

Follower Behavior and Followership Identity: A Follower's Perspective

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“Lead, follow, or get out of the way,” drove my understanding of leadership from the time I joined the United States Army in 1982 until 2009 when I was assigned to teach Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) at the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse (UWL). At UWL, I was charged with providing Cadets a solid foundation in military leadership, an area in which I had practical experience but no academic foundation. While preparing my first workshop, I reviewed military leadership doctrine for material that would introduce future Army officers to leadership perspectives that prioritized teamwork and organizational success. Because Cadets led classmates who were their peers, it was imperative that they learned to influence outcomes without authority. As I organized my material, an idea came to mind that I had not read or heard previously: “followership.” I had the idea that if leading led to leadership, and being a committed follower was necessary to organizational success, then followership should follow following. Unfortunately, when I searched for followership in our military doctrine, I could not find any reference. I then turned to the internet, where I found several expressions of followership, none of which addressed making followers better as followers. Considering what I had read, I developed my own idea for followership: “doing one’s best to ensure their leader’s success,” which I incorporated until I retired from the Army in 2014.

In August of 2017, benefitting from research instruction, and with resources to guide me, I revisited followership as a research proposal. I determined that I should explore the origin of followership attitudes, how the followership attitudes are developed, and how followership attitude informs follower behaviors. I was interested to learn what compels individuals to abandon their autonomy and subscribe to the leadership of another when there was no extrinsic motivation. My revised research objective seemed a better fit for the grounded theory approach that would allow me to develop future research based on my results. I began my research by

visiting professors from Staley School of Leadership and the Communication Studies Department, where I hoped to gain insight into existing scholarship and followership trends. Although I was not able to develop a common understanding of followership attitudes from these discussions, I did plan to narrow my research focus to the follower's perspective on following and followership.

After visiting with the professors, I employed basic internet searches to determine the etymology of followership. From there, I utilized Hale library resources to identify research from followership scholars Robert Kelley, Barbara Kellerman, and Ira Chaleff. These scholars provided the foundational perspectives that shaped later research by numerous scholars. Ira Chaleff's article and book titled *Courageous Followership* were the only foundational references to provide a follower's perspective and were central considerations in framing my research. Once I had my starting point, I used Google Scholar and the Hale Library databases (e.g. Communication & Mass Media Complete, ProQuest Research Library, and SAGE Research Methods) to search for articles that compared available followership research by "definition" and "followership typologies." By combining and cross-checking results from Google Scholar and the library databases, I was able to identify and obtain the references necessary for my research. On two occasions references were unavailable at Hale Library. In both instances, I visited with the library staff who, in one case, guided me toward an alternate source, and in the other case, guided me to submit an interlibrary loan (ILL) request. Bot experiences were very positive and confidence building as I moved forward.

As I gathered and evaluated articles, I quickly became overwhelmed by the information I was finding and my inexperience in organizing research. I discussed my frustration with a professor who suggested research software called *EndNote*. My professor demonstrated how he

used the software to reinforce his organizational objectives, to group topics, attach referenced articles, and automatically generate a reference list according to in-text citations. I purchased the software, and I was able to organize my 90+ references into groups and sub-groups that supported my objectives. I used EndNote extensively to review each article and collect notes for incorporation into my research proposal, which I used as the starting point for my capstone project.

Fast forward to January of 2018. When I began my capstone research project, it was obvious that I had bitten off more than I could chew. On the advice of my capstone professor, I reorganized my research objectives as a series of smaller projects. We agreed that I should begin with evaluating how followers viewed their roles and how they understood followership. We settled on two research questions: RQ1: How do individuals who have held subordinate roles view the role of follower? And, RQ2: How do individuals who have held follower roles understand the term followership? By narrowing the scope of my research, I was able to accomplish two tasks; build the foundation from a follower's perspective and set up future research that would advance my subject. By narrowing my focus, I was more deliberate in my source assessment, which allowed me to be more precise in my findings.

I can imagine how difficult my research might have been if it weren't for resources like Google Scholar and the more complex tools available through Hale Library. Throughout my project, I relied on the online databases, accessed available references and interlibrary loans, and I received guidance and assistance from professors and numerous library staff to acquire and assess my references. I am a naturally curious person who is just learning to employ the incredible resources available to expand my knowledge and understanding of topics that are important to me. My research project on followership has been both informative and rewarding,

all while reinforcing critical thinking and organizational skills. Hale Library resources were critical in my success and have allowed me to begin a research project that I am proud to present to my fellow students, faculty, staff, and visitors during my capstone colloquium.