

# Followership

## DESCRIPTION

You cannot have leaders without followers. In the previous chapter, “Adaptive Leadership” (Chapter 11), we focused on the efforts of *leaders* in relation to the work of *followers* in different *contexts*. The emphasis was on how leaders engage people to do adaptive work. In this chapter, we focus primarily on *followers* and the central role *followers* play in the leadership process. The process of leading requires the process of following. Leaders and followers together create the leadership relationship, and without an understanding of the process of following, our understanding of leadership is incomplete (Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014).

For many people, being a follower and the process of followership have negative connotations. One reason is that people do not find followership as compelling as leadership. Leaders, rather than followers, have always taken center stage. For example, in school, children are taught early that it is better to be a leader than a follower. In athletics and sports, the praise for performance consistently goes to the leaders, not the team players. When people apply for jobs, they are asked to describe their leadership abilities, not their followership activities. Clearly, it is leadership skills that are applauded by society, not followership skills. It is just simply more intriguing to talk about how leaders use power than to talk about how followers respond to power.

While the interest in examining the active role of followers was first approached in the 1930s by (1949), groundwork on follower research wasn't established until several decades later through the initial works of scholars such as Zaleznik (1965), Kelley (1988), Meindl (1990), and Chaleff (1995). Still, until recently, only a minimal number of studies have been published on followership. Traditionally, leadership research has focused on leaders' traits, roles, and behaviors because leaders are viewed as the causal agents for organizational change. At the same time, the impact of followers on organizational outcomes

has not been generally addressed. Researchers often conceptualize leadership as a leader-centric process, emphasizing the role of the leader rather than the role of the follower. Furthermore, little research has conceptualized leadership as a *shared process* involving the interdependence between leaders and followers in a shared relationship. Even though followers share in the overall leadership process, the nature of their role has not been scrutinized. In effect, followership has rarely been studied as a central variable in the leadership process.

There are indications that this is beginning to change. In a recent *New York Times* article, Susan Cain (author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*) decries the glorification of leadership skills in college admissions and curricula and argues that the world needs more followers. It needs team players, people called to service, and individuals committed to something outside of themselves. Followership is also receiving more attention now because of three major works devoted exclusively to the process of following: *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations* by Riggio, Chaleff, and Lipman-Blumen (2008), *Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders* by Kellerman (2008), and *Followership: What Is It and Why Do People Follow?* by Lapierre and Carsten (2014). Collectively, these books have put the spotlight on followership and helped to establish it as a legitimate and significant area of study.

In this chapter, we examine followership and how it is related to the leadership process. First, we define followers and followership and discuss the implications of these definitions. Second, we discuss selected typologies of followership that illustrate different styles used by followers. Next, we explore a formal theory of followership that has been set forth by Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) and new perspectives on followership suggested by Carsten, Harms, and Uhl-Bien (2014). Last, we explore types of ineffective followership that contribute to destructive leadership.

### **Followership Defined**

It is challenging to define followership because the term conjures up different meanings for people, and the idea of being a follower is positive for some and negative for others. For example, followership is seen as valuable in military situations when soldiers follow orders from a platoon leader to complete a mission, or when passengers boarding a plane follow the boarding agent's instructions. In contrast, however, followers are thought of negatively in such situations as when people follow a cult leader such as David Koresh of the Branch Davidians, or in a college fraternity when individuals are required to conduct life-threatening hazing rituals with new members. Clearly, followership can be positive or negative, and it plays out differently in different settings.

What is followership? *Followership is a process whereby an individual or individuals accept the influence of others to accomplish a common goal.* Followership involves a power differential between the follower and the leader. Typically, followers comply with the directions and wishes of leaders—they defer to leaders' power.

Followership also has an ethical dimension. Like leadership, followership is not amoral; that is, it is not a process that is morally neutral. Followership carries with it a responsibility to consider the morality of one's actions and the rightness or wrongness of the outcomes of what one does as a follower. Followers and leaders work together to achieve common goals, and both share a moral obligation regarding those goals. There are ethical consequences to followership and to what followers do because the character and behavior of followers has an impact on organizational outcomes.

### **Role-Based and Relational-Based Perspectives**

Followership can be divided into two broad categories: *role-based* and *relational-based* (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

The *role-based* perspective focuses on followers in regard to the typical roles or behaviors they exhibit while occupying a formal or informal position within a hierarchical system. For example, in a staff planning meeting, some people are very helpful to the group because they bring energy and offer insightful suggestions regarding how the group might proceed. Their role as engaged followers, in this case, has a positive impact on the meeting and its outcomes. Emphasis in the role-based approach is on the roles and styles of followers and how their behaviors affect the leader and organizational outcomes.

The *relational-based* approach to followership is quite different from the role-based approach. The relational-based system is based on social constructivism. Social constructivism is a sociological theory that argues that people create meaning about their reality as they interact with each other. For example, a fitness instructor and an individual in an exercise class negotiate with each other about the kind of influence the instructor will have and the amount of influence the individual will accept. From a social constructivist perspective, followership is *co-created* by the leader and follower in a given situation. The meaning of followership emerges from the communication between leaders and followers and stresses the interplay between following and leading. Rather than focusing on roles, it focuses on the interpersonal process and one person's attempt to influence and the other person's response to these influence attempts. Leadership occurs within the interpersonal context of people exerting influence and responding to those influence attempts. In the relational-based approach, followership is tied to interpersonal *behaviors* rather than to specific *roles* (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

**Table 12.1** Typologies of Followership

Zaleznik (1965)	Kelley (1992)	Chaleff (1995)	Kellerman (2008)
Withdrawn	Alienated	Resource	Isolate
Masochistic	Passive	Individualist	Bystander
Compulsive	Conformist	Implementer	Participant
Impulsive	Pragmatist	Partner	Activist
	Exemplary	Diehard	

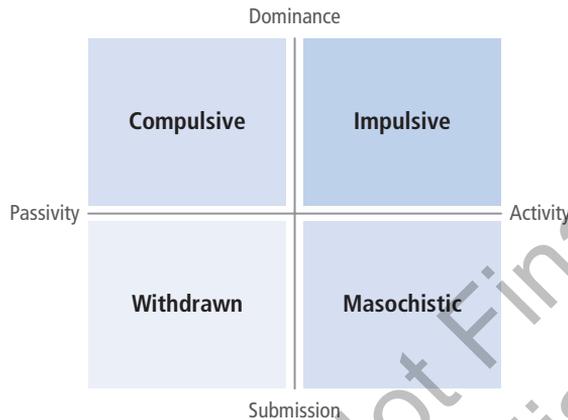
**SOURCE:** Adapted from Crossman, B., & Crossman, J. (2011). Conceptualizing followership: A review of the literature. *Leadership*, 7(4), 481–497.

### Typologies of Followership

How can we describe followers' roles? Trying to do just that has been the primary focus of much of the existing followership research. As there are many types of leaders, so, too, are there many types of followers (Table 12.1). Grouping followers' roles into distinguishable categories to create an accurate category system, or typology, of follower behaviors has been undertaken by several researchers. A typology enhances our understanding of the broader area of followership by breaking it down into smaller pieces. In this case, these pieces are different types of follower roles observed in various settings.

#### The Zaleznik Typology

The first typology of followers was provided by Zaleznik (1965) and was intended to help leaders understand followers and also to help followers understand and become leaders. In an article published in the *Harvard Business Review*, Zaleznik created a matrix that displayed followers' behaviors along two axes: Dominance–Submission and Activity–Passivity (Figure 12.1). The vertical axis represents a range of followers from those who want to control their leaders (i.e., be dominant) to those who want to be controlled by their leaders (i.e., be submissive). The horizontal axis represents a range of followers from those who want to initiate and be involved to those who sit back and withdraw. Based on the two axes, the model identifies four types of followers: *withdrawn* (submissive/passive), *masochistic* (submissive/active), *compulsive* (high dominance/passive), and *impulsive* (high dominance/active). Because Zaleznik was trained in psychoanalytic theory, these follower types are based on psychological concepts. Zaleznik was interested in explaining the communication breakdowns between authority figures and subordinates, in particular the dynamics of subordinacy conflicts. The follower types illustrated

**Figure 12.1** Zalesnik Follower Typology

**SOURCE:** Zalesnik, A. (1965, May/June). The dynamics of subordnacy. *Harvard Business Review*, p. 118.

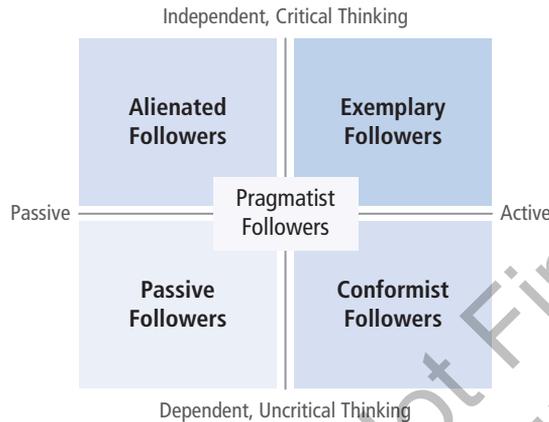
in Figure 12.1 exist as a result of followers' responses to inner tensions regarding authority. These tensions may be unconscious but can often come to the surface and influence the communication in leader–follower relationships.

### The Kelley Typology

Kelley's (1992) typology (Figure 12.2) is currently the most recognized followership typology. Kelley believes followers are enormously valuable to organizations and that the power of followers often goes unrecognized. He stresses the importance of studying followers in the leadership process and gave impetus to the development of the field of followership. While Zalesnik (1965) focused on the personal aspects of followers, Kelley emphasizes the *motivations* of followers and follower behaviors. In his efforts to give followership equal billing to leadership, Kelley examined those aspects of followers that account for *exemplary followership*.

Kelley sorted followers' styles on two axes: independent critical thinking–dependent uncritical thinking and active–passive. These dimensions resulted in five follower role types:

- *passive followers* (sometimes pejoratively called “sheep”) who look to the leader for direction and motivation,
- *conformist followers* who are “yes people”—always on the leader's side but still looking to the leader for direction and guidance,
- *alienated followers* who think for themselves and exhibit a lot of negative energy,

**Figure 12.2** Kelley Follower Typology

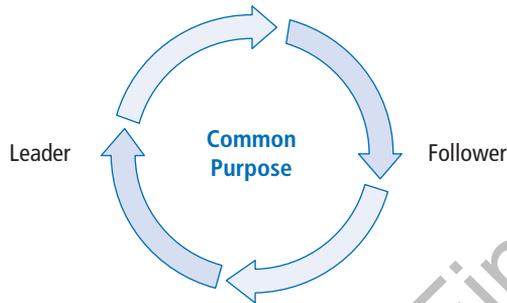
**SOURCE:** Based on Kelley, R. E. (1992). *The power of followership*. New York, NY: Doubleday Business (p. 97).

- *pragmatists* who are “fence-sitters” that support the status quo but do not get on board until others do, and
- *exemplary followers* (sometimes called “star” followers) who are active and positive and offer independent constructive criticism.

Based on his observations, Kelley (1988) asserts that effective followers share the same indispensable qualities: (1) They self-manage and think for themselves, exercise control and independence, and work without supervision; (2) they show strong commitment to organizational goals (i.e., something outside themselves) as well as their own personal goals; (3) they build their competence and master job skills; and (4) they are credible, ethical, and courageous. Rather than framing followership in a negative light, Kelley underscores the positive dimensions of following.

### The Chaleff Typology

Chaleff (1995, 2008) developed a typology to amplify the significance of the role of followers in the leadership process (Table 12.1). He developed his typology as a result of a defining moment in his formative years when he became aware of the horrors of the World War II Holocaust that killed more than 6 million European Jews. Chaleff felt a moral imperative to seek answers as to why people followed German leader Adolf Hitler, a purveyor of hate and death. What could be done to prevent this from happening again? How could followers be emboldened to help leaders use their power appropriately and act to keep leaders from abusing their power?

**Figure 12.3** Leader–Follower Interaction

**SOURCE:** Chaleff, I. (2008). Creating new ways of following. In R. E. Riggio, I. Chaleff, & J. Lipman-Blumen (Eds.), *The art of followership: How great followers create great leaders and organizations* (p. 71). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

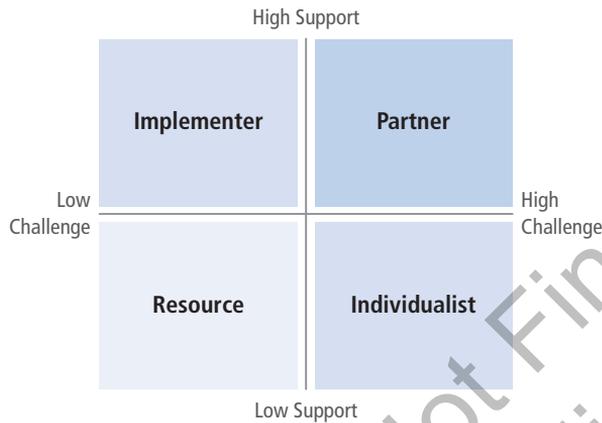
Rather than *servicing leaders*, Chaleff argues that followers *serve a common purpose along with leaders* (Figure 12.3) and that both leaders and followers work to achieve common outcomes. Chaleff states that followers need to take a more proactive role that brings it into parity with the leader's role. He sought to make followers more responsible, to change their own internal estimates of their abilities to influence others, and to help followers feel a greater sense of agency.

To achieve equal influence with leaders, Chaleff emphasizes that followers need to be *courageous*. His approach is a prescriptive one; that is, it advocates how followers *ought to* behave. According to Kelley, followers need the courage to

- a. assume responsibility for the common purpose,
- b. support the leader and the organization,
- c. constructively challenge the leader if the common purpose or integrity of group is being threatened,
- d. champion the need for change when necessary, and
- e. take a moral stand that is different from the leader's to prevent ethical abuses.

In short, Chaleff proposes that followers should be morally strong and work to do the right thing when facing the multiplicity of challenges that leaders place upon them.

Chaleff created a follower typology (Figure 12.4), which is constructed using two characteristics of courageous followership: *the courage to support* the leader (vertical axis) and the *courage to challenge* the leader's behavior and policies (horizontal axis). This typology differentiates four styles of followership:

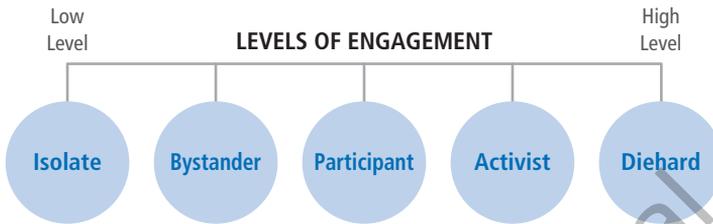
**Figure 12.4** Chaleff Follower Typology

**SOURCE:** Chaleff, I. (2008). Creating new ways of following. In R. E. Riggio, I. Chaleff, & J. Lipman-Blumen (Eds.), *The art of followership: How great followers create great leaders and organizations* (pp. 67–87). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass (p. 75).

1. *Resource* (lower left quadrant), which exhibits low support and low challenge. This is the person who does just enough to get by.
2. *Individualist* (lower right quadrant), which demonstrates low support and high challenge. Often marginalized by others, the individualist speaks up and lets the leader know where she or he stands.
3. *Implementer* (upper left quadrant), which acts with high support and low challenge. Often valued by the leader, implementers are supportive and get the work done but, on the downside, fail to challenge the leader's goals and values.
4. *Partner* (upper right quadrant), which shows high support and high challenge. This style of follower takes responsibility for his- or herself and the leader and fully supports the leader, but is always willing to challenge the leader when necessary.

### The Kellerman Typology

Kellerman's (2008) typology of followers was developed from her experience as a political scientist and her observations about followers in different historical contexts. Kellerman argues that the importance of leaders tends to be overestimated because they generally have more power, authority, and influence, while the *importance of followers* is underestimated. From her perspective, followers are subordinates who are "unleaders." They have less rank than leaders, and they defer to leaders.

**Figure 12.5** Kellerman Follower Typology

Kellerman designed a typology that differentiates followers in regard to a single attribute: *level of engagement*. She suggests a continuum (Figure 12.5), which describes followers on one end as being detached and doing nothing for the leader or the group's goals and followers on the opposite end as being very dedicated and deeply involved with the leader and the group's goals. As shown in the figure, Kellerman's typology identifies five levels of follower engagement and behaviors:

*Isolates* are completely unengaged. They are detached and do not care about their leaders. Isolates who do nothing actually strengthen the influence potential of a leader. For example, when an individual feels alienated from the political system and never votes, elected officials end up having more power and freedom to exert their will.

*Bystanders* are observers who do not participate. They are aware of the leader's intentions and actions but deliberately choose to not become involved. In a group situation, the bystander is the person who listens to the discussion but, when it is time to make a decision, disengages and declares neutrality.

*Participants* are partially engaged individuals who are willing to take a stand on issues, either supporting or opposing the leader. For example, participants would be the employees who challenge or support the leader regarding the fairness of their company's new overtime policy.

*Activists* feel strongly about the leader and the leader's policies and are determined to act on their own beliefs. They are change agents. For example, in 2017, activists were willing to sit in the halls of the U.S. Capitol to protest proposed changes to the Affordable Care Act.

*Diehards* are engaged to the extreme. They are deeply committed to supporting the leader or opposing the leader. Diehards are totally dedicated to their cause, even willing to risk their lives for it. In a small-group setting, a diehard is a follower who is all-consumed with his or her own position within the group to the point of forcing the group members to do what he or she wants them to do or forcing the group process to implode. For example, there have been U.S. congresspersons willing to force the

government into economic calamity by refusing to vote to raise the country's debt ceiling in order to force their will on a particular issue, such as increased defense spending or funding for a roads project in their district.

What do these four typologies (i.e., Zaleznik, Kelley, Chaleff, and Kellerman) tell us about followers? What insights or conclusions are suggested by the typologies?

First, these typologies provide a starting point for research. The first step in building theory is to define the phenomenon under observation, and these typologies are that first step to identifying key followership variables. Second, these typologies highlight the multitude of different ways followers have been characterized, from alienated or masochistic to activist or individualist. Third, while the typologies do not differentiate a definitive list of follower types, there are some commonalities among them. Generally, the major followership types are active–engaged, independent–assertive, submissive–compliant, and supportive–conforming—or, as suggested by Carsten et al. (2014), passive followers, anti-authoritarian followers, and proactive followers.

Fourth, the typologies are important because they label individuals engaged in the leadership process. This labeling brings followers to the forefront and gives them more credence for their role in the leadership process. These descriptions can also assist leaders in effectively communicating with followers. By knowing that a follower adheres to a certain type of behavior, the leader can adapt her or his style to optimally relate to the role the follower is playing.

Collectively, the typologies of followership provide a beginning point for theory building about followership. Building on these typologies, the next section discusses some of the first attempts to create a theory of followership.

## THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO FOLLOWERSHIP

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What is the phenomenon of followership? Is there a theory that explains it? Uhl-Bien and her colleagues (2014) set out to answer those questions by systematically analyzing the existing followership literature and introducing a broad theory of followership. They state that followership comprises “characteristics, behaviors and processes of individuals acting in relation to leaders” (p. 96). In addition, they describe followership as a *relationally based process* that includes how followers and leaders interact to construct leadership and its outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 99).

Based on these definitions, Uhl-Bien et al. proposed a formal theory of followership. They first identified the constructs (i.e., components or attributes) and variables that comprise the process of followership as shown in Table 12.2.