

Proceedings of the 2014 International Followership Symposium

Preface

First, let me say how delighted I am to be here with all of you today. Rob, I have enjoyed being your follower as you honcho'd this event from idea to reality. I am also delighted to be sharing the agenda with colleagues who were central to the first followership conference eight years ago at Claremont University. Jean Lipman-Blumen, Robert Kelley, Barbara Kellerman who will join us later, Gene Dixon and others.

The back story to the conference at Claremont was that I noticed Jean Lipman-Blumen was using *The Courageous Follower* as a text in a class, pairing it with her book on toxic leadership and why people follow toxic leaders. I emailed Jean to thank her and asked if she had ever considered holding a conference on followership. Jean being Jean said, give me a couple of days. Literally, in a couple of days she got back to me and said that she had arranged with Ron Riggio at the Kravis Leadership Institute to make followership the theme in the Institute's next annual leadership program. The most important words she said were "He has the money." I had the honor of co-editing a book with Jean and Ron that came out of that conference as part of the Warren Bennis Leadership series entitled *The Art of Followership*. Again, Jean being Jean, she got Warren's agreement to write the introduction and James McGregor Burns' agreement to write the preface. The kind of bona fides about which most of us only dream and Jean makes happen.

Sadly we have lost these two great contributors to our field. I think it is no small part of their legacy that each in their way, towards the sunset of their illustrious careers, clearly stated that followership is at least as importance as leadership and more difficult to do well. Since I joined the ILA board, Shelly Wilsey, ILA's long term Director, worries that I am campaigning to

change the International Leadership Association (ILA) to the International Leadership and Followership Association (ILFA). Worse things could happen.

I hope Warren won't mind my telling a story out of school should he be hovering over these proceedings. In the intensity of editing a significant book like *The Art of Followership*, I got somewhat carried away. We divided up the chapters and I found myself in the unusual situation of editing a lot of contributors with far more impressive credentials than I have, including Jean herself. Carried away by the generally positive response I got from my editing, when we got Warren's introduction, I didn't stop to think about the difference between my relationship with authors and with the executive editor of the book. I took out the blue pencil and marked up his introduction with comments as to why I thought the changes would strengthen the introduction. I shot it off to Warren without so much as consulting my co-editors. Warren sent me back a polite but clearly boundary setting note that said it would be inappropriate for the editors to edit the executive editor. So, out of this failure to think clearly about our respective roles and to frame my suggestions accordingly, I stepped right into the classic follower dilemma of my wonderful ideas being summarily rejected.

But think about my dilemma for a moment. Could I, Mr. Courageous Follower, put my tail between my legs at this rebuff and run for cover? I wanted to, given Warren Bennis's stratospheric credentials versus my own. It was really a bit of a cosmic joke with the joke being on me. So I carefully constructed an appropriately diplomatic response that apologized for my insensitivity to our roles, and expressed great respect for his work and gratitude for including *The Art of Followership* in his series. And then I said that I would be remiss as a follower if I didn't try one more time to explain why I thought it was in his and the book's interest for him to consider the editorial suggestions. The outcome of that exchange was that I joined the ranks of

many courageous followers who don't have their meritorious ideas accepted. But I felt that I had at least maintained my integrity by speaking with the candor that both Warren and I encourage in others. I guess Warren understood, as in 2011, in response to an invitation to join the Followership Learning Community meeting in London he wrote:

Dear Ira,

Unfortunately, since I've given up air travel for about 3 and 1/2 years, I will be unable to join you at the London 2011 ILA conference. Keep up your intense drive to get followership in everybody's space!

All best,

Warren

Well, we are doing that here today, Warren.

I am glad to say that I had more success in the follower role when talking with Rob about the symposium. I made a strong pitch for making its focus be more on application than theory. Ultimately, the value of the ILA and of leadership or followership studies is making a positive impact in the world. And this is the heart of the message I want to convey this morning. When I read scholars like Warren Bennis or Jean Lipman-Blumen who have matured in their fields and developed a voice that speaks with wisdom and clarity and vision and practicality all rolled together, I am in awe of their capacity to reach beyond the academic homes that support them into the world those academic homes must ultimately serve. That is the voice I also hear when I listen to, or read, Robert Kelley or Barbara Kellerman. Each of their voices is distinctive and unique, but each speaks and writes with a reference to the audience, rather than a reference to other academics whose work supports their claims.

For the ILA to achieve its mission of making a difference to leadership by bringing together scholars, educators and practitioners, we need to look to people like Bennis as models.

They are the stars in the firmament who have mastered how to create bridges from the requirements of academic writing to those of the marketplace. It is in the marketplace where we reach individuals and groups and nudge cultures in the direction of ideas that improve the human condition.

We are getting there. Earlier this year, both Barbara Kellerman and I were panelists at the United States Naval Academy. The event was a milestone. The Naval Academy holds a leadership conference each year. The entire brigade of 4500 midshipmen is invited to attend any of the events their class schedule permits. In addition, 60 well-regarded universities send contingents to participate. The theme of this year's event was "Followership: The Evolution of a Leader." I asked the Lieutenant Commander who put the event together how the theme was chosen. She told me that the midshipmen on the event committee chose it. I consider that magnificent evidence of generational change and the meme of followership entering the culture. Barbara was on the first panel. The topic was "Change From Below: Creativity, Dissent and Reshaping." Let me read you some of the language in the program describing this panel:

The rapid proliferation of social networking and instant communication has vastly expanded the follower's voice across all industries. Today's most successful organizations are those which acknowledge, understand and appreciate the follower's unprecedented role in reinforcing the leader's vision and influencing organizational change...The constructive dissent of a single follower can inspire creativity – generating new ideas to transform the organization from the inside out...

This is not your father's military.

I served on the second panel. The title was "Ethics: The Leader, The Follower and the Organization." Let me read you excerpts from the program description of that panel:

The information revolution has ushered in a new era of transparency and accountability. Stakeholders ... expect the organization to meet demands while simultaneously operating with integrity and maintaining trust... What responsibilities does the follower have to “lead from below” when defining ethical guidelines in business, warfare or politics? How does a follower toe the ethical hardline when a leader vacillates?

This time, I will say, nor is this your mother’s military.

As another example, The Department of State is organized into its embassy services and its consular services. Consular Affairs handles all passport and visa issues with about 300 offices distributed around the six continents. About three years ago, a group of senior and mid-level careerists initiated a process to define the ten leadership tenets to which Consular Affairs would aspire. After rich feedback from below, one of the tenets that emerged was “Follow Courageously.” As defined, it stated:

We take ownership of our work and hold ourselves accountable for improving performance and making our organization stronger. We dissent respectfully and help the boss become more effective in the interest of the team and the mission.

Each year every consular office stands down for a day to review how it is doing, with particular focus on one of the tenets. In 2013, the chosen tenet was “Follow Courageously.” Every staff member in every consular office around the world discussed followership. This year, the rest of the Department of State is adopting ten leadership principles. The principles were developed with less bottoms up input and do not, as of this time, explicitly include followership. But I have been told there is a strong sentiment in the team guiding the initiative to start their reading program with a focus on followership, as followership informs many of the other principles. The times they are a changing.

Personally, I have been immensely gratified to be part of the trajectory of transforming the cultural understanding of followership. When I was writing *The Courageous Follower*, I called Robert Kelley to ask him why he thought his terrific book wasn't more widely available. He said he thought he was ahead of his time. I would modify that assessment to say that he created the time of which he was ahead. We are all now sharing the responsibility to carry forward that work. The people in this room are picking up the torch and doing some great work.

I myself am in the whirlwind of publishing my next book which is an extension of courageous followership. It's called *Intelligent Disobedience: Doing Right When You're Told to Do Wrong*. It's based on guide dog training which requires the dog being able to distinguish between when to obey and when to resist for the safety of the team, the team being the human and dog. The follower in this team must know when and how *not* to follow. And it must know how to find alternate ways around obstacles and when to hand the lead back to the human. When the dust settles around the launch, my personal goal is to spend time in what Eric Erickson calls the generativity stage - passing on what I have learned about teaching followership in the workplace. I do not conceive of this as a commercial venture. It is legacy work.

Meanwhile, remember, our job is to find the language for conveying what we are learning about followership in our research and our practice, so that it makes a meaningful impact on all the cultures with which ILA members engage. I am going to enjoy learning more about how this is being done in this wonderful symposium the Followership Learning Community has organized.

Thank you.
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