Follower Behavior and Followership Identity: The Follower's Perspective
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Study Purpose

To understand how people view the role of "follower" and how they understand the *idea* of "followership" from a follower's perspective. Understanding how followership attitudes influence follower behaviors may provide insight into motivations that inform follower role fulfillment, leading to the development of strategies to influence the followership attitude to improve follower behaviors.

Selected Review of Literature

Foundational Research – Original identification and exploration of followership

- "People who are effective in the follower role have the vision to see both the forest and the trees, the social capacity to work well with others, the strength of character to flourish without heroic status, the moral and psychological balance to pursue personal and corporate goals at no cost to others, and, above all, the desire to participate in a team effort for the accomplishment of some greater common purpose." (Kelley, 1988)
- "The response of those in subordinate positions (followers) to those in superior ones (leaders). Followership implies a relationship (rank) between subordinates and superiors, and a response (behavior) of the former to the latter." (Kellerman, 2008)

Operational Research – How followership is acquired and developed

- "Followership is a relational role in which followers have the ability to influence leaders and contribute to the improvement and attainment of group and organizational objectives. It is primarily a hierarchically upwards influence." (Crossman and Crossman, 2011)
- "Courageous followership is built on the platform of courageous relationship. The courage to be right, the courage to be wrong, the courage to be different from each other. Each of us sees the world through our own eyes and experiences. Our interpretation of the world thus differs. In relationships, we struggle to maintain the validity of our own interpretation while learning to respect the validity of other interpretations." (Chaleff, 2009)

Followership Types by Leadership Dependency				
Author	Higher ←		→	Lower
Kellerman (2008)	Isolates	Bystanders	Participants	Activists	Diehards
Chaleff (2006)	Resource	Implementor	Individualist		Partner
Kelley (1988)	Alienated	Passive	Conformists	Pragmatists	Exemplary

Figure 1. Followership typologies

RELATIONSHIP ORIENTATION		
How the root words "lead" and "follow" relate to each other in different contexts can be helpful in avoiding the conflation or interchanging of terms which can result in a less accurate evaluation of each term		
Relationship	Suffix	Definition
follow ↔ lead	-	action
follower ↔ leader	-er	one who performs the action
following ↔ leading	-ing	the action performed
followership ↔ leadership	-ership	the attitude that shapes the relationship and behavior

Figure 2. Relationship orientation

Research Questions

RQ1: How do individuals who have held subordinate roles view the role of follower?

RQ2: How do individuals who have held follower roles understand the term followership?

INTERVIEW RESPONSES:

– "I have heard of leadership, and followership seems like it should mean something, but I have never heard the word before."
– employee at a large corporation

– "I don't know what followership is."
– neighbor #3

– "Followership means following someone."
– university student

Methods

- A qualitative research project considering data from 13 in-depth interviews
- Convenience sampling of adult individuals who have held follower roles
- Sample (age 19-68, M=31.5); Sex (30% male, 70% female); Current role: (2 business owners, 2 students, 3 neighbors, and 6 employees)
- Responses analyzed to capture language and behavioral expressions in context.
- Methods allowed the capturing of experiences, feelings and values that underpin participant's behaviors and attitudes.
- Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to code responses, and determine thematic orientation.

Key Findings

RQ1: The role of a follower

- Followers generally view the role of a follower as mundane, a "less-than" role, where they are responsive to leaders and not involved in decision making.
  - Followers who had not held leadership roles expressed a sense of duty to "serve" their employer.
  - Participants with prior leader roles: viewed the role of followers as supportive as opposed to obedient.
- Follower's reported high expectations for their own attitudes and behavior, high levels of commitment to a strong work ethic, maintaining credibility, discipline, and doing their best.

RQ2: Understanding of followership

- Experience with the term: Through inductive reasoning, most participants concluded that followership was complimentary to leadership.
- Of 13 interview subjects, only one had prior knowledge of "followership" through a corporate mentorship program.
- Four participants related followership and leadership as a cooperative relationship based on attitudes centered on organizational or task success.
- The balance either did not know or conflated leader/follower with leadership/followership.
- Of those who considered the term "followership," three equated the term with "work ethic," which seems to be the closest analog to followership minus the consideration of relationship and commitment to higher objectives.

Implications

This study found that participants generally held a negative view of the term "follower," while simultaneously (inductively) providing a very complimentary view of "followership." Considering these findings, an opportunity exists to introduce followership development programs that reinforce the positive views of followership attitude and shape the behavior of people in follower roles.
Examples:

- Civic: increase community engagement and volunteerism
- Business: Increase loyalty, situational awareness, critical task evaluation, etc.
- Academic: Increase personal investment, responsibility, and expectations
- Relational: Reinforce commitment, selfless behaviors, attentiveness, etc.

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