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LEADERSHIP

Research: To Be a Good Leader, Start By Being a Good Follower

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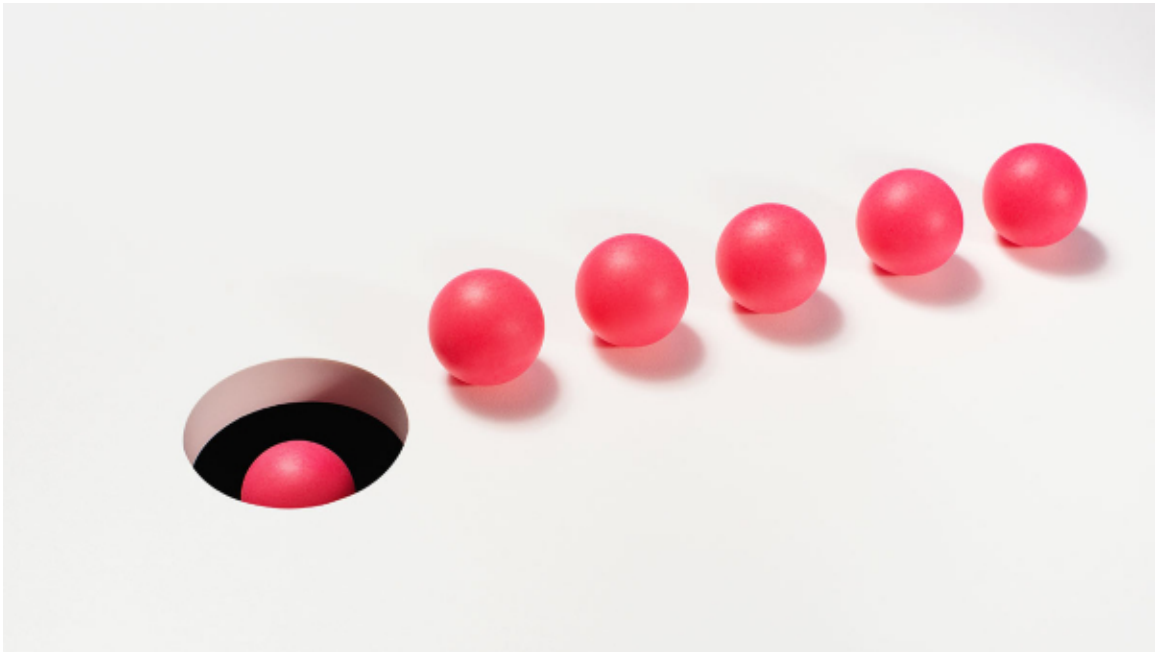

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There is no shortage of advice for those who aspire to be effective leaders. One piece of advice may be particularly enticing: if you want to be a successful leader, ensure that you are *seen as a leader* and not a follower. To do this, goes the usual advice, you should seek out opportunities to lead, adopt behaviors that people associate with leaders rather than followers (e.g., dominance and confidence), and — above all else — show your exceptionalism relative to your peers.

But there is a problem here. It is not just that there is limited evidence that leaders really are exceptional individuals. More importantly, it is that by seeking to demonstrate their specialness and exceptionalism, aspiring leaders may compromise their very ability to lead.

The simple reason for this is that, as Warren Bennis has observed, leaders are only ever as effective as their ability to engage followers. Without followership, leadership is nothing. As one of us (Haslam) observed in a 2011 book coauthored with Stephen Reicher and Michael Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*, this means that the key to success in leadership lies in the collective "we," not the individual "I."

In other words, leadership is a process that emerges from a relationship between leaders and followers who are bound together by their understanding that they are members of the same social group. People will be more effective leaders when their behaviors indicate that they are *one of us*, because they share our values, concerns and experiences, and are *doing it for us,* by looking to advance the interests of the group rather than own personal interests.

This perspective identifies a major flaw in the usual advice for aspiring leaders. Instead of seeking to stand out from their peers, they may be better served by ensuring that they are seen to be a good follower — as someone who is willing to work within the group and on its behalf. In short, leaders need to be seen as "one of us" (not "one of them") and as "doing it for us" (not only for themselves or, worse, for "them").

In a recent paper, we set out to test these ideas through a longitudinal analysis of emergent leadership among 218 male Royal Marines recruits who embarked on the elite training program after passing a series of tests of psychological aptitude and physical fitness. More specifically, we examined whether the capacity for recruits to be seen as displaying leadership by their peers was associated with their tendency to see themselves as natural leaders (with the skills and abilities to lead) or as followers (who were more concerned with getting things done than getting their own way).

For this purpose, we tracked recruits' self-identification as leaders and followers across the course of a physically arduous 32-week infantry training that prepared them for warfare in a range of extreme environments. This culminated in the recruits and the commanders who oversaw their training casting votes for the award of the Commando Medal to the recruit who showed most leadership ability. So who gets the votes? Marines who set themselves up as leaders, or those who cast themselves as followers?

In line with the analysis that we present above, we found that recruits who considered themselves to be natural leaders were not able to convince their peers that this was the case. Instead, it was the recruits who saw themselves (and were seen by commanders) as followers who ultimately emerged as leaders. In other words, it seems that those who want to lead are well served by first endeavoring to follow.

Interestingly, though, alongside these results, we also found that recruits who saw themselves as natural leaders were seen by their commanders as having more leadership *potential* than recruits who saw themselves as followers. This suggests that what good leadership looks like is highly dependent on where evaluators are standing. Evaluators who are situated within the group, and able to personally experience the capacity of group members to influence one another, appear to recognize the leadership of those who see themselves as followers. In contrast, those who stand outside the group appear to be most attuned to a candidate's correspondence to generic ideas of what a leader should look like.

This latter pattern tells us a lot about the dynamics of leadership selection and helps to explain why the people who are chosen as leaders by independent selection panels often fail to deliver when they are in the thick of the group that they actually need to lead. It also has the potential to complicate the picture for aspiring leaders. The reason for this is that in organizations that eschew democratic processes in their selection of leaders, employees who are seen as leaders (by themselves and by those who have the power to raise them up) may be more likely to be appointed to leadership positions that those who see themselves as followers.

However, as our Marines data suggest, this elevation of those who seek to distance themselves from their group may actually be a recipe for failure, not success. It encourages leaders to fall in love with their own image and to place themselves above and apart from followers. And that is the best way to get followers to fall out of love with the leader. Not only will this then undermine the leader's capacity to lead but, more importantly, it will also stifle followers' willingness to follow. And that can only ever be a path to organizational mediocrity.

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