency models, and designing the best possible leadership development programs. In more recent years, emphasis has turned to enhancing employee engagement, refining performance management systems, and leveraging people analytics. While it is hard to argue against the need for these human-capital-centric strategies, new research raises questions about whether they are as effective as currently believed. In particular, research suggests that HR professionals need to more strongly consider social capital strategies in driving both performance and innovation within complex organizations.

By definition, social capital refers to the competitive advantage that is created based on the way an individual is connected to others. Two primary aspects of social capital—group cohesion and brokerage—are particularly relevant to

HR practices. Group cohesion is best described as how connected an individual within a group is to others in the same group. Often referred to as clusters, groups are considered highly cohesive when they have many redundant connections within the group (see Figure 1). The benefits of cohesive groups are that individuals are able to quickly share information and typically demonstrate higher levels of trust than less cohesive groups (Fleming, Mingo & Chen, 2007). Brokerage represents the bridge connections from one cluster to another cluster (see Figure 2). It occurs as individuals, or brokers, act as connectors from one cluster to the next. For individuals, being in a broker role has three specific competitive advantages: wider access to diverse information, early access to new information and control over the diffusion of information (Burt, 2005).

High performers tend to be uniquely positioned as brokers in the organizational network (Mehra, Martin & Brass, 2001; Burt, 2004). These individuals generally perform better, get promoted sooner, and are better compensated than others. The implications of social capital are even greater when it comes to innovation. It appears that innovation is as much a social phenomenon within complex organizations as it is a technological one. Successful innovation in a social context requires a thorough understanding of the interplay between cohesion and brokerage. Despite this, routinely across organization only 50 percent of these high performers and innovators are identified by traditional human capital systems (Cross, Cowen, Vertucci & Thomas, 2009). Such research suggests that HR professionals would be wise to shift at least part of their focus to how they can unleash the hidden potential within organizations through a better understanding of social capital.

As HR professionals, we need to explore new leadership frameworks that more fully leverage the competitive advantages of brokers to drive better performance today, while enabling the organization to more effectively innovate and adapt to the challenges of tomorrow. To do this requires that we enable the capability of brokers to actively link up diverse information and solve existing problems. HR professionals must consider how we can foster approaches that enable brokers to actively access novel ideas across the network that emerge in response to unfolding pressures and challenges. They also need to leverage the capacity of cohesive groups to disperse and share information.

In today's dynamic world, leadership frameworks must also shift—from a predominantly human capital focus, such as the bias toward competency-based models, to a social capital em-

Figure 1. Highly Cohesive Clusters

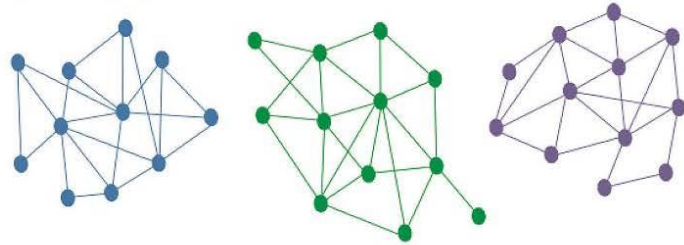
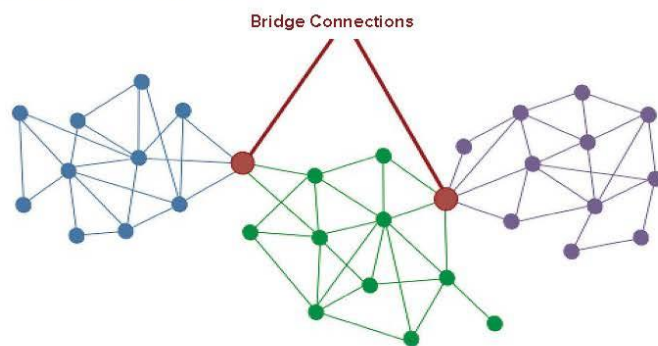


Figure 2. Brokerage across Clusters



phasis, focusing on facilitating the movement of ideas across a system through bridging and brokering.

Complexity Leadership Theory

This kind of leadership is described in emerging work on complexity leadership theory (CLT). CLT proposes that adaptability, which enhances performance and innovation, occurs in the everyday interactions of individuals acting in response to pressures and opportunities in their local contexts (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). These local actions then link up with one another to produce powerful emergent phenomena (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). But the problem is, in many organizations, these linkages are hard to make because organizational bureaucracy and silos can create obstacles to interconnectivity.

Therefore, the central question addressed by CLT is: How, in the context of bureaucratic organizing structures, can organizational leaders enable emergence of the new solutions and innovation needed to survive and thrive in today's complex world? The key in answering this question lies in the recognition that organizations have two primary systems—an operational system and an entrepreneurial system—that function in dynamic tension with one another. The operational system drives formality, standardization, and business performance, and the entrepreneurial system strives for innovation, learning and growth (see Figure 3).

What is being discovered in complexity leadership theory is that despite widespread belief that the role of the leader is to “manage conflict” (meaning “reduce” it), the conflict experienced in the dynamic tension between the two systems is actually the key to innovation and adaptability in organizations. It is in the tension that occurs between the operational system pushing for administrative efficiency (e.g., schedule, budget, results), and the entrepreneurial system pushing for creativity, learning and growth, that innovation and adaptability are enabled.

More specifically, a key discovery of our research in complexity leadership theory is that adaptive organizations possess a distinct advantage previously unrecognized in leadership and organization theory: what they are really good at is enabling adaptive space (see Figure 4).

Adaptive space occurs in the interface between the operational and entrepreneurial system by embracing, rather than stifling, the dynamic tension between the two systems. It does this by enabling brokerage across clusters to spark emergence of novel ideas and then leveraging the natural benefits of cohesion that occurs in the local, entrepreneurial context to foster idea development and sharing. Ultimately, this leads to diffusion across the organization when a network closes in on a sponsor to gain formal endorsement from the operational system (see Figure 5). In this way, novel ideas are more readily introduced, more openly shared and more effectively integrated into formal processes. All of this is essential to scaling and creating value in organizations.

Adaptive space, therefore, is essential in helping organizations become and remain adaptive. It helps address the most pressing problem facing organizations today: the need to overcome the overwhelming bias in organizations for the operational system to stifle out the creative energy of the entrepreneurial system, thereby limiting bold innovations and inhibiting adaptive capacity.

The Research Program

These findings were generated through a series of research studies conducted from 2007 to 2015 across 30 complex organizations (Table 1). The data reveal that innovation and adaptation are the result of pressures on a system. These adaptive pressures are comprised of four components:

- A need for a novel solution (i.e., cannot do things the same way)

Figure 3. Entrepreneurial and Operational Systems

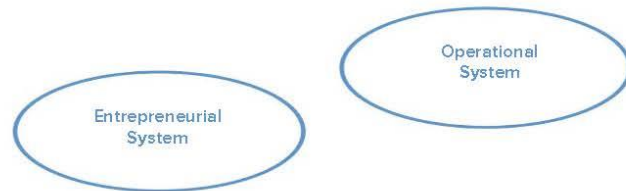


Figure 4. Adaptive Space Bridging the Two Systems

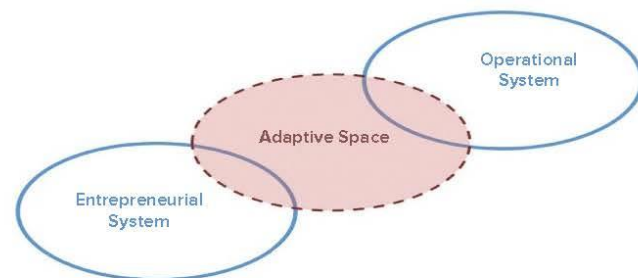
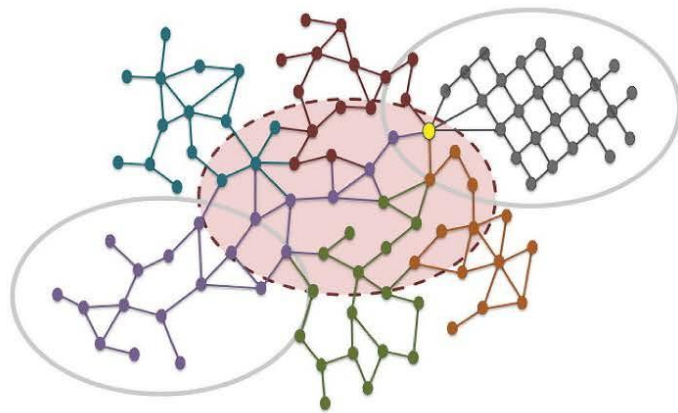


Figure 5. Network Intersections in Adaptive Space



- New relationships or partnerships (i.e., bridging relationship offer new perspectives),
- Conflicting perspectives (i.e., individuals bring different needs and diverse experiences)
- Interdependence (i.e., have no choice but to work together—adapt or die).

Each of these is more directly aligned to advance social capital across an organization.

The findings suggest that what is needed in complex organizations is an adaptive response—one that involves engaging, rather than suppressing, the tension generated in the conflicting perspectives of the operational and entrepreneurial systems. Adaptive responses are enabled through the opening up of adaptive space. This space acts as a bridge between the operational system and the entrepreneurial system that enables emergent solutions to take hold. That is, novel ideas that originate in the entrepreneurial system are advanced through adaptive space and formalized as new order within the operating system. The primary role of “enabling” leaders, therefore, is to loosen and tighten adaptive space in ways that allow emergence to occur.

Pressures, both real and perceived, are driven by internal and external events. For example, external pressures come from new competitive situations, new regulatory policy or procedures, radical advancements in technology, major economic shifts, and so forth. Internal pressures come from changing strategy, new organizational initiatives, budget reductions, shifting demographics, and other changes. Regardless of where they originate, pressures are at the heart of adaptive space (see Table 1).

A primary role of pressures is to move a system out of equilibrium. Change is hard, and people won’t do it if they don’t have to. Therefore, pressures “loosen up” a system by forcing individuals out of their comfort zone and, when placed in the

HR Practices

As HR professionals, the findings from this research challenge us to shift many of our conventional practices. As previously stated, the overwhelming focus in HR has been on optimizing human capital strategies. In the context of complexity leadership theory, HR has focused on attracting, placing and developing operational talent to drive performance and, more recently, entrepreneurial talent to drive innovation. Both of these are human-capital-centric approaches, which are necessary, yet still insufficient. What complexity leadership research shows instead is that a primary focus in HR needs to be on enabling adaptive space.

We can do this by more fully leveraging social capital strategies to unleash latent potential already existing deep within the entrepreneurial and operational systems. For example, HR professionals can demonstrate enabling leadership by enabling novel solutions created locally in the entrepreneurial system to link-up with influencers and resources needed to help them gain momentum and advance into the formal system. They can also create adaptive space by encouraging conflicting interactions early on as a means to enhance the fitness of initial solutions, ultimately facilitating their sponsorship across the organization to leverage the scaling power of the operational system.

On a practical basis, there are three primary elements that are essential to enabling adaptive space: leveraging existing pressures, applying adaptive space practices, and employing adaptive space principles.

Enabling Adaptive Space = Pressures + Practices + Principles.

Adaptive Pressures

Adaptive space functions by capitalizing on adaptive tension to generate creative outcomes. Therefore, the key to enabling adaptive space is in understanding how to use pressures to advantage—hence the mantra, “never waste a good crisis.”

TABLE 1. RESEARCH PROGRAM

Type of organization	Sample & data	Focus of research
Financial Services	32 interviews and archival data	Overall CLT Model
Aerospace	25 interviews	Enabling leadership
Medical Equipment	16 interviews	Administrative stiflers and inhibitors
6 Healthcare Systems	204 interviews and archival data	Strategic leadership and adaptability
Financial Services	80 participants organizational network analysis	Entrepreneurial system
18 Highly Innovative & Adaptive Companies	32 validity interviews	Adaptive space and emergence
Automotive	30 validity interviews	Adaptive space application

context of adaptive space, giving them a safe place to struggle through them to come up with novel ideas and solutions. Enabling leaders need to be adept at helping people to “play in the pressures.” They do this by being skillful at formulating and articulating challenges to the organization that create the appropriate amount of creative tension (not too much, not too little). Skillfully crafted challenges help to catalyze adaptive space. Enabling leaders also learn to be fluent at building a cadence around the four components of adaptive pressures previously mentioned, as a means to holding adaptive space open. Under CLT, the role of leaders shifts from a focus on driving and managing outcomes to a focus on enabling adaptive space, and leveraging pressures is essential to this role.

Within a large financial service organization, a leader discovered that cohesive teams within a call center were 37 percent more efficient at effectively closing out customer calls. By leveraging the pressure to enhance customer satisfaction, the current system was loosened up for local employees to experiment with such things as more routine huddles, shared team coffee breaks and inter-team instant messaging. The result was a 25 percent improvement in average handle time for calls.

Practices

Adaptive practices enable interactions and exchanges through various forums, methods, and frameworks designed to respond to an articulated adaptive challenge. Many of

these practices have been around for years—the difference is the broader understanding of CLT in which they are being applied. For example, adaptive practices include positive deviance, liberating structures, design thinking, adaptive salons, co-labs and adaptive summits, to name a few (see Table 2).

A frequent cadence of adaptive practices, when used in conjunction with pressures and applied over time, enables an organization to fluidly respond to a challenge. For example, one large company applied a multitude of adaptive practices across an 18-month cycle to enable sustained momentum around the same core challenge. Each of these sessions included between 20 and 250 participants. During these sessions, many participants personally identified with specific elements of the core challenge and took the initiative to progress it forward. At times, this would include local actions within their own subgroups, while at other times, they designed and launched adaptive practice themselves. The result was scores of bottom-up solutions being exchanged, developed, and implemented within the organization.

Understanding how to design and deploy adaptive practices can be heavily informed by network theory and complexity science. Interventions that are cross-function and multi-level help ensure diverse perspectives and novel ideas. Adaptive practices encourage adaptive responses to the inherent tensions and conflict that arise in bringing multiple groups together. They challenge participants to follow the energy of the group. Finally, they tap into the benefits of natural networks by encouraging brokerage, setting network boundaries to enhance ongoing interactions beyond the events, and inspiring local actions within cohesive sub-groups. Each adaptive practice has the capacity to improve performance and enhance innovation. When combined, they can catalyze bold, emergent change across an organization.

Principles

The third and final element of enabling adaptive space is

TABLE 2. ADAPTIVE PRACTICES

Practice	Practice Description
Positive deviance	An asset-based, problem-solving, and community-driven approach to enable the discovery of successful local behaviors and solutions
Liberating structures	Easy-to-learn, adaptable methods to solve problems and develop opportunities
Design thinking	A set of tools applied to achieve human centered innovation
Adaptive salons	Simple focus group frameworks that encourage short cross-organization brainstorming blitzes around critical issues
Co-labs	A intensive, 24-hour experience where teams both collaborate and compete against each other in pitching prototype solutions
Adaptive summits	A grassroots large-group event designed to unleash a community of change agents to co-create the way they work

TABLE 3. ADAPTIVE PRINCIPLES

Principle	Principle Description
Start Small	Think big, but start small. Getting started is the hardest part in solving problems and ideas are cheap. So get started, build it, test it and share it locally and then iterate.
Find a Friend	Forging both a new idea and a new relationship is challenging, so leverage the relationships you already have and focus on evolving the idea. Local allies embolden.
Follow the Energy	Link up with existing ideas, strategies and advocates. Enable another's plan to build momentum. Find a way to make that passion flourish while advancing your own.
Set Boundaries	Proximity is essential to maintaining momentum, if people aren't talking about the idea, or concept it doesn't exist. Initially, limit engagement to a group of intersecting natural networks.
Embrace the Conflict	An idea must have fitness to be meaningful for an organization. The fitness of an original idea can only be enhanced with a modification or adaptive response to conflict.
Create Network Closure	As individuals engage in the development process of an idea and share it, the network closes in around it. Eventually a sponsor takes notice, enhancing the likelihood of formal endorsement.

adaptive principles. If adaptive pressures act as the spark and adaptive practices are the catalyst, adaptive principles are the fuel or energy that keeps it going on an everyday basis. These principles need to be leveraged across all three dimensions of CLT: the entrepreneurial system, the operating system, and adaptive space. They include such notions as start small, find a friend, follow the energy, set boundaries, embrace conflict and create network closure (see Table 3).

For example, following the energy, setting the network boundaries, and embracing conflict are essential when operating with adaptive space. Adaptive principles encourage people to go back to their local cluster or the entrepreneurial system and take action, or to start small to build early momentum. Most change strategies seek to build leadership support, adaptive principles, encourage individuals to find a friend that will join them in implementing their idea. Supporting friends help embolden individuals to take risks.

Finally, after testing ideas locally, amplifying and refining them within the adaptive space, individuals are encouraged to create network closure around a critical sponsor within the more formal operating system. As these ideas grow, they create an internal buzz that echoes across the network, building significant credibility with a sponsor. This is essential to getting the idea fully endorsed and scaled for greater impact.

Within one large organization, a young engineer was interested in driving change in her local area after participating

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in a large adaptive practice event. Her first inclination was to propose some ideas she had to her local leader, then she remembered the find a friend principle. Instead, she reached out to another engineer she thought might be interested in her ideas. The two of them iterated on the ideas and invited a few additional peers into the dialogue. The small network began to implement a multitude of ideas, such as a local guru bar to answer routine questions, a non-tech newsletter to keep people informed, they even created an idea posting site where others could thumbs-up or thumbs-down responses for their own ideas. The duo and their band of local friends, were intent on creating a network that was more inclined to say “yes” than “no.” They recognized that if they followed the local energy, they could link-up the right people, with the right ideas at the right time. Ultimately, after building tremendous momentum, they approached their leader and asked him to support an adaptive practice event. After experiencing the local buzz first hand, he responded with a resounding “yes.”

Embrace Emerging Research

As HR professionals, we need to advance the field to keep pace with the dynamic nature of the world we live in. To help us in this, we should embrace emerging research from such disciplines as network theory and complexity science, and use it to challenge our organizations to seek out adaptive solutions. Without such solutions, we will not be able to remain competitive and innovative. Complexity leadership theory challenges us to reframe our human capital centric approach and embrace new practices that recognize and enable the value of social capital. As we embrace these methods, we will unleash the hidden potential that already exists. ■■

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LEADERSHIP

In Praise of Followers

by [Robert Kelley](#)

From the November 1988 Issue

We are convinced that corporations succeed or fail, compete or crumble, on the basis of how well they are led. So we study great leaders of the past and present and spend vast quantities of time and money looking for leaders to hire and trying to cultivate leadership in the employees we already have.

I have no argument with this enthusiasm. Leaders matter greatly. But in searching so zealously for better leaders we tend to lose sight of the people these leaders will lead. Without his armies, after all, Napoleon was just a man with grandiose ambitions. Organizations stand or fall partly on the basis of how well their leaders lead, but partly also on the basis of how well their followers follow.

In 1987, declining profitability and intensified competition for corporate clients forced a large commercial bank on the east coast to reorganize its operations and cut its work force. Its most seasoned managers had to spend most of their time in the field working with corporate customers. Time and energies were stretched so thin that one department head decided he had no choice but to delegate the responsibility for reorganization to his staff people, who had recently had training in self-management.

Despite grave doubts, the department head set them up as a unit without a leader, responsible to one another and to the bank as a whole for writing their own job descriptions, designing a training program, determining criteria for performance evaluations, planning for operational needs, and helping to achieve overall organizational objectives.

They pulled it off. The bank's officers were delighted and frankly amazed that rank-and-file employees could assume so much responsibility so successfully. In fact, the department's capacity to control and direct itself virtually without leadership saved the organization months of turmoil, and as the bank struggled to remain a major player in its region, valuable management time was freed up to put out other fires.

What was it these singular employees did? Given a goal and parameters, they went where most departments could only have gone under the hands-on guidance of an effective leader. But these employees accepted the delegation of authority and went there alone. They thought for themselves, sharpened their skills, focused their efforts, put on a fine display of grit and spunk and self-control. They followed effectively.

To encourage this kind of effective following in other organizations, we need to understand the nature of the follower's role. To cultivate good followers, we need to understand the human qualities that allow effective followership to occur.

The Role of Follower

Bosses are not necessarily good leaders; subordinates are not necessarily effective followers. Many bosses couldn't lead a horse to water. Many subordinates couldn't follow a parade. Some people avoid either role. Others accept the role thrust upon them and perform it badly.

At different points in their careers, even at different times of the working day, most managers play both roles, though seldom equally well. After all, the leadership role has the glamour and attention. We take courses to learn it, and when we play it well we get applause and recognition. But the reality is that most of us are more often followers than leaders. Even when we have subordinates, we still have bosses. For every committee we chair, we sit as a member on several others.

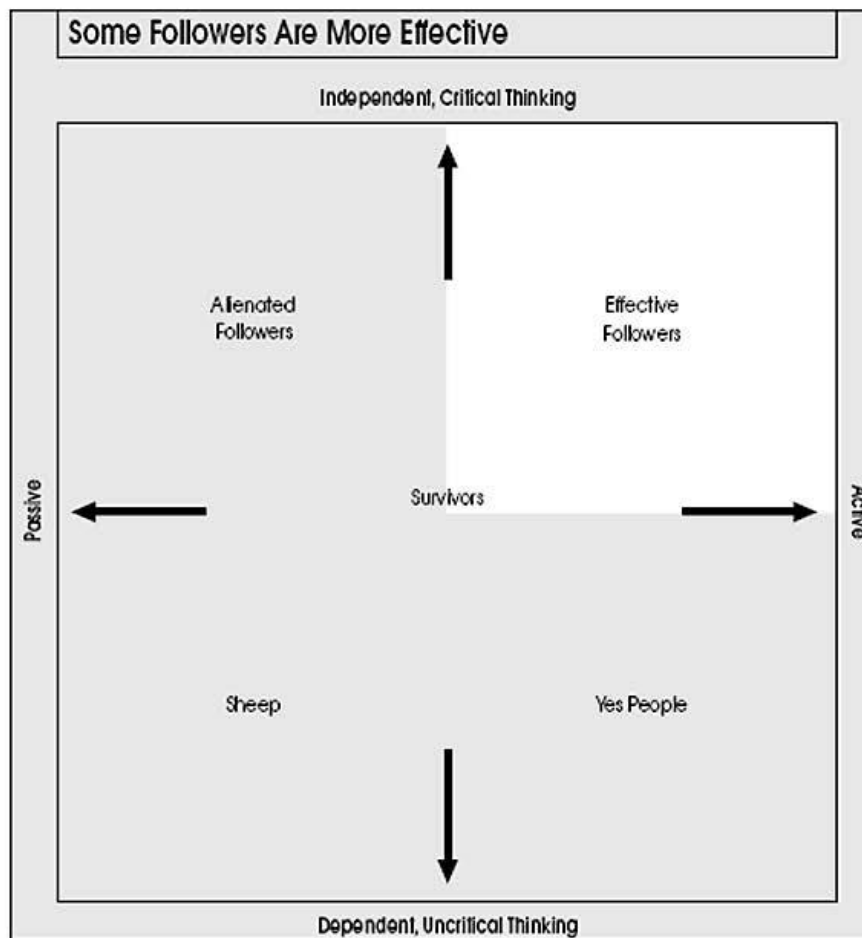
So followership dominates our lives and organizations, but not our thinking, because our preoccupation with leadership keeps us from considering the nature and the importance of the follower.

What distinguishes an effective from an ineffective follower is enthusiastic, intelligent, and self-reliant participation—without star billing—in the pursuit of an organizational goal. Effective followers differ in their motivations for following and in their perceptions of the role. Some choose followership as their primary role at work and serve as team players who take satisfaction in helping to further a cause, an idea, a product, a service, or, more rarely, a person. Others are leaders in some situations but choose the follower role in a particular context. Both these groups view the role of follower as legitimate, inherently valuable, even virtuous.

Some potentially effective followers derive motivation from ambition. By proving themselves in the follower's role, they hope to win the confidence of peers and superiors and move up the corporate ladder. These people do not see followership as attractive in itself. All the same, they can become good followers if they accept the value of learning the role, studying leaders from a subordinate's perspective, and polishing the followership skills that will always stand them in good stead.

Understanding motivations and perceptions is not enough, however. Since followers with different motivations can perform equally well, I examined the behavior that leads to effective and less effective following among people committed to the organization and came up with two underlying behavioral dimensions that help to explain the difference.

One dimension measures to what degree followers exercise independent, critical thinking. The other ranks them on a passive/active scale. The resulting diagram identifies five followership patterns.



Some Followers Are More Effective

Sheep are passive and uncritical, lacking in initiative and sense of responsibility. They perform the tasks given them and stop. Yes People are a livelier but equally unenterprising group. Dependent on a leader for inspiration, they can be aggressively deferential, even servile. Bosses weak in judgment and self-confidence tend to like them and to form alliances with them that can stultify the organization.

Alienated Followers are critical and independent in their thinking but passive in carrying out their role. Somehow, sometime, something turned them off. Often cynical, they tend to sink gradually into disgruntled acquiescence, seldom openly opposing a leader's efforts.

In the very center of the diagram we have Survivors, who perpetually sample the wind and live by the slogan “better safe than sorry.” They are adept at surviving change.

In the upper right-hand corner, finally, we have Effective Followers, who think for themselves and carry out their duties and assignments with energy and assertiveness. Because they are risk takers, self-starters, and independent problem solvers, they get consistently high ratings from peers and many superiors. Followership of this kind can be a positive and acceptable choice for parts or all of our lives—a source of pride and fulfillment.

Effective followers are well-balanced and responsible adults who can succeed without strong leadership. Many followers believe they offer as much value to the organization as leaders do, especially in project or task-force situations. In an organization of effective followers, a leader tends to be more an overseer of change and progress than a hero. As organizational structures flatten, the quality of those who follow will become more and more important. As Chester I. Barnard wrote 50 years ago in *The Functions of the Executive*, “The decision as to whether an order has authority or not lies with the person to whom it is addressed, and does not reside in ‘persons of authority’ or those who issue orders.”

The Qualities of Followers

Effective followers share a number of essential qualities:

1. They manage themselves well.
2. They are committed to the organization and to a purpose, principle, or person outside themselves.
3. They build their competence and focus their efforts for maximum impact.
4. They are courageous, honest, and credible.

Self-Management. Paradoxically, the key to being an effective follower is the ability to think for oneself—to exercise control and independence and to work without close supervision. Good followers are people to whom a leader can safely delegate responsibility, people who anticipate needs at their own level of competence and authority.

Another aspect of this paradox is that effective followers see themselves—except in terms of line responsibility—as the equals of the leaders they follow. They are more apt to openly and unapologetically disagree with leadership and less likely to be intimidated by hierarchy and organizational structure. At the same time, they can see that the people they follow are, in turn, following the lead of others, and they try to appreciate the goals and needs of the team and the organization. Ineffective followers, on the other hand, buy into the hierarchy and, seeing themselves as subservient, vacillate between despair over their seeming powerlessness and attempts to manipulate leaders for their own purposes. Either their fear of powerlessness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—for themselves and often for their work units as well—or their resentment leads them to undermine the team's goals.

Self-managed followers give their organizations a significant cost advantage because they eliminate much of the need for elaborate supervisory control systems that, in any case, often lower morale. In 1985, a large midwestern bank redesigned its personnel selection system to attract self-managed workers. Those conducting interviews began to look for particular types of experience and capacities—initiative, teamwork, independent thinking of all kinds—and the bank revamped its orientation program to emphasize self-management. At the executive level, role playing was introduced into the interview process: how you disagree with your boss, how you prioritize your in-basket after a vacation. In the three years since, employee turnover has dropped dramatically, the need for supervisors has decreased, and administrative costs have gone down.

Of course not all leaders and managers like having self-managing subordinates. Some would rather have sheep or yes people. The best that good followers can do in this situation is to protect themselves with a little career self-management—that is, to stay

attractive in the marketplace. The qualities that make a good follower are too much in demand to go begging for long.

Commitment. Effective followers are committed to something—a cause, a product, an organization, an idea—in addition to the care of their own lives and careers. Some leaders misinterpret this commitment. Seeing their authority acknowledged, they mistake loyalty to a goal for loyalty to themselves. But the fact is that many effective followers see leaders merely as coadventurers on a worthy crusade, and if they suspect their leader of flagging commitment or conflicting motives they may just withdraw their support, either by changing jobs or by contriving to change leaders.

Self-confident followers see colleagues as allies and leaders as equals.

The opportunities and the dangers posed by this kind of commitment are not hard to see. On the one hand, commitment is contagious. Most people like working with colleagues whose hearts are in their work. Morale stays high. Workers who begin to wander from their purpose are jostled back into line. Projects stay on track and on time. In addition, an appreciation of commitment and the way it works can give managers an extra tool with which to understand and channel the energies and loyalties of their subordinates.

On the other hand, followers who are strongly committed to goals not consistent with the goals of their companies can produce destructive results. Leaders having such followers can even lose control of their organizations.

A scientist at a computer company cared deeply about making computer technology available to the masses, and her work was outstanding. Since her goal was in line with the company's goals, she had few problems with top management. Yet she saw her department leaders essentially as facilitators of her dream, and when managers worked at cross-purposes to that vision, she exercised all of her considerable political skills to their

detriment. Her immediate supervisors saw her as a thorn in the side, but she was quite effective in furthering her cause because she saw eye to eye with company leaders. But what if her vision and the company's vision had differed?

Effective followers temper their loyalties to satisfy organizational needs—or they find new organizations. Effective leaders know how to channel the energies of strong commitment in ways that will satisfy corporate goals as well as a follower's personal needs.

Competence and Focus. On the grounds that committed incompetence is still incompetence, effective followers master skills that will be useful to their organizations. They generally hold higher performance standards than the work environment requires, and continuing education is second nature to them, a staple in their professional development.

Less effective followers expect training and development to come to them. The only education they acquire is force-fed. If not sent to a seminar, they don't go. Their competence deteriorates unless some leader gives them parental care and attention.

Good followers take on extra work gladly, but first they do a superb job on their core responsibilities. They are good judges of their own strengths and weaknesses, and they contribute well to teams. Asked to perform in areas where they are poorly qualified, they speak up. Like athletes stretching their capacities, they don't mind chancing failure if they know they can succeed, but they are careful to spare the company wasted energy, lost time, and poor performance by accepting challenges that coworkers are better prepared to meet. Good followers see coworkers as colleagues rather than competitors.

At the same time, effective followers often search for overlooked problems. A woman on a new product development team discovered that no one was responsible for coordinating engineering, marketing, and manufacturing. She worked out an interdepartmental review schedule that identified the people who should be involved at each stage of development. Instead of burdening her boss with yet another problem, this woman took the initiative to present the issue along with a solution.

Another woman I interviewed described her efforts to fill a dangerous void in the company she cared about. Young managerial talent in this manufacturing corporation had traditionally made careers in production. Convinced that foreign competition would alter the shape of the industry, she realized that marketing was a neglected area. She took classes, attended seminars, and read widely. More important, she visited customers to get feedback about her company's and competitors' products, and she soon knew more about the product's customer appeal and market position than any of her peers. The extra competence did wonders for her own career, but it also helped her company weather a storm it had not seen coming.

Courage. Effective followers are credible, honest, and courageous. They establish themselves as independent, critical thinkers whose knowledge and judgment can be trusted. They give credit where credit is due, admitting mistakes and sharing successes. They form their own views and ethical standards and stand up for what they believe in.

Insightful, candid, and fearless, they can keep leaders and colleagues honest and informed. The other side of the coin of course is that they can also cause great trouble for a leader with questionable ethics.

Courageous followers can keep a leader honest —and out of trouble.

Jerome LiCari, the former R&D director at Beech-Nut, suspected for several years that the apple concentrate Beech-Nut was buying from a new supplier at 20% below market price was adulterated. His department suggested switching suppliers, but top management at the financially strapped company put the burden of proof on R&D.

By 1981, LiCari had accumulated strong evidence of adulteration and issued a memo recommending a change of supplier. When he got no response, he went to see his boss, the head of operations. According to LiCari, he was threatened with dismissal for lack of team spirit. LiCari then went to the president of Beech-Nut, and when that, too, produced no

results, he gave up his three-year good-soldier effort, followed his conscience, and resigned. His last performance evaluation praised his expertise and loyalty, but said his judgment was “colored by naiveté and impractical ideals.”

In 1986, Beech-Nut and LiCari’s two bosses were indicted on several hundred counts of conspiracy to commit fraud by distributing adulterated apple juice. In November 1987, the company pleaded guilty and agreed to a fine of \$2 million. In February of this year, the two executives were found guilty on a majority of the charges. The episode cost Beech-Nut an estimated \$25 million and a 20% loss of market share. Asked during the trial if he had been naive, LiCari said, “I guess I was. I thought apple juice should be made from apples.”

Is LiCari a good follower? Well, no, not to his dishonest bosses. But yes, he is almost certainly the kind of employee most companies want to have: loyal, honest, candid with his superiors, and thoroughly credible. In an ethical company involved unintentionally in questionable practices, this kind of follower can head off embarrassment, expense, and litigation.

Cultivating Effective Followers

You may have noticed by now that the qualities that make effective followers are, confusingly enough, pretty much the same qualities found in some effective leaders. This is no mere coincidence, of course. But the confusion underscores an important point. If a person has initiative, self-control, commitment, talent, honesty, credibility, and courage, we say, “Here is a leader!” By definition, a follower cannot exhibit the qualities of leadership. It violates our stereotype.

But our stereotype is ungenerous and wrong. Followership is not a person but a role, and what distinguishes followers from leaders is not intelligence or character but the role they play. As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, effective followers and effective leaders are often the same people playing different parts at different hours of the day.

In many companies, the leadership track is the only road to career success. In almost all companies, leadership is taught and encouraged while followership is not. Yet effective followership is a prerequisite for organizational success. Your organization can take four steps to cultivate effective followers in your work force.

1. *Redefining Followership and Leadership.* Our stereotyped but unarticulated definitions of leadership and followership shape our expectations when we occupy either position. If a leader is defined as responsible for motivating followers, he or she will likely act toward followers as if they needed motivation. If we agree that a leader's job is to transform followers, then it must be a follower's job to provide the clay. If followers fail to need transformation, the leader looks ineffective. The way we define the roles clearly influences the outcome of the interaction.

Instead of seeing the leadership role as superior to and more active than the role of the follower, we can think of them as equal but different activities. The operative definitions are roughly these: people who are effective in the leader role have the vision to set corporate goals and strategies, the interpersonal skills to achieve consensus, the verbal capacity to communicate enthusiasm to large and diverse groups of individuals, the organizational talent to coordinate disparate efforts, and, above all, the desire to lead.

People who are effective in the follower role have the vision to see both the forest and the trees, the social capacity to work well with others, the strength of character to flourish without heroic status, the moral and psychological balance to pursue personal and corporate goals at no cost to either, and, above all, the desire to participate in a team effort for the accomplishment of some greater common purpose.

This view of leadership and followership can be conveyed to employees directly and indirectly—in training and by example. The qualities that make good followers and the value the company places on effective followership can be articulated in explicit follower training. Perhaps the best way to convey this message, however, is by example. Since each of us plays a follower's part at least from time to time, it is essential that we play it well,

that we contribute our competence to the achievement of team goals, that we support the team leader with candor and self-control, that we do our best to appreciate and enjoy the role of quiet contribution to a larger, common cause.

2. *Honing Followership Skills.* Most organizations assume that leadership has to be taught but that everyone knows how to follow. This assumption is based on three faulty premises: (1) that leaders are more important than followers, (2) that following is simply doing what you are told to do, and (3) that followers inevitably draw their energy and aims, even their talent, from the leader. A program of follower training can correct this misapprehension by focusing on topics like:

Improving independent, critical thinking.

Self-management.

Disagreeing agreeably.

Building credibility.

Aligning personal and organizational goals and commitments.

Acting responsibly toward the organization, the leader, coworkers, and oneself.

Similarities and differences between leadership and followership roles.

Moving between the two roles with ease.

3. *Performance Evaluation and Feedback.* Most performance evaluations include a section on leadership skills. Followership evaluation would include items like the ones I have discussed. Instead of rating employees on leadership qualities such as self-management, independent thinking, originality, courage, competence, and credibility, we can rate them on these same qualities in both the leadership and followership roles and then evaluate

each individual's ability to shift easily from the one role to the other. A variety of performance perspectives will help most people understand better how well they play their various organizational roles.

Moreover, evaluations can come from peers, subordinates, and self as well as from supervisors. The process is simple enough: peers and subordinates who come into regular or significant contact with another employee fill in brief, periodic questionnaires where they rate the individual on followership qualities. Findings are then summarized and given to the employee being rated.

4. Organizational Structures That Encourage Followership. Unless the value of good following is somehow built into the fabric of the organization, it is likely to remain a pleasant conceit to which everyone pays occasional lip service but no dues. Here are four good ways to incorporate the concept into your corporate culture:

- In leaderless groups, all members assume equal responsibility for achieving goals. These are usually small task forces of people who can work together under their own supervision. However hard it is to imagine a group with more than one leader, groups with none at all can be highly productive if their members have the qualities of effective followers.

**Groups with many leaders can be chaos.
Groups with none can be very productive.**

- Groups with temporary and rotating leadership are another possibility. Again, such groups are probably best kept small and the rotation fairly frequent, although the notion might certainly be extended to include the administration of a small department for, say, six-month terms. Some of these temporary leaders will be less effective than others, of course, and some may be weak indeed, which is why critics maintain that this structure is inefficient. Why not let the best leader lead? Why suffer through the tenure of less effective leaders? There are two reasons. First, experience of the leadership role is essential to the education of effective followers. Second, followers learn that they must

compensate for ineffective leadership by exercising their skill as good followers. Rotating leader or not, they are bound to be faced with ineffective leadership more than once in their careers.

- Delegation to the lowest level is a third technique for cultivating good followers. Nordstrom's, the Seattle-based department store chain, gives each sales clerk responsibility for servicing and satisfying the customer, including the authority to make refunds without supervisory approval. This kind of delegation makes even people at the lowest levels responsible for their own decisions and for thinking independently about their work.
- Finally, companies can use rewards to underline the importance of good followership. This is not as easy as it sounds. Managers dependent on yes people and sheep for ego gratification will not leap at the idea of extra rewards for the people who make them most uncomfortable. In my research, I have found that effective followers get mixed treatment. About half the time, their contributions lead to substantial rewards. The other half of the time they are punished by their superiors for exercising judgment, taking risks, and failing to conform. Many managers insist that they want independent subordinates who can think for themselves. In practice, followers who challenge their bosses run the risk of getting fired.

In today's flatter, leaner organization, companies will not succeed without the kind of people who take pride and satisfaction in the role of supporting player, doing the less glorious work without fanfare. Organizations that want the benefits of effective followers must find ways of rewarding them, ways of bringing them into full partnership in the enterprise. Think of the thousands of companies that achieve adequate performance and lackluster profits with employees they treat like second-class citizens. Then imagine for a moment the power of an organization blessed with fully engaged, fully energized, fully appreciated followers.

A version of this article appeared in the November 1988 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

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Rebecca McInerney 5 months ago

This article is exceedingly important to understand how to correctly participate in the world of business today. More than once the article mentions how a great follower seems to have the same qualities as a great leader, but students are not normally taught how to be great followers. Robert Kelly, however, does a great job of outlining how to be a good follower. It is important to hear that, good followers need to be committed to their company and always looking for ways to improve their knowledge. I think that these are areas that would seem to be necessary for leaders alone, but as the article points out, these are the qualities that show that a great follower can also serve as a great leader. In understanding that followers are an important aspect of any company, it is also good to see that Robert Kelly addresses the ways that companies can foster the growth of good followers. Giving feedback and defining the differences between leadership and followership seem to be the most important of the four points made because they emphasize the importance of open communication which is the best way to create productive growth within a company.

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