TidalShift

Followership - The Other Half of Leadership

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"Before you can be a good leader, you must first learn to be a good follower." - Lt. Ted Volks

As a young man, I was fortunate to be a part of an Air Cadet squadron, where my instructors were truly extraordinary. Lt. "Teddy" Volks was working on his PhD in leadership, a keen student of the art of leadership and fortunately for us, very willing to share his knowledge and mentor anyone who showed an interest. While I appreciated his words at the time, I never understood their true meaning – until now. My initial understanding was that you first need to learn how to be led before you could learn how to lead. I still hold this to be true, but now I can better appreciate the ongoing role that followership plays in one's life as a leader and how we can apply this concept to be superior project managers.

Initially, this concept appeared to be counter-intuitive: to lead you must follow? Not exactly. As a leader you bring a particular set of skills to the role, many of those skills can be characterized as followership. As much as we may wish this weren't the case, regardless of your position on an organizational chart, you have a boss. Everyone has a boss - whether you are on the frontline, or a senior executive, everyone answers to someone. To be successful you have to not only engage great leadership skills, but also followership skills so that things can run smoothly and the organization as a whole can flourish.

In Capt. D. Michael Abrashoff's book, *It's Our Ship:*

The No-Nonsense Guide to Leadership[1], he closes his argument by articulating the need for the 'battle group' to succeed, not just his ship. He acknowledges the lessons learned, after retiring from the navy, and describes how he could have been an even better captain by judiciously employing his followership skills to bolster the entire group and thereby creating a more successful organization. The concept that if his ship was a success but the group failed, they have all failed. This is the generative effect that happens when you couple leadership and followership skills.

One of the characteristics of great leaders is they build great teams; you cannot build a great team without great followers. It is said that great leaders lead by example so it holds true that to develop great followers you must demonstrate great followership skills. By focusing on people, leaders develop great followers by stepping out of the way and allowing people to take the lead in a given situation.

Yes, great leaders are ever present; monitoring, supporting, and making the tough decisions, but they frequently engage in the role of follower allowing the team to make meaningful contributions. It is only when leaders 'lead-by-example' that an environment of cooperation, collaboration, and contribution is created, rather than the alternative and often destructive - competition. The team realizes that it is not only okay

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1 Abrashoff, D. Michael. It's Our Ship: The No-Nonsense Guide to Leadership (Grand Central Publishing, 2008).

to step aside and allow other members to flourish, but it actually makes for a stronger and more effective team.

Classic leadership training focuses solely on the leader. Imagine that you and your partner decide to take salsa dance lessons. When you arrive for your lesson the leader is asked in for intensive training while their partner waits patiently in the lobby. After several sessions the leader emerges, having mastered the skills of leading, and you head off together to enter a dance competition. It sounds ridiculous but that is the reality of traditional leadership training – the focus is entirely on only one-half of the equation. The dance partner analogy is found in Marc and Sam Hurwitz's book, *Leadership is Half the Story: A Fresh Look at Followership, Leadership, and Collaboration*[2], a text that has beautifully articulated this subject.

These authors not only shed light on the importance of followership skills, while providing some great tools to develop one's own focus, but they also put followership into the context of how these skills will make you a better leader. They illustrate how these skills are absolute vital as you move up the corporate ladder as well as in everyday activities.

The Generative Partnership® Model marries leadership and followership skills and uses them in balance and as required, to complement each other. The concept is simple: each half of the model complements the other and together they generate greater results. The book opens with a traditional Vulcan salutation from Mr. Spock, "Greetings! I am pleased to see that we are different. May we together become greater than the sum of both of us?" This concept holds true in the example of leading effective teams. A true team produces more than the sum of its members. Therefore, if you are only generating the equivalent to the sum of the members then you have a group of individual contributors rather than a team.

Jim Collins talks about Level 5 leaders in his seminal work, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't*[3]. The one factor that separates the Level 4 and Level 5 leaders is humility. One could deduce that the humility Collins speaks of is actually a

form of followership.

All of the great leaders I have had the good fortune to work with have been humble, but did not exhibit humility for humility's sake - it was the leader recognizing that they did not have all the answers and needed to draw on their team for guidance and to problem-solve. They realized that they were less without their team and that to truly lead, they needed to step out of the way and let their team shine. A leader who is always at the front "leading" the troops is not engaging followership. One who leads from within, one who seeks the input of team members, one who demonstrates humility is a leader who is leveraging followership skills to better shepherd their team to success.

I have been a member of a team with a pair of true Level 5 leaders. Both of these gentlemen are highly educated, one is a PhD in the field of aeronautical engineering and the other holds a Masters. Whenever tackling problems, they are both open to suggestions, even when the person making the suggestion had little or no formal training in the field. It takes a special kind of person, after a lifetime of study, to step back and say, "I do not have all the answers and I am open to input." As a result, these two achieved what no one in documented history had been able to do, and they continue to break world records.

So then, how do we apply this to our work as project managers? The first step is to employ followership skills in our relationship with our sponsor and with senior management. It is quite clear in this situation that we are solidly in the role of follower. This follower role is different than the frontline staff follower role since we are leading a team to complete the work and our sponsor plays more of a governance functions as opposed to a manager role.

One of the key concepts in good followership is to support your boss, to make them look good. We do this in our role as PM by helping our sponsors make solid, informed decisions. The idea of building a strong working relationship with our sponsor, anticipating what they need and enabling them to get their work done is the epitome of good followership. I often hear PMs lamenting about absent sponsors and I wonder how much they themselves are contributing to the relationship. What are they doing to build, nurture, or destroy that relationship?

2 Hurwitz, Sam. Hurwitz, Marc. Leadership is Half the Story: A Fresh Look at Followership, Leadership, and Collaboration. (U of T Press, 2015.)
3 Collins, Jim. Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't (Harper Business, 2001.)

Next, we need to recognize that we are project *managers* so we are leading a team of people, without whom we do not have a project. The team we are leading is often, and should be, of greater technical skill and expertise than we are. In the role of PM, we are not there to execute the project tasks but rather, to facilitate the execution of the project tasks. What we bring to the table is the expertise to manage the project, not perform the tasks.

The next time you are managing a high-functioning SME on your project team, try engaging some followership skills. This will not only create better engagement with that team member, but will also enable them to do what they do best. In the right circumstances, the best way to lead is to step out of the way and follow the person who is better suited for the task. A very difficult thing to do if you are a 'Type A' personality, but worth it in the end as the project manager is rewarded with great results and a stronger team.

Finally, we have to recognize and do what is best for the organization. When the organization fails, the project fails. We need to be generative in our work, looking at the larger context that our project operates within, ensuring that we are not only succeeding within our project but that we are contributing to the larger group of projects within the organization thereby enabling the whole organization to move forward and succeed.

Multiple texts on the subject of leadership talk about the importance of making your boss look good: This is the thinking behind 'followership'. The concept of helping the team grow and prosper by stepping aside when necessary, is followership. Leading a team by putting the best person for the task temporarily in charge, is followership. Leveraging the generative model and building relationships, is followership. Seek to continuously obtain the balance of leaders and followers. Lead by example and as needed, be the best follower you can be.

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