

## Leaders and Followers

*John W. Gardner*

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The interaction between leaders and constituents is one of the most central topics within the study of leadership. I would like to pass along some of my reflections from studying that topic over the past several months. Leaders are almost never as much in charge as they are pictured to be, and followers almost never are as submissive as one might imagine. That influence and pressure flow both ways is not a recent discovery. The earliest sociologists who wrote on the subject in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century made the same point. Max Weber, discussing charismatic leaders, asserted that such leaders generally appear in times of trouble and that their followers exhibit "a devotion born of distress." In other words, the state of mind of fol-

lowers is a powerful ingredient in explaining the emergence of the charismatic leader.

Weber's great contemporary Georg Simmel was even more explicit, suggesting that followers have about as much influence on their leaders as leaders have on their followers. Leaders cannot maintain authority, he wrote, unless followers are prepared to believe in that authority. Weber and Simmel were writing in pre-World War I Germany. Their views were not the product of a populist environment!

There is a striking difference between the situation of political leaders and that of line executives in business or government. In the political process, people are free to follow any leader—and leaders must compete for approval. In corporate and governmental bureaucracies, employees appear to have less choice: They are supposed to accept their superiors in the hierarchy as their leaders. But, of course, quite often they do not. One reason corporate and governmental bureaucracies stagnate is the assumption by line executives that, given their rank and authority, they can lead without being leaders. They cannot. They can be given subordinates, but they cannot be given a following. A following must be earned. Surprisingly, many of them do not even know they are not leading. They mistake the exercise of authority for leadership, and as long as they persist in that mistake they will never learn the art of turning subordinates into followers.

Whatever one may say about the influence of constituents, leaders continue to play a crucial role in the interaction. How should they play that role? That is a question that explodes into a thousand questions. Does the group function most effectively when leaders make the decisions without consultation and impose their will—or when they invite varying degrees of participation in the decision? The tension between the two approaches is nicely illustrated in a quote attributed (probably inaccurately) to Woodrow Wilson when he was president of Princeton University. "How can I democratize this university," he demanded, "if the faculty won't do what I ask?"

Should there be a high degree of structure in the relationship—a sharp differentiation between the roles of leaders and followers, a clear hierarchy of authority with emphasis on detailed assignments and task specifications? Or should the relationship be more informal, less structured, with leaders making the goals clear and then letting constituents help determine the way of proceeding?

Should there be an atmosphere of discipline, constraints, controls—in Navy parlance, "a tight ship"—or should there be autonomy, individual re-

sponsibility, and freedom for growth, with the leader in the role of nurturer, supporter, listener, helper?

Should the leader focus on the job to be done—be "task-oriented" as the researchers put it—or should the leader be concerned primarily with the people performing the task, with their needs, their morale, their growth?

## No Simple Answers

More than four decades of objective research have not produced clear answers to these questions. Simple answers have not emerged from the research because there are not any simple answers, only complicated answers hedged by conditions and exceptions. Followers do like being treated with consideration, do like having their say, do like being able to exercise their own initiative—and participation does increase acceptance of decisions. But there are times when followers welcome rather than reject authority, want prompt and clear decisions from the leader, want to close ranks around the leader.

In recent decades there has been increasing support for the view that the purposes of the group are best served by a relationship in which the leader helps followers to develop their own judgment and enables them to grow and to become better contributors. Industrial concerns are experimenting with measures that further such a relationship because of their hard-won awareness that some matters (for example, quality control, productivity, morale) simply cannot be dealt with unless highly motivated workers on site are committed to deal with them. Anyone who believes that people should be encouraged to the full development of their powers is bound to applaud the trend.

To the extent that leaders enable followers to develop their own initiative, they are creating something that can survive their own departure. If they have, in addition, the gift for institution-building, they may create a legacy that will last for a very long time. Some individuals who have dazzling powers of personal leadership not only fail to build institutions but create dependency in those below them. However spectacular their own performance, they leave behind a weakened organization staffed by weakened people.

The two-way conversation between leaders and followers is deeply influenced by the expectations of followers. Any social group, if it is more than a crowd of unrelated strangers, has certain shared needs, aspirations, values, hopes, and fears. The group creates norms that tend to control the behavior of its members, and these norms constitute the social order. It is in this con-

text that leaders arise; and it is this context that determines what kinds of leaders will emerge and what will be expected of them. A loyal constituency is won when people consciously or unconsciously judge the leader to be capable of solving their problems and meeting their needs, when the leader is seen as symbolizing their norms, and when their image of the leader (whether or not it corresponds to reality) is congruent with their inner environment of myth and legend.

Effective leaders deal not only with the explicit decisions of the day—approving a budget, announcing a policy, disciplining a subordinate—but also with that partly conscious, partly buried world of needs and hopes, ideals and symbols. They serve as models; they symbolize the group's unity and identity; they retell the stories that carry shared meanings. William James says that the struggle between right and wrong is a matter of helping our best selves to act. Leaders can perform that function. Unfortunately, they can also help our worst selves to act. Their confidence—or, for that matter, their lack of confidence—communicates itself to followers. “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound,” says the Bible, “who shall prepare himself to the battle?”

To analyze complex problems, leaders must have a capacity for rational problem solving; but they must also have a penetrating intuitive grasp of the needs and moods of followers. Woodrow Wilson said, “The ear of the leader must ring with the voices of the people.” The ablest leaders understand, rationally and intuitively, the embedded expectations of people with respect to their leadership. And they are adept at meeting those expectations not only with rational verbal pronouncements but with symbolic acts, ritual observances, and the like.

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## Leaders and Followers Are the People in this Relationship

*Joseph C. Rost*

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The second essential element flowing from the definition of leadership is that the people involved in this relationship are leaders and followers. This sounds rather innocuous, but there are several important points to be gained from examining this element, especially the meaning of the word *followers*.

### Active Followers

I have no trouble with the word *followers*, but it does bother a number of other scholars and practitioners, who view the word as condescending. Gardner,<sup>1,2</sup> for instance, has rejected the word in favor of *constituents*. That word is problematic, however, because it has strong political connotations. People don't speak about constituents in small groups or clubs, business or religious