Followership

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Everyone likes to talk about leadership—we are culturally conditioned to view success as a progression through leadership positions—but far less attention is paid to being a good follower. In fact, when most people think of themselves as followers, it's often accompanied with negative feelings, like being judged as meek or submissive. As if being a follower comes at the expense of being a leader. But in reality, every leader in an organization is following someone, and so it serves us well to remember to live up to those responsibilities.

Models of Followership

There are many models of followership out there that give us a handy way of understanding follower behaviors for our reports and for ourselves. One model I'm fond of is the *Chaleff* model, shown in Figure 30-1, which describes two axes: the degree of support a follower gives a leader and the degree to which the follower is willing to question or challenge the leader's behavior or policies. These axes give rise to four distinct follower styles:

Resources display low support and low challenge. They do what is requested of them, but little more. They're just trying to get by and do just enough to retain their position.

Implementers demonstrate high support but low challenge. They take orders and don't ask questions. It's easy to love this type of follower because they just get things done. The downside is that they won't speak up when they see that the direction is not aligned with the company's ideals or vision.

Individualists demonstrate low support and high challenge. They tend to think for themselves and prefer to do as they want. This type of follower has no problem speaking up, but is often marginalized due to being consistently difficult.

Partners display both high support and high challenge. They are strong supporters but will provide challenge where they deem necessary. These types of followers are not afraid to speak up when something doesn't mesh with the best interests of the organization, but commit wholeheartedly to the corporate vision and the initiatives of the leader after a direction is decided.
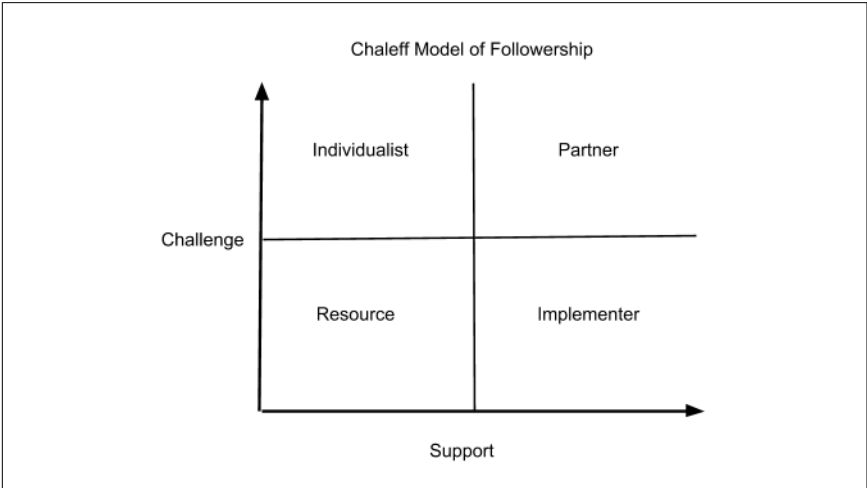

Figure 30-1. The Chaleff model of followership

Practical Application

To date, I've used this model in a number of ways. The first being, at a basic level, just helping me understand the types of folks in my organization and how to bring them together into productive teams. Identifying potential tech leads (partners) with a supporting cast and being cognizant of the difficulties that might occur if an individualist gets that role.

I've also used followership concepts to frame career paths by setting expectations around follower behaviors at every level on the career ladder. Starting engineers aren't expected to be implementers or partners. Software engineers, however, should be strong implementers, and senior software engineers and above should be developing their ability to be partners. With those expectations set, I can ask interesting career progression questions. Followership gives me a framework to direct my feedback. For example, Engineer A needs to grow from a resource into an implementer. Or, Engineer B is too much of an individualist, and I need them to be a partner.

In a day-to-day leadership role, I use followership to keep me honest about embracing and rewarding strong partners. When words are spoken that I'd

prefer not to hear, understanding followership helps me remember the positives of being challenged, and I would be well served to consider what is being said rather than dismiss it out of hand. It helps me to avoid labeling people as troublemakers when they might, in fact, be influencing me in a better direction.

And, finally, I've used followership to evaluate how I am following my manager. How am I living up to my responsibility to stand up when I feel strongly about something in the company's interest? When my manager makes a decision, how am I undercutting or supporting them? What kind of follower does my manager need right now? These questions help me understand my performance and how I'm showing up in my role.

Conclusion

Good followers can influence leaders in positive ways that don't always come in pleasant packages. Some of the most impactful work I've done has come as a result of listening to folks who disagreed with me. Having a richer model for followership has helped me in numerous ways. As a follower, it helps clarify my responsibility to speak out and show support when appropriate. As a leader, followership reminds me that when I hear disagreement, it's an opportunity to take a beat, listen, and appreciate.