

Follow the leader !

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In many organizational motivational issues, the solution is not in making better leaders, but in having better followers. Mistrust and cynicism on the part of the follower are common barriers to an effective leader follower relationship.

Whatever be the problem in an organization, it is common to hear companies and their employees grumble about the lack of leadership in their organization.

Management theorists and consultants stress the need for able & dynamic leadership. Organizations spend lakhs of rupees each year trying to identify the leadership potential of their employees. We have innumerable books, seminars and training sessions, which claim to generate that elusive quality so essential to success - leadership.

Even as individuals we idolize and worship leaders in all walks of life – we admire political leaders, business leaders, sports leaders, opinion leaders and even spiritual leaders. Perhaps it is our physiological and sociological need to transfer the responsibility of our actions and performance on an external entity - the leader. Why is it that most persons readily blame their leadership (or lack of it!) rather than take responsibility for their own lack of follower-ship? The answer lies

in our understanding of leadership and power, which shapes our attitude towards leaders.

We usually consider power as evil and undesirable and powerful people as dangerous and manipulative. However, if there is one thing we fear even more than power, it is; "being influenced". Being influenced by someone is usually regarded as a sign of weakness of the individual since it implies that the individual was unable to ward off the (evil?) influence of another powerful person. Yet we are being influenced all the time, by parents, neighbors, friends and even advertisements. Every time we accept a friend's dinner invitation, each time we agree to oblige someone, and every time we buy a product we are "being influenced". We are so caught up in trying to influence others that we are totally ignorant of ourselves being influenced. So if we are being influenced anyway would it not make sense to understand the process better and at least be able to select consciously the influence that we most desire?

Power, is just a means by which we can influence others (for better or for worse) and leadership is a relationship between the leader (initiator of the relationship) and the follower in which the leader changes the goals of the follower while keeping in mind the followers' real needs. This clearly indicates that the two roles of leader and follower are not permanent but dependent on the nature of individual relationships. In addition, we see that the follower has a lot to gain in this relationship, since his / her real goals are addressed.

The leadership relationship in the organizational context is often expressed in the interactions between boss (leader) and subordinate (follower). The boss influences the subordinate in order that he (the subordinate) makes the boss' and the organization's goal his own while the boss takes care of the subordinate's real needs which are usually in the form of material rewards and job satisfaction.

A crisis in this relationship is manifested in the form of low motivation levels, low productivity and indiscipline. If we recognize that all motivational problems are a breakdown of the leader-follower relationship, we realize that the obvious solution lies in setting right that relationship.

There are different ways of resolving these leadership (relationship) crises. The most common solution looks at the communication channel between the two individuals and tries to rebuild the link between them by increased interaction, clearing misconceptions and regular feedback. The next method is to influence the attitude and behavior of the leader. We have already seen how our misconceptions about power and leadership make us focus unduly on the leader.

The basic assumption underlying this obsessive leadership focus is that the sole responsibility for establishing the leadership relationship lies with the leader.

Even though we recognize that there are various follower characteristics and attitudes (like cynicism, fear and arrogance), which are impediments to being influenced, we leave it to the leader to overcome all these and establish the relationship. The popular literature available tends to underplay the role of the

follower, and considers him a passive creature waiting to be influenced by the leaders who are out to get him. It is true that there are highly effective leaders who are able to influence and impress almost everyone. However, these persons are rare and the potential of our development into these is limited. Hence the need to look also at the follower and his contribution to the relationship (or its breakdown).

If we move beyond the conventional approach and look at the follower, we may be able to evolve a fresh approach to motivation. This approach would consider the follower as an active player who goes beyond his usual cynicism and mistrust and allows himself to be influenced by the leader of his choice in order to help him reach his own life goals. The first step in developing a follower involves identifying those characteristics and attitudes (like cynicism and mistrust) that are a blockage to being influenced. Next, we must try to make the person aware of how in the leadership relationship, there is a potential for his /her own goals being realized. Finally, we must try to instill in the follower a sense of love and respect for the leader.

Something similar to the process described lies at the root of patriotism and love for one's country. Since here there is no person in the form of a leader (the country is an abstract entity) the only way of developing a bond is to influence the followers, which is done by means of books, films and stirring speeches of leaders.

The process of enabling the follower to be more open to being influenced must not be confused with the brainwashing and sloganeering done by some companies to maintain loyalty which is nothing but an attempt by the leader (the company's management) to influence the employees.

What can be done is more at the personal level of the follower. It involves making an individual more open to the ideas and visions of persons around him / her in order to achieve his / her own goals. Obviously, this is not an easy job considering that the act of making the individual "more open to being influenced" is itself an act of influence and presupposes an existing leader-follower relationship.

The best method perhaps is for each of us to introspect and to remove all those barriers within ourselves, which prevent us from trusting and objectively evaluating the potential leaders who are trying to lift us beyond our normal existence to a superior level.

One of the major factors preventing us from becoming effective followers is being caught up in personalities. Objective evaluation of ones fellow beings is the first step in becoming a good follower. One must look beyond the personal characteristics of the leader and focus only on the teachings and the guidance of the leader.

The next big trap is that of motives. We begin to doubt the motives of the leader and feel that in some way we are being used to satisfy his / her personal ends. This feeling then manifests as defensiveness and makes us impervious to the

leader's suggestions, which may be useful to our own growth. We completely deny the possibility that it may be possible for us to further our own goals and at the same time be used by another.

There are a number of leaders all around us who have the potential and are eager to guide us in achieving our true potential and raising us to a higher plane of existence whom we fail to recognize due to our own preconceived fears.

The way out of this is two fold: First, to realize that you always have the freedom to move out of a relationship as and when you feel like and second, to look upon "being influenced" not as a tool of exploitation in the hands of people more powerful than us but as an opportunity for us to fully achieve our own potential with the help and guidance of persons more knowledgeable or experienced than ourselves.

The ideas expressed in this article are entirely my own and do not reflect the views of my company.

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