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Beyond Leadership. . .

The Importance of Followership

America's passionate and unremitting love affair with leadership shows little sign of waning, and for good reason: The visionary, entrepreneurial spirit that launched America's greatest corporations has never been more essential than right now, when the United States is faced with a significant trade imbalance, rapid erosion of traditional markets, and competition from many directions.

The longer and harder we look at leadership, however, the more we realize that the success of great leaders depends on their ability to establish a base of loyal, capable, and knowledgeable followers.

Nurturing effective followership requires doing away with the misconception that leaders do all the thinking and followers merely carry out commands. Followership plays a vital role at every level of an organization. The job of a presidential cabinet member requires the vision and leadership skills to head a department, as well as the ability to carry out orders, build teams, gather information, and give the president the bad news along with the good. These are the same tasks a skilled shop foreman or receptionist performs daily — the tasks of an effective follower.

For example: In 1987, a national equipment manufacturer took a long, hard look at a plan suggested by employees in its marketing department. These employees had

The art of followership will be recognized as equally important as leadership in unlocking the untapped potential of organizations and workers.

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found a way to grade customers on several characteristics that included gross sales, profitability, products purchased, and additional services supplied. They found that certain large and powerful customers, while producing huge sales volume, purchased the least-profitable products and demanded the most additional services, resulting in the lowest profit margins.

The marketing staff suggested that the company begin reducing its involvement with such unprofitable accounts, even if it meant losing customers. Management agreed to the plan, and marketing staffers launched a campaign to convince the sales department to pursue new accounts based on profitability rather than on volume. It was a difficult process, and resistance was great. But, by constantly communicating, the marketing department kept their programs moving ahead, even when a few large customers left to go to competitors whose prices they could more easily manipulate.

Although initially risky, the program has produced excellent results. The company has seen a significant increase in profitability. Customers who stayed have paid a fair price and received premium products and service; some of those who left have returned after negative experiences with other vendors who promised more than they could deliver.

All of this was accomplished by effective followers who were thinking independently, were willing to send top management a tough message, and were able to implement plans in the face of strong resistance.

Leadership versus Followership

Although thousands of pages have been written about leaders in organizations, very little has been written about followers. We all know that leaders are expected to be visionary, decisive, communicative, energetic, committed, and responsible. But what about followers? Are the characteristics of successful followers so different from those of leaders? Not really.

Effective followers must possess a high level of organizational understanding in order to see how their work contributes to the big picture. They must be able to make sound decisions, often through teamwork that requires a high level of communication. They must be enthusiastic about what they do to the point that roadblocks and repetition don't deter them from achieving their objectives. They need to feel a strong level of commitment, both to the organization and to their own work. And, finally, they must be highly responsible individuals who are willing to perform under stressful circumstances, motivated by the sense of a job well done.

Belief systems that value followership as highly as leadership enrich individuals and companies. A customer-service director in a *Fortune* 500 food company uses followership skills when she serves as a member of a problem-solving task force. She uses leadership skills as she translates task-force

findings into assignments for her staff. As a valued employee, she realizes the importance to the company of both roles. "I may get more recognition for my role as leader," she remarked, "but I get the greatest satisfaction from my work as a team member solving problems for customers."

A national telecommunications company hires attorneys for its 30-member legal department based on their ability to work intensely in teams on deregulation issues, then vigorously sell and defend their strategies. "The challenge for our legal group," explains a staff member, "is to serve many masters



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well. We have to meet the needs of our users and regulatory agencies as well as numerous internal customers. That demands an unusual level of interpersonal skills, coupled with the ability to think independently. In other words, our people have to lead *and* follow. Very few job applicants can do both well."

Led by the explosion of books focusing on leadership, many companies have begun to meet organizational challenges by instituting leader-training programs. Only a few, however, are tackling the problem of followership.

Ironically, the skills of the follower are seen as being the responsibility of the leader, as if followers

are not responsible for themselves. A day-care employee lamented, "When we feel unmotivated, they send our *supervisor* to a class on motivation. Why aren't they helping us get the skills we need to stay productive in this job?"

The misconceptions we hold about followership can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Followers who are treated as if they were unimportant tend to act as if they were unimportant. These disempowered followers live in constant fear of displeasing their bosses, being labeled as troublemakers, and possibly even losing their jobs. They learn to avoid giving honest opinions. They cover up problems and avoid taking on extra responsibility that might involve career risks. Gradually, these attitudes spread throughout the departments and organizations. The result is low morale, lack of productivity, and lost human potential.

Empowered followership, like motivation, requires a joint effort between companies and individuals. Organizations can help, encourage, reward, applaud, and support the process, but they cannot create followers simply by leading them. Successful followership requires skills and behaviors that must be learned and practiced before they are mastered.

The Fabric of Followership

In our research on successful followership, we've asked hundreds of people in organizations to describe their experience as followers. This information has allowed us to identify some characteristics that make followers effective. These characteristics are:

1. Integrity: Effective followers possess personal integrity that requires both loyalty and the willingness to act according to their beliefs.

2. Owning the territory: They understand the organization and acknowledge their own contribution.

3. Versatility: They are versatile in their skills and flexible enough to adapt to a changing environment.

4. Self-employment: They take responsibility for their own careers, their own actions, and their own development.

● **Integrity.** Integrity means identifying values and being true to them. Unfortunately, most people regard values much as they regard fire extinguishers: They ignore them until there's a crisis, then hope they can remember how to work them. Followers can and must improve their skills for identifying and exercising values in the workplace.

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An example: The Pillsbury plant in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is unusual in several ways. First, employees in the plant are expected to voice opinions and bring up problems to management, no matter how unpleasant or unwelcome those messages might be. Second, management's response to those communications ranges from encouraging to downright celebratory. Joe Raney, the plant director, explains:

"We figured out that if we were really going to solve some problems here, we needed every person involved in the process all the way — no one just taking up space. Also, we realized that many problems could have been avoided if each employee was on the lookout for them and was willing to communicate what they knew to the rest of us. We've worked extraordinarily hard to change the way we communicate around here."

At Murfreesboro, this means tell-

ing others what you think about a situation even if you know they don't want to hear it. Pillsbury's management has learned that the very same human dynamics that cause the boss to avoid delivering critical performance appraisals to followers keep those followers from being honest when they think the boss is moving in the wrong direction.

This type of communication requires a number of skills, including willingness to seek the truth, the ability to cope with conflict, and the confidence to take personal risks to benefit the common good. Organizations that value integrity will welcome employees with these skills; they will be rewarded with a level of employee loyalty and commitment that cannot be fully attained in any other way.

● **Owning the territory.** We all assume that "vision" is a quality of leaders, but we overlook the fact that followers must be able to relate their work to the big picture if they are to contribute fully. Without this vision, they may miss information vital to the health and well-being of the organization.

"Owning the territory" is the unique combination of knowledge and commitment that enables individuals to see how their piece contributes to the larger effort. It means knowing your job very well and taking pride in that expertise. It means working constantly to help your piece fit into the larger puzzle. When the fit is wrong, it means asking why and looking for answers.

For example, when two principals in a large accounting firm realized that their company was losing bids because of the poor presentation skills of various partners, they decided to take action. After failing to convince their peers that everyone should participate in training sessions, they hired a consultant on their own and got some private tutoring. As others began to notice their improved skills and increased sales figures, interest in the training grew, resulting in a company-wide program.

Owning the territory often means dealing with the conflict that arises

around participation and commitment. If followers are to live and work according to their values, organizations must reward acts of courage.

● **Versatility.** Companies and the individuals who work for them are being forced to adjust to changes at a faster rate than ever before. Organizations need individuals who can adjust to changing definitions, ideas, products, and systems without being paralyzed by the stress of not knowing all the answers.

Managers must create an environment in which followers can both participate in and initiate change. Followers, in turn, must view change as a challenging and rewarding part of the job.

Two large midwestern high-technology firms present a marked contrast in encouraging employee versatility. One firm went through a terrible economic downturn with major layoffs and debilitating financial losses. Its method of coping was to tell employees, "Don't worry, this will all be over soon." As the recovery failed to materialize, many top performers left and the remaining employees became increasingly depressed and unable to function effectively.

Another firm in the same market survived a similar downturn by telling employees that change was going to be a constant factor in their lives and that the company would help them find ways to adjust. Although the situation has remained volatile, employees have found means of coping and remaining productive, thus keeping the company relatively healthy.

Versatility involves being able to deal with ambiguity. It involves being able to communicate effectively with others to establish a continuous flow of information. It also involves handling the interpersonal conflicts that invariably arise in business and in life.

The bad news is that few of us ever receive direct feedback about our versatility. The good news is that versatility can be developed. The highly skilled followers of the future will be able to give and receive feedback and will actively

seek opportunities to develop versatility throughout their careers.

● **Self-employment.** In an address to the North Central Institute for Management Studies, David Berlo presented his definition of self-employment as follows: "You are self-employed when you can find another job that compensates you at a level equal to what you are actually spending within a relatively short period of time." His point is that fear of losing a job,

and therefore a way of life, causes people to feel trapped and to avoid taking risks.

Many people stop being self-employed when they move into management. They continue spending what they make, but their ability to go into the market and secure a comparable salary declines. Others stop feeling self-employed because they don't know what their skills and abilities are worth on the open market. In both situations, people

develop "negative fantasies," imagining the worst without testing reality. Such people will avoid honesty, confrontation, and conflict rather than facing the perceived risk. Organizations discourage independence through vehicles such as vesting employees in retirement plans and delaying bonuses, not realizing the cost of such dependency.

The remedy for this is simple but not easy. Followers must work toward feeling self-employed both financially and in terms of values. One highly successful corporate manager remarked, "I would never be able to do this job if I hadn't spent time running my own consulting firm. I know that if I leave here I can always go back to consulting. That allows me to challenge the status quo in this job without the constant fear that I could lose everything."

Employees perform best when they want to be with a company, not when they are trapped into staying. As negative fantasies decrease, employees' ability to perform acts of courage increases, and those acts encourage others.

Nurturing Followership

The workplace of the future will be an environment in which workers become increasingly autonomous and self-directed. The ability of employees to make difficult decisions, to decipher and deliver complex messages, and to be troubleshooters for the organization on every level will be intensely important. Here are some ways organizations can encourage and nurture followership:

● **Reconceptualize the workplace.** Prevailing attitudes that assume it is the leader's job alone to coach, counsel, motivate, develop, review, discipline, and overcome resistance to change must be replaced with the knowledge that followers can take an active role in managing themselves. Organizations must realize that self-management always outperforms coercion.

● **Institutionalize followership.** Empowered followership must be a part of business as usual. Two

Strengthening Followers

If both leaders and constituents are significant actors in the relationship, we must talk not only about failures of leadership but also about failures of followership. There is a vast literature on the failures of leadership — on the abuse of power, injustice, indecisiveness, shortsightedness, and so on — but little on individual and collective failures among followers. A discussion of "followership" must cover two matters.

First, there are qualities such as apathy, passivity, cynicism, and habits of spectatorlike non-involvement that invite the abuse of power by leaders. Bertrand de Jouvenel said, "A society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves."

Second, there is the inclination of followers in some circumstances to collaborate in their own deception. Given the familiar fact that what people want and need often determines what they see and hear, the collaboration comes easily. But a citizenry that wants to be lied to will have liars as leaders. Have we not tested that generalization at every level of government?

Rather than dwell on the failings, we would do well to focus on how to ensure better performance. Perhaps the most promising trend in our thinking about leadership is the growing conviction that the purposes of

the group are best served when the leader helps followers to develop their own initiative, strengthens them in the use of their own judgment, and enables them to grow and to become better contributors. Industrial concerns are experimenting with such an approach because of their hard-won awareness that some matters (for example, quality control, productivity, morale) simply cannot be dealt with unless lower levels of leadership are actively involved.

To the extent that leaders enable followers to develop their own initiative, they are creating something that can survive their own departure. Some individuals who have dazzling powers of personal leadership create dependency in those below them and leave behind a weakened organization staffed by weakened people. Leaders who strengthen their people may create a legacy that will last for a very long time.

In the conventional mode, people want to know whether the followers believe in the leader; a more searching question is whether the leader believes in the followers.

— John W. Gardner

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examples: A large midwestern financial-services institution is moving to establish self-managed work teams, a major step toward incorporating followership into overall organizational design. And a large law firm has turned over the management of partners meetings to junior partners — with the proviso that they find some new, creative, and more-effective ways to run the meetings.

• **Hire and train for followership.** Skills that empower followers such as interpersonal communication, problem solving, coping with change, and conflict management must be taught. New employees should be screened for abilities such as independent thinking rather than simply for the ability to perform assignments. Followers must also seek feedback on their capabilities and take responsibility

for their own development.

• **Recognize and celebrate followership.** For change to occur, words have to match deeds. The current fashion in organizations of talking about people while celebrating leadership just doesn't work. Until we remove some of the fear and replace it with rewards, we will have to rely on the few self-employed followers whose sense of loyalty and integrity overpowers their fear of punishment. But gradually, as encouragement and acceptance of brave actions increases, so will followership.

As a result of encouraging empowered followership in ourselves and others, organizational skills such as troubleshooting, problem solving, information gathering, conflict resolution, and change management will improve. We will become, and will be surrounded by, more-stimulated employees who take greater responsibility for our individual contributions and for our careers. We will increase both our individual and organizational capacity for innovation by encouraging new ways of thinking and by learning to defend our ideas rather than defending the status quo.

The role of leaders will remain critical in years to come. However, we must seek to balance that power by discovering the tremendous untapped potential of followers.

312 MILLION PREGNANT IMMIGRANTS?

The Attorney General last December, on the President's instruction, informed the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization that in all refugee, asylum and deportation cases, an "applicant (who) has refused to abort or be sterilized. . . will now be considered to have established a well-founded fear of persecution. . ." This brings them under the purview of the Refugee Act of 1980.

The instruction was aimed primarily at China, and since the U.S. Government has already concluded that coercion is being practiced in China after women have had one child, it establishes a prima facie case for Chinese mothers to claim refugee status.

There are nearly 312 million Chinese women in their childbearing years. Add their husbands and children, and President Bush—without public discussion or an environmental impact statement—has qualified several hundred million Chinese and unborn babies for refugee status.

Let us hope that the rush does not start. The President has done just what President Carter did in 1980 when the Cuban boatlift began: put the decision in the other side's hands as to who will get onto the boats.

The President was engaged in a little power struggle with Congress—but it is dangerous to trifle with the nation's demographic future in the pursuit of such political games.

Congress is playing similar games. With the Morrison subcommittee in the lead, it is considering bills to increase immigration quotas, allow various Central Americans to stay here if they can get here, start a guest worker program, and expand the 1986 amnesty.

With natural increase alone, U.S. population size would be heading toward a gradual turnaround in the next two generations. Present immigration levels will send it past 333 million by 2080. These proposals could drive it explosively higher. We must learn to balance a natural sympathy for others (and the urge to score political points) with a sense of responsibility for the nation's future.

Population growth is interwoven with most of the nation's social, environmental and resource problems. We at **NPG** make it our business to bring this most neglected of variables into the process of addressing those problems.

Before we choose a crowded future through inadvertence, we should ask: how many Americans should there be? **NPG** is engaged in a new study of optimum population. On immigration policy, for example, labor economist Vernon Briggs concludes that the poor and the nation would benefit from selective rather than mass immigration, with fewer, better educated youths entering the labor force, and a consequent turnaround in population growth.

If you agree that the nation should look to its demographic future and if you would like a copy of the *NPG FORUM* introducing the new study, send us your name and address.

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