

Leadership and followership are closely intertwined. Effective followers can shape productive leader behaviour just as effective leaders develop people into good followers.

The role of followers

Followership is important in the discussion of leadership for the following reasons.

One, without followers there are no leaders. For any group or organization to succeed there must be people who willingly and effectively follow just as there must be those who willingly and effectively lead. If all “human beings are not only capable of being leaders but often called to exercise leadership” then everyone is a follower at one time or another. What I have seen is that individuals are often followers at one time.

Secondly, many leadership gurus define leadership as a “process of influence”. Professor J. Jansen writing in *Leadership in the African context’s* foreword emphasises that “leadership is not a position that is held but an influence that is felt... leadership is not simply technical set of skills exercised by a brainy leader, but also emotional disposition that influences human behaviour for good.” This view is good, but I would like to add that a follower can influence a leader. Simply because at its core leadership is relational. The follower’s influence upon a leader can enhance the leader or accentuate the leader’s short comings.

Third, many of the qualities that are desirable in a leader are the same qualities possessed by an effective follower (e.g. commitment, integrity, courage etc.). Ineffective followers are as much to blame for ethical and legal lapses within a country as are crooked leaders.

So we can’t talk about leadership and ignore followership. Both the leader and follower roles are proactive; together they can achieve a shared vision.

By training I am a theologian, a Pastor by calling. As such my world view is biblically influenced. I’m surprised that so much is said about leaders and so little about followers, especially in the church. The Bible says comparatively little about leadership and a great deal about followership. Jesus did not invite his disciples to be leaders immediately. He said “follow me”. Jesus wants leaders to be followers first. Good followers make best leaders.

The style of followership

Dr. Mamphela Ramphele has on several occasions urged South Africans to stop being “passive objects” and become active citizens. Her call is that of effective followership. Robert Kelley, made a research among leaders and followers and came up with five styles of followership.

These styles are categorised according to two dimensions. The first dimension is the quality of independent, critical thinking versus dependent, uncritical thinking. The second dimension is active versus passive behaviour. What we find in our country is the other four styles of followership. The alienated follower is a passive, yet independent, critical thinker.

The *conformist* participates actively, but does not utilize critical thinking skills in his or her behaviour. The *pragmatic survivor* avoids risks and fostering the status core often for political reason. The *passive follower* exhibits neither critical, independent thinking nor active participation. *Passive followers* are often the result of leaders who are over controlling of others and who punish mistakes.

An *effective follower* is both a critical, independent thinker and active in the running of the country. They know what they stand for and willing to express their own ideas and opinions to their leaders, even though this might mean risking their jobs or being demeaned. Effective followers accept responsibility, challenge authority, participate in change, and serve the needs of the country.