Introducing Followership into the Leadership Classroom: An Integrative Approach

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Abstract

Developing followers is just as important as developing leaders. This brief outlines strategies for integrating material on followership into three leadership course units: introduction to leadership, leadership theories, and leadership ethics. Instructors can highlight the importance of followership by emphasizing that (a) leaders and followers have an interdependent relationship, (b) followers are essential to group success, (c) followers are an important component in many leadership theories, and (d) followers are responsible for their moral choices and face their own set of ethical challenges.

Introduction

After decades of neglect, followers and followership are beginning to get the attention they have long deserved. Papers and panels on followers were featured at recent Academy of Management and International Leadership Association conventions. The Kravis Institute at Claremont McKenna College and the Institute for Advanced Studies in Leadership at Claremont Graduate School of Management devoted an entire conference to followership in 2006. Organizers of the event believe that this gathering, which resulted in the publication of *The Art of Followership* (2008), marked the beginning of a new subfield in leadership studies. In her latest book *Followership* (2008), Harvard political scientist Barbara Kellerman argues that followers are gaining power while the influence of leaders is fading. She urges leadership educators to include followership as part of leadership education, noting that "developing good followers is important, as important as developing good leaders" (p. 240).

It may be decades more before followership earns equal billing with leadership. However, there can be little doubt that leadership educators must focus more attention on followers and followership than they traditionally have in the past.

Followership can be addressed as a stand-alone unit in the leadership course (Bratton, Grint & Nelson, 2005; Hughes, Ginnett & Curphy, 2009). Separating followership from leadership is misleading because leadership cannot properly be understood without accounting for the attitudes, skills and behaviors of followers. An integrative approach, one that incorporates material about followers throughout the quarter or semester, presents a more complete picture of the leadership/followership dynamic. This brief describes how followership can be integrated into three course units.

Integration Strategies

Three sections of the leadership course are particularly suited for including material on followers and followership. They illustrate some of the ways that followers can be considered throughout the quarter or semester.

Unit 1: Introduction to Leadership

I introduce followership the first day of the class by highlighting the interdependent relationship between leaders and followers. Leaders and followers are relational partners who work toward shared goals (Hollander, 1992). Both play an important part in the success of the group (Kelley, 1992). Most class members will rotate between leader and follower functions through the course of a week, serving as the leaders of class project groups, for instance, and then as work-study students taking direction from university supervisors. In light of this reality, I encourage them to view themselves as leader-followers (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

The negative connotations associated with the labels "follower" and "followership" should be confronted when the topic is first raised. Followers are widely thought of as passive and subservient and some scholars object to the use of these terms, arguing that alternative terms like "collaborators" and "constituents" be employed instead (Rost, 2008). Students holding a similar view may object to devoting class time to followers. I address these misconceptions by asking small groups to brainstorm the duties or functions of the leadership and followership roles. It soon becomes apparent that both roles are essential to success. Leaders have more influence and bear more responsibility for the overall direction of the group. Followers are more responsible for implementing plans and making sure that the work is completed (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). As part of this exercise, I also ask the teams to generate lists of the characteristics of effective leaders and followers. Team members discover that many of the same characteristics contribute to the success of both leaders and followers. For example, those in leadership and followership roles need to communicate effectively, generate creative ideas, make good decisions, and work effectively with others.
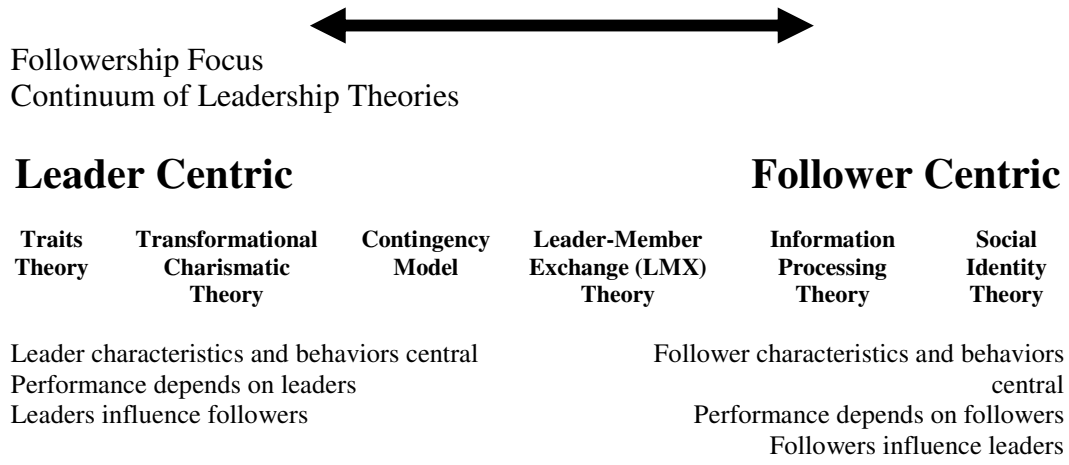
Unit 2: Leadership Theories

Followers are an important, albeit often overlooked, component in a number of popular leadership theories. In fact, major theories can be categorized according to their degree of emphasis on followers and followership, ranging from leader centric to follower-centric. Theories can be introduced using the framework outlined in Table 1 and described in more detail below.

Traits Approach. This approach is leader-centric, focusing on the personal characteristics, such as personality, motivation, physical appearance and intelligence that qualify individuals for leadership positions (Stogdill, 1974; Kenny & Zaccaro, 1983; Harder, 2003). Traditionally, traits theorists have paid very little attention to followers, believing that the success or failure of the group depends almost entirely on the actions of the leader. However, some recent proponents of trait theory have begun to identify qualities that encourage followers to identify some individuals as leaders (Lord, De Vader & Alliger, 1986).

Transformational and Charismatic Leadership. The transformational and charismatic leadership theories focus largely on the behaviors of leaders, largely crediting them for the collective success or failure of the group. Nevertheless, these approaches do not completely overlook the contributions of followers. Transformational leaders bring about significant positive change in groups, organizations and societies (Burns, 2003). In the process, followers are transformed into leaders. Both leaders and followers become more effective and ethical. Burns (1978), who coined the term transforming leadership, notes: "Such leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (p. 2). In charismatic leadership, leaders are seen as having extraordinary powers, generate strong emotional attachments with followers, and exert powerful influence over follower behavior (Weber, 1947; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Follower perceptions are a key to maintaining charismatic status. To be perceived as charismatic, leaders must speak to the needs, fears, aspirations and desires of followers while engaging in behaviors that encourage attributions of charisma, such as acting in an unconventional manner, demonstrating personal commitment, risk taking, and appearing confident and knowledgeable (Conger & Kanungo, 1987).

Table 1

Followership Focus
Continuum of Leadership Theories

Leader Centric   Follower Centric

Traits Theory	Transformational Charismatic Theory	Contingency Model	Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory	Information Processing Theory	Social Identity Theory

Leader characteristics and behaviors central
Performance depends on leaders
Leaders influence followers

Follower characteristics and behaviors central
Performance depends on followers
Followers influence leaders

Contingency Models. Contingency models are based on the premise that a leader's effectiveness is dependent on (contingent upon) elements of the situation, including followers. According to Fiedler's Least Preferred Coworker theory (1967; 1978), the influence of a leader rests upon the power of the position the leader holds, the structure of the task, and the interpersonal relationship between the leader and the followers. The most favorable conditions for leaders exist when they have significant power, direct highly structured tasks, and have good relationships with followers.

In Path-Goal Theory, leaders influence follower perceptions of task paths and the desirability of goals (House, 1977; House & Mitchell, 1974). Followers will be more motivated if they are convinced that completing the task will lead to achievement of a desirable objective. Deciding what kind of leadership style to use (directive, supportive, participative, achievement oriented) depends primarily on (a) the nature of the followers (needs, values, abilities, personality) and (b) the structure of the task to be completed. Followers need the most direction when they are inexperienced and the task is unstructured. In Situational Leadership Theory, the most effective leadership style matches the readiness level of followers. Readiness levels are based on the ability of followers as well as their willingness to undertake tasks (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2008). Leaders need to provide most direction when followers lack ability and motivation; very little guidance is required when followers are highly skilled and motivated.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory highlights the relationship between leaders and followers (Goertzen &

Fritz, 2004). Some followers enjoy relationships with their leaders that are marked by high levels of trust, support and mutual influence. Followers in these high quality (high LMX) relationships are more productive, satisfied, and committed than their low LMX counterparts (Gerstner & Day, 1997). In the latest stage of LMX theory, researchers outline ways that entire work units can foster high-quality leader-follower partnerships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1998).

Information Processing Theory. The information processing theory examines the cognitive processes that determine the behavior of leaders and followers. Cognitive schemas determine how individuals make sense of the world around them (Brown, Scott, & Lewis, 2004). Leaders use schemas to determine which behavioral style to use but, perhaps more importantly, followers use schemas when interpreting and evaluating the behaviors of leaders. Judgments about who is suitable to lead are based largely on implicit leadership theory – beliefs about what separates leaders from non-leaders. Those individuals engaging in prototypical behaviors are more likely to be elected, to emerge as small group leaders, to be selected as CEOs and so forth. At the same time, followers judge the effectiveness of leaders based on such indirect cues as the success of the group and whether they believe the leader is responsible for high performance (Lord & Maher, 1991).

Social Identity Theory. This theory shifts attention almost entirely to followers, making this the most follower-centric approach (Lord & Brown, 2004). Leader effectiveness depends on how leaders speak to the self-images of followers (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). To be successful, leaders must tailor their messages to the self-identity level of followers and modify those images when necessary. Followers who are individually oriented are more receptive to personal performance feedback and rewards. Interpersonally oriented followers want to establish a positive emotional connection with their leaders. Followers who define themselves at the group or collective level will be motivated by messages that highlight teamwork and organizational goals. There is evidence to suggest that the most effective leaders encourage followers to shift from selfish concerns to collective goals and values (Lord & Brown, 2004)

Unit 3: Leadership Ethics

The failings of leaders are obvious given the recent glut of well-publicized scandals involving Jeffrey Skilling, Bernie Ebbers, Franklin Raines, Martha Stewart, William Aramony, Bernard Madoff, and others. However, these scandals would not have taken place without the willing participation of followers who inflated earnings, lied to investors, defrauded donors, and covered up the crimes of their bosses. Followers, like leaders, are responsible for their moral choices (Kellerman, 2004; Chaleff, 2003). My discussion of ethics in the leadership course includes followers as well as leaders for that reason. As part of this

discussion, I point out that followers face a unique set of ethical challenges inherent in the role that they play. Not only are followers charged with doing the work and implementing the decisions of leaders, they have less status and power. Their moral dilemmas center around (a) Obligation – how much to followers owe their leaders, (b) Obedience – when should followers disobey, (c) Cynicism – how can followers prevent themselves from being exploited yet not become cynical, (d) Dissent – when and how should followers express their disagreement to leader, and (e) Bad news – how can followers take the risk to tell their leaders what they do not want to hear (Johnson, 2009). Students have first hand experience with a number of these dilemmas and I ask them to share their stories with the rest of the class.

I introduce two ethical approaches that specifically address the moral dimension of followership. Courageous followership is based on the premise that courage is the most important character trait for followers (Chaleff, 2003). Courageous followers assume responsibility for their own actions and the organization as a whole. They serve their leaders through hard, often unrecognized, work. However, they challenge or stand up to leaders who are engaging in inappropriate behaviors, help leaders change their attitudes and actions, and leave the organization when the leader or organization refuses to change its unethical behavior. To help students develop their confrontational skills, I ask them to role-play such scenarios as confronting an abusive or disorganized supervisor.

Servant followership is an offshoot of servant leadership, which I also introduce in the ethics component of the course. In servant leadership, leaders put the needs of followers first which discourages such selfish behaviors as hoarding power and wealth (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant followership also discourages self-centered behavior by encouraging individuals to remain in a follower role. This reduces competition and conflict for leadership positions (Kelley, 1998). Servant followers recognize that they have responsibilities to their leaders just as servant leaders have duties to their followers. They demonstrate the active engagement and independent thinking typical of exemplary or outstanding followers.

Conclusion

The examples provided in this brief serve only as a starting point. There are many more opportunities to incorporate followership in the leadership course. For example, follower expectations play a key role in diverse settings. Leaders in a global society must meet the cultural expectations and values of followers in order to be successful. The challenge for leadership educators, then, is to take advantage of these opportunities to introduce followers and followership. Failure to do so is a disservice to students who are entering a world where followers play an

increasingly important role and followership development is becoming as important as leadership development.

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Biography

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