

# THE POWER OF FOLLOWERSHIP

*BRENNA LARNEY*

UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

*Followership is an essential quality  
of a successful leader.*

If I had been asked to define leadership two years ago, my definition would have included the ability to collect a group's attention, direct them towards a particular cause, and motivate them to contribute to that cause. Now that those two years have passed, I have discovered an important addition to that definition—followership. Followership involves working under a leader to accomplish things as a group. It is based on the idea that other members of a group are needed to complete somewhat mundane tasks in order to achieve the main goal. For most of my life, I have considered myself a follower and viewed this as a weakness. I thought that I wasn't strong enough and didn't have the voice of a leader. As it turns out, followership is one of the greatest components of leadership. It takes a great leader to follow, to receive guidance, and to listen. I began college as a nervous student simply trying to step into a new world of learning and opportunities. Today I am a more confident leader, student, and individual, but I will always have a foundation built on followership.

During the time I was attending my first semester of college, I began a leadership program on campus. Almost immediately after beginning the program, I came to realize the reasons for why followership was so essential and could in fact help me to become a stronger leader. In October 2016, Barbara Kellerman, a lecturer on leadership at Harvard University stated:

There is a lot a person can learn about being a good leader by being a good follower... Being a good follower does not end when one becomes a leader. It is important that emerging leaders understand that they must continue to practice good followership in their leadership roles; they become good followership leaders. (2016)

My involvement with the leadership program proved that leadership included more than rallying a crowd, or being an outspoken individual. Instead, leadership included my own growth and discovery of followership skills that I honed in over the years.

Dependence on others is another quality of leadership that soon became apparent to me during my college experience. Through active followership, I realized the importance of a group working together to accomplish a task, even seemingly mundane ones. Followers are needed so that both a leader and their followers can come together and accomplish a common goal. This example of dependence exists across the animal kingdom. Nature is a cycle of dependence involving relationships such as those between predator and prey, parasite and host, or symbiosis between plants and fungi. This same dependence also applies to humans needing one another, and it has worked for millennia. This circle of dependence goes on and on, with each of us becoming a leader or follower depending on differing situations. Sometimes we provide the guidance; sometimes we offer the support to fulfill a task. It is not always easy to ask for assistance, especially when we have been trained to be self-reliant, and our pride can cause us to reject the open arms of others willing to help. However, as followers and leaders, it is necessary to realize that a single individual can't always achieve or complete all that is expected of them on their own.

Aside from strength in numbers, I was also reminded of how significant developing the right attitude is to effective followership. This is a skill that many followers can develop because they learn to be open-minded in a variety of situations. In stressful circumstances, a good attitude can create a learning experience. An individual can only control his or her own attitude, so each individual needs to develop the right outlook on challenges. Challenges shape people into stronger beings. In leadership opportunities, it is probable that trying situations will arise. Through learning to overcome and rise above those situations, one can become an example for followers and leaders alike. Experiencing time as a follower isn't a weakness if one sees it as a way to grow into an even better leader. All leaders learn from others, good or bad, and so at one point all leaders will be required to take on a role as a follower. Whether the learning experiences are realized consciously or subconsciously, they can affect leadership qualities later on.

As a teacher once told my classmates and me, “attitude is everything.” A good attitude should be expected before one becomes a leader with the power to make a difference.

While all other aspects of leadership are important, the most effective leadership involves the mastery of humility. Rick Warren has said, “humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less” (148). Great leaders should not sacrifice their own self-worth for the sake of humility; instead they can enhance it when they are working closely with their followers. Focusing on the needs of others, especially those of one’s followers, can create a more open environment from which productivity is able to flow with greater ease. Humility is not easy to develop in yourself, but those that follow you will greatly appreciate the results of that effort. With the “domino effect” in mind, the example of one person displaying humility can cause the rest of the team to follow suit. When one becomes involved in a followership position, humility may become easier to grasp, which is why it is so important to take part in roles outside of leadership.

As I studied and considered the pressures and expectations of leadership, I received a new direction and a sense of encouragement from a quote by Warren Bennis. He states, “becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It’s precisely that simple, and it’s also that difficult” (xl). It isn’t enough to simply realize that followership is important, because it can still cause one to feel out of place when they are not as rambunctious or as loud as others. However, the process of coming to understanding oneself can provide experiences that display the way that they best lead. I studied my strengths with a positive attitude and enthusiasm, and contemplated how they played a role in my day-to-day activities. By acknowledging my strengths and coming to understand them more profoundly, they became important factors in my striving for success as a future leader. When leadership roles became available I was prepared and aware of how I best functioned as a leader; I knew what I could offer to my followers. Dedication to self-discovery and self-improvement are essential qualities and can be gained through experiencing times as a follower. As explained by a flight attendant on an airplane, it is crucial to support yourself before you assist others. Through becoming the best follower you can be, it is presumed that these traits will create the best version of yourself as a leader.

Followership is powerful—more powerful than many may realize. Leaders come about from the influences displayed by others, their own experiences, and their own desires for the future. These qualities can all point back to the importance of developing proper followership abilities in order to effect successful leadership. Learning to depend on others, having the right attitude, and coming to know and understand one’s own

strengths and weaknesses are all part of this process. Successful and productive followers become such with experience in a greater variety of tasks, expectations, and qualities. There is power in followership; the kind that can't be learned from simply becoming a leader. This position as a supporter and follower offers a powerful strategy for knowledge of what it means to be an effective leader.

**WORKS CITED**

- Bennis, Warren G. *On Becoming a Leader*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Company, 1989.
- Warren, Rick. *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002.
- University of North Carolina Executive Development. "To be a Good Leader, First Be a Good Follower." 18 Oct. 2016, <http://execdev.kerian-flagler.unc.edu/blog/to-be-a-good-leader-first-be-a-good-follower>.