

## **Taking Followership Education to the Next Level**

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### **Introduction**

If leadership is a relationship between a leader and follower (Rost, 1991), why are we, as higher education faculty and practitioners, so focused on only one half of the equation: the leader? When we examine the countless research articles, books, and conferences, it is clear that more attention has been paid to leaders than followers. Followership, however, in recent decades, is beginning to get its share of attention (Raffo, 2013). As educators in colleges and universities, we are tasked with sculpting and feeding the minds of students that will soon lead our society and make change. While higher education institutions across the United States and Canada offer leadership programs, certificates, and education, there seems to be a disconnect: if leadership is a relationship between the leader and follower, why is there little or no education on followership (Smith, 2009)? There needs to be a shift in the way institutions support leadership education to ensure we are developing and graduating individuals that will shape our future in positive ways.

Followership, until recent years, has been an understudied and undervalued concept (Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, & Morris, 2006), but this seems to be shifting. “After decades of neglect, followers and followership are beginning to get the attention they have long deserved” (Johnson, 2009, p. 20). There is widespread recognition that leadership is a process, and it engages at least two members (leader and follower) (Kellerman, 2007). Followership and leadership scholars are starting to understand and recognize that the study of followers and followership is as dense and multifaceted as the topic of leadership. As a deeper understanding of the term is emerging, it is time to prepare for the continued growth of the field. This can be accomplished by offering our students in higher education settings the opportunity to learn more about followership, engage with the concept, and contribute to the evolving discussion.

In the last few years, publications have explored how to teach followership in engaging ways (Hoptin, 2014; Raffo, 2013), but what is lacking is the discussion of why this is needed. Rather than adding followership education to the existing structure of leadership education, I argue that a philosophical shift must occur to ensure educators are providing students with a comprehensive, realistic educational experience. This can best be achieved by developing a parallel followership education stream. This brief will explore this idea of why followership education warrants its own education and certificate track that works in tandem and parallel with leadership courses.

## **The Importance of Followership**

It is neither practical nor philosophically possible for everyone to be a leader (Kellerman, 2008); in fact, there are usually more followers than leaders in classrooms, laboratories, residence halls, and other university sites. If the majority of our population are followers, why are we focusing most of our energy, resources, and attention on a fraction of the student body? Lippitt (1982) identifies followers as a major unused human resource. Let me be clear: I am not suggesting we neglect leaders, but rather, develop a followership framework that mirrors the leadership education experience. Kilburn (2010) suggests that followership is not in competition with leadership, but rather, it is a different perspective addressing the same phenomenon. Exploring theories, models, and perspectives about followership will entice students to challenge the existing definition of follower and will contribute to their development. It is well accepted that many characteristics of leaders are appropriate and relevant for followers as well (Guidera & Gilmore, 1988) and that leadership and followership are inextricably linked (Hollander, 1992). By contributing to students' understanding of followership, we are building their leadership capacity as well. However, this is not the sole reason to explore followership.

Some scholars have suggested that the psychology of followership is not only more complicated but also more interesting than leadership (Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). Hollander (1992) accurately notes, "leaders do command greater attention and influence, but followers can affect and even constrain leaders' activity in more than passing ways" (p.71); good leaders are made by good followers (Thody, 2003).

**Changing societal culture.** Bjugstad et al. (2006) identify several reasons why followers are playing a more prominent role in organizational success, such as expanding social networks and individuals' ability to access information more easily. Students are more outspoken and engaged than in previous years, they are aware that they have power, and with the speed and access of communication, anyone can make a difference quickly and globally (Kellerman, 2008). Because of this, colleges and universities need to understand the concept of followership and recognize the value it adds to the student experience. Since leaders are no longer the sole source of information, followers do not follow blindly, and they demonstrate more skepticism (Bjugstad et al., 2006). Holcomb (2008) states that leaders and followers now, jointly, are sharing the ownership of workforce relationships and this responsibility rests equally with both identities. The balance of power is shifting: leaders have less power and influence, and followers are becoming equal partners in the relationship. With this changing dynamic, is it not time for our perspective and emphasis that has been traditionally exclusively on leader development to change as well?

## **The Need for a Followership Education and/or Certificate**

It is evident that the follower needs more focus and attention (Hoptin 2014). Some authors suggest incorporating followership research into the existing structure of

leadership education, so to explore why followership warrants its own education track, we must understand the current context.

**Current state of leadership development, education, & certificates.** When we examine the current state of leadership education and certification, it is clear that there has been a focus on leaders to the point of ignoring, and even discrediting, followers (Kupers, 2007). Existing certificates provide sessions on leadership theory, social change, and group leadership, among others. Hoptin (2014) argues that followership content is beginning to make its way into the classroom via discussions, and Johnson (2009) adds that this is necessary to aid in the development of individuals' leadership skills. Some scholars are already integrating followership into existing leadership education structures. Johnson's brief in 2009 offers ways to incorporate followership material into three core leadership classes, and Raffo (2013) and Hoptin (2014) provide lesson plans and class activities to engage students in critical thinking and reflection regarding followership. This brief, however, takes it a step further. What I suggest is beyond a course or classroom activity(ies). I suggest it is time to develop a followership education certificate and/or program, and this may need to be accompanied by a philosophical shift in how we view the leader-follower relationship.

Over twenty years ago, Ronald Lippitt (1982) stated "one interesting discovery has been that, many times, leadership training is dysfunctional in that it puts an emphasis on strengthening the role of leadership without focusing on strengthening the skills and competencies of members" (401-402). Although it took over two decades, his message can finally be heard by developing followership education courses and certificates to support the development specifically of the "members" or followers. Followership development, while it may have many overlapping areas with leadership, requires unique instruction and examination to be successful and fruitful.

It is important to distinguish between leader/follower development and leadership/followership development. As Day (2000) shares, there has been confusion between the terms. He posits that leader development focuses on individual capabilities, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation, which contribute to intrapersonal ability. Leadership development, on the other hand, examines something more complex. A commonly accepted definition is Rost's that states "[l]eadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect mutual purposes" (1991, p. 102). Using this definition, it appears as though followers are acknowledged and recognized. I argue, however, with the title "leadership development," the emphasis is still on the leader and neglects the follower. Although many scholars would argue followership is encompassed in this definition of leadership development, others suggest that in the existing structure, this is not adequately presented. "For example, in leadership education, development, and training, most of the practice consists of formatting and evaluating the traits or behaviors of leaders and leaders-to-be" (Kupers, 2007, p.195). In this existing training, there is no obvious place for followership. Clearly, a topic of further conversation may be developing or reframing a term to ensure the roles of both parties are equally highlighted. Rost's definition is a valuable start. This brief,

however, is focused on developing follower and followership competencies from the perspective that leadership development does not currently address this sufficiently.

**The uniqueness of followership.** To understand why followership education deserves its own emphasis and certificate, there must be recognition that it is, in fact, different than leadership. While there are many similarities between leaders and followers, followership offers many unique aspects and characteristics that warrant study and education on its own. For example, followers need to challenge the concepts of groupthink and sabotage (Guidera and Gilmore, 1988), and they must learn how to support fellow followers, along with the leader. Obviously, these skills are not examined in leadership education. Guidera and Gilmore (1988) examined the nursing profession specifically and summarized:

in education, more emphasis needs to be placed on developing followership skills rather than leadership skills. It seems absurd to believe that we can prepare nursing students to assume leadership positions in nursing upon graduation. Nurses need to know that to follow effectively is as important. One behaviorist suggests having workshops to train followers to build effective communication skills and to teach them how to influence policy makers within systems (p.1017).

Offering a followership track alongside a leadership stream, clearly, has many benefits.

**Possible outcomes.** One of the many benefits of teaching followership in its own vein is the re-definition of the term “follower,” which is not a well-respected term (Bjugstad et al., 2006). Carr, Mulgan, and Hastings (1998) provide one perspective of why it is not valued: socially, especially in Western society, individuals are encouraged to be autonomous and independent, and to call oneself a follower is admitting to being led, which subsequently carries overtones of failure. Raffo (2013) elaborates and suggests that the stereotypes that exist with the word include individuals that are docile, obedient, indifferent, conformists, weak, unthinking, dependent, and helpless. Is it any surprise individuals would prefer being identified as a leader than as a follower? As educators in postsecondary institutions, it is our responsibility to provide an image of the society our students will be contributing to, and by offering development in both followership and leadership skills and competencies, we are ensuring our students are set for success regardless of the role, position, or industry they are entering. By offering a followership certificate, students can dissect and re-define the term “follower,” and eventually, use it with pride.

In addition to the valuable rebranding of a term that carries negative stereotypes, there are many other possible outcomes as a result of a followership education certificate. A study by Ostergaard, Ostergaard, and Lippert (2004) in Denmark examined how the study of leadership, communication, cooperation, and followership skills had on reducing the risk of serious events, and thus improved patient safety, in medical environments. The authors recognized that many failures or hazards in medical contexts are due to ineffective or insufficient communication. Their hypothesis was that decision-making abilities would improve if individuals understood his/her role on the team. The two

aspects of the team they focused on were the individual's ability to function as a team member and the entire team's ability to function as an effective, efficient collective (Ostergaard et al., 2004). In the medical field, and arguably, in any industry, team members must transition in and out of roles and groups often, so to be competent, individuals must possess general team awareness and generic team skills as well as their individualized expertise. Ostergaard et al. (2004) noted,

we emphasize the importance of leadership and train the team leader to take charge, avoid getting too involved in practical issues, and the ability to step back and have a 'bird's eye' view of the situation. Equally important is followership, meaning that each team member understands his or her role in the team, ranging from doing as requested to actively participating in problem solving and decision-making, and if necessary decrease the workload on the team leader (p.92).

The resulting outcomes they found were several adult learning principles such as activation of the leader, building on prior knowledge, and opportunities for self-reflection. While this is a very focused and specific situation, in the broader followership context, these are just some of the possible outcomes. By fully understanding principles and concepts of followership, students can also better understand leadership (Raffo, 2013). Additional outcomes include a greater understanding of individual and group processes and dynamics as well as improved relationship and emotional intelligence.

Once educators accept that followership is integral to leadership and leadership is integral to followership (Kupers, 2007; Van Vugt et al., 2008), they can begin to understand that good followers actually act as a counterbalance to poor leadership (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2009). Crossman and Crossman (2011) suggest that many leaders and managers "appear to have assumed that individuals instinctively know how to follow and have not fully appreciated the potential for individuals to learn how to follow effectively" (p.482). In a broader view, developing competent, courageous, educated followers will support leaders to be successful. As mentioned, rather than seeing followership education as an opponent to leadership studies, Kilburn (201) suggests that "coupled with an understanding of leaders, followership studies enable researchers and practitioners alike to attain greater perspective on the leadership phenomenon" (p. 9). Clearly, pursuing a followership education and certificate is beneficial to scholars, students, and educators in both leadership and followership studies alike.

## **Moving Forward**

Baker (2007) does an excellent job chronicling the emergence of followership as a field of study and examining why the emphasis has traditionally been on leaders rather than followers. Now, it is our opportunity to contribute to the evolution of followership and provide students the ability to create and contribute to change. Kupers (2007) recognizes that the challenges that exist in business, organizations, and I argue, higher education institutions, are numerous and evolving. Issues such as globalization, technological developments, and increased competition are requiring that society view and define leadership and followership in new ways. By raising the visibility of

followership, we can contribute to these new definitions and refine them to empower all students and groups and support their holistic development.

**Possible study topics and classes.** Several authors have outlined key concepts that need to be communicated regarding followers and followership, and this presents us with an outline of how to proceed with a followership certificate. For example, Hurwitz and Hurwitz (2009) summarized three key points from their writing. First, leadership and followership are separate and independent roles. Second, most people do both roles, and third, followership is critical to organizational and personal effectiveness and success. These same concepts are mentioned in different ways by different authors, but the core messages are consistent. Using these principles to guide our certificate and curriculum development, we can ensure our outcomes are met. Hurwitz and Hurwitz (2009), listed above, is only one example; many others exist. Baker (2007) shares four basic tenants of active followership theory. These include (1) followers and leaders are roles, not people with inherent characteristics. (2) followers are not passive; they are active, (3) followers and leaders share a common purpose, and lastly (4) followers and leaders are interconnected and need to be studied in the context of their relationship. Johnson (2009) echoes these principles with four of his own, (1) leaders and followers have an interdependent relationship, (2) followers are essential to group success, (3) followers are an important component in many leadership theories, and (4) followers are responsible for their own moral and ethical choices and face their own challenges.

Using the tenants and principles listed above, an outline of a curriculum emerges. I recommend the following topics for classes, complementing existing leadership classes (using Florida State University’s leadership certificate for comparison purposes):

| <b>Leadership Courses</b>            | <b>Followership Courses</b>            |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Leadership Theory and Practice       | Followership Theory and Practice       |
| Leadership in Groups and Communities | Followership in Groups and Communities |
| Leadership and Change                | Enacting Change as a Follower          |

Obviously, developing parallel courses based on followership rather than leadership is achievable. Additionally, typologies of followers, traits for effective followers (and subsequently how to develop them), and followership ethics are also options.

One note of concern is that followers will continue to be examined through the leader lens; in other words, understanding the follower will have the purpose to educate leaders how to be more effective. This is not the intention, but instead of the leader-centric perspective, the follower-centric development viewpoint must be present. These education streams, however, can easily complement each other. For example, good followers learn the preferences of their leader and make changes to adapt (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2009). There are, however, some limitations with this certificate as followership and followers are still being researched. The education of followership works hand in hand with continued scholarship.

**Research.** Although I am advocating for a followership certificate, research must be a part of the effort. Bremner (2011), in his doctoral thesis, suggests that “in order to achieve a more complete understanding of the leadership process, it has been argued that research should be shifted to consider the role of followers” (p. 1). With this in mind, continuing on the same path of exploring different typologies, different characteristics, as well as other ideas will ensure the evolution of followership will progress. Additionally, there are some new areas of interest proposed by researchers that have not been examined and require attention. For example, some authors (Monö, 2013; Van Vugt et al., 2008) acknowledge that to follow is actually counterintuitive to Darwin’s theory of natural selection; it is not obvious why people agree to subordinate themselves when this may put them at an evolutionary disadvantage, although there are many theories. Holcomb (2008) suggests that while we can all identify good and bad leadership, we cannot do the same with followership. There must be an increased comfort and ease of rewarding and recognizing followership behaviors and contributions. Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, and McGregor (2010) reinforce that followership research still has a leader-centric focus, and there needs to be a change. In addition to researching followers’ view of leaders, there is also the untapped area of followers’ view of each other and the concept of followership. The bold statement that “we have often encountered the perspective that, while followership may be interesting, leadership is vital. Is this valid?” (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2009, p.81) also opens new research doors and opportunity for debate. Regardless of the specific area of research, “since most of us are more often followers than leaders and engage in multiple follower roles at any given time, followership should be more prevalent in our research” (Raffo, 2013, p. 263).

## **Conclusion**

This brief has the intention of suggesting a new practice: developing and offering a followership certificate and education in conjunction with the existing leadership structure. While the value and intricacies of followership have evolved recently, its importance to leadership is not a new connection. Lippitt (1982) recognized that “followers, like leaders must adapt their attitudes, roles, and skills to help meet the challenges of the 1980s and the decades ahead” (p. 400). Is it not time to finally heed the suggestions of scholars before us? It is imperative we recognize the value of followers, as we have begun to do, but the next step, educating our student populations is just as important. Taking followership certificate and education to a level parallel to that of leadership will send the message that it is truly a relationship between both parties, and we can develop and adapt to become our best self in each of these roles. Students can also play an active role in followership studies and contribute to its scholarship.

Carr et al. (1998) provide a vision of the future they desire: they hope that society is moving towards an environment of greater interdependence in which there are certain qualities recognized that are needed in leaders, but followers are provided the power and responsibility to productively contribute to the shared vision. We must not forget that to reach the shared vision, “developing followers is just as important as developing leaders” (Johnson, 2009, p.20). Hurwitz and Hurwitz (2009) suggest that many individuals could become great followers if the concept was made more prominent and training was

available: “making the invisible visible allows for a productive discussion of followership and its implementation throughout an organization” (p.81). The topic is not going away; in fact, in 2003, Harvard Business Review listed followership as one of its top five breakthrough ideas. More recently, Crossman & Crossman (2011) state that “recent research appears to be cementing the importance of followership and providing cogent arguments for practice and directions for future research” (p.491). It cannot be avoided, so it begs the question: isn’t it time we take Followership education to the next level?

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## **Author Biography**

Shermin Murji is a doctoral student in Florida State University's Higher Education program. Her areas of interest include assessment, student engagement, and followership and leadership development. With no formal training in leadership, she brings a unique practitioner perspectives from her years of experience leading students in a peer health education capacity. She is passionate about discussing followership and exploring the distinction between the follower and leader and the intricacies and value of both roles, education, and development. Born in Calgary, Canada, she obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Cooperative) in Psychology from the University of Alberta and a Masters of Public Health from Walden University in 2012. Following her anticipated graduation in 2017, she is planning to return to Canada with lessons from American peers and colleagues to contribute to and improve the Canadian higher education system.