

Be a team member on a mission

Your stepping stone to becoming a leader is choosing “followership” over “following”

THOUGH we ultimately aspire to achieve success and a leadership position, we all start our worklife as “followers”

So imagine your first day at work, where you are presented with two different groups.

On your right side stands a smart, capable, enthusiastic and energetic bunch of people. On your left side, is a downtrodden, lazy, incapable bunch of losers, who are more glum than glam.

Which group would you choose to be part of? If you were a manager, would you pick a different group?

In both cases, I assume you would pick the raring-to-go righties, over the languorous lefties — right?

It is good to start out with great expectations, and pick the best route to success, isn't it? Sadly, in the cold reality of practice, teams that are made up of “followers” — even capable ones — lose their edge in the heat of competition, and mediocrity is often the best they can offer.

As you plan your personal success, you can do things differently — by choosing “followership” over “following”.

“Followership” is not a substitute word for “follower”. It is not about passive plodders, dragging along like lead weights behind a leader's loudly barked orders. Nor is it about uncritical masses, silently doing only what they are told, without a thought for consequences.

Followership is an intensely active state, where followers drive towards mission success, supporting their leader and team. It is about mindful, constructive behaviours that immerse, engage and fully own and resolve problems that arise along the way.



Don't be a passive plodder listening to the leader's orders. Support him and the team on the journey to success.

Followership means taking an active pride in the success of your team. It is also a humble form of self-leadership for followers — your teammates. It is a relatively new and well-kept secret. Tap into Google to find over a billion results on leadership — about 1,000 times more than for followership!

The rising tide of evidence suggests that the right combination of team, leadership and followership, is the amalgam for greater achievement, and personal success.

Followership is a mind shift, set in place by embracing the following behaviours.

Own success

Become fully aware of your leader's desires, your team's mission and the challenges. Know your strengths, what you can contribute and the roles that you can best play. Understanding both sides of this equation enables you to bridge the gaps in active ways.

It might seem easier to drop your head, avoid the gaze of those around you or disappear.

Instead of doing that, enrol in the mission, sign on to fully engage in and achieve successful outcomes.

Own your situation, whether or not you created it. Be proud of outcomes achieved, understanding that it is always possible to celebrate success, yet still maintain humility.

Communicate well

Followership demands stronger communication skills, so start out with a desire to listen. Conduct open and honest dialogue with the leader and team, building up positive interactions inside relationships based on trust.

Have courage to give feedback to your leader, even to challenge him if required.

Avoid the “weakness trap” of keeping your thoughts to yourself, risking everything, by saying nothing.

Followership means pointing out things your leader cannot see, at appropriate times, and in appropriate ways. Good followers are not sheep; leave “silence” to the lambs!

Influence upwards

You know where your influence arises, how to grow it and how to exercise it in positive, ethical ways that help your leader and the team succeed.

You understand that your influence stems more from performance than authority. You also see that growing expertise becomes core to greater influence. The better you perform, the more people listen; the more they listen, the more they seek your opinion; the more your opinion is heard, the more expertise you amass.

You also know that increased visibility puts you in places where more people listen. You don't hide, but instead, take steps to ensure you are more frequently heard, in appropriate places, in appropriate ways, for the good of the team.

Model the mind shifts

Though you already have embraced followership, you know that not everyone else “gets it” yet. You also understand that its adoption is transformative and recognise that it is at its most productive when it dovetails inside the team, alongside strong leadership.

Full effectiveness is only achievable with a mind shift in others. You therefore take on board responsibility to model appropriate behaviours to your team members and leader.

Tomorrow: Five important leadership areas that complement followership

Article by Patrick O'Brien, managing director of the Amanuenses Network. Amanuenses delivers soft-skills training solutions that focus on team productivity and personal effectiveness. For more information, visit www.amanuenses.net

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