



Followership The Neglected Skill?

A Travel Free Learning Article

by

Ken Kessler

Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership

Voice: 804.338.5058, E-mail: KKessler@TheColumbiaPartnership.org

Web Site: www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org

Do you remember the childhood game, *Follow the Leader*? We would choose a leader. Then everyone had to follow the actions of our designated leader. If you did not follow the moves of the leader, you lost and had to wait for the next game. If you followed every move of the leader and were the last one standing, you won.

We always thought the most important person in the game was the leader. She could make all of the moves to trick us. We would follow whatever she did just to win the game. I would suggest, though, the follower was just as important as the leader. How much fun would the game be without the followers mimicking the leaders?

This game mirrors life. We justifiably talk a great deal about leadership. Thousands of books have been written by many great men and women about the values of leadership. A leader provides vision and focus. He encourages the group to tackle the biggest challenges. She serves effectively as a servant and a great team builder. We need great leaders!

To have great leaders, we must also have great followers. In fact, my contention is that the best leaders have learned first how to be good followers. Jesus in all his majesty and glory learned first to be a follower of His Father's mission. He knew what He came to do and followed that path very closely. Before Peter or Paul could become a recognized leader of the early church, they had to show they were faithful followers of our Lord. Peter, of course, spent time with Jesus. Paul spent several years in Antioch learning from leaders like Barnabas.

What are the characteristics of a good follower? Very few books or workshops are dedicated to helping us learn how to be a good follower. What type of follower are you? What is your follower style? What are you doing to grow as a follower of whoever is your leader? I have been making a list of some characteristics that I think are important.

- **Followers commit to the vision of the leader.** When Jesus chose his disciples, he called them to a new mission and vision. He told the ones at the boats they would be "fishers of men." They had to dedicate their lives to his vision. Our commitment to followership begins with our commitment to the vision and mission of the person we are following. Leaders need people who will get behind their mission and encourage them as they lead. What is the vision of the leader you follow? How committed to you are living out that vision? How does your leader allow you to share in the visioning process? The most effective leaders do not hand down the vision to their followers, but instead cultivate their followers through a careful listening process. How engaged are you in helping your leader with the vision of the congregation or the organization in which you serve?

- **Followers recognize their power comes in the context of relationship.** Power is an intoxicating thing. You get it, and you like the feeling it provides. The real challenge is often power leads to abuses and wanting more. For followers, the power is not most effectively found in the position they hold, but in the relationship they cultivate with the leader. Followers have a responsibility to cultivate a relationship with the leader. Trust is one of the key ingredients of all relationships. At times because of personality or unique work challenges, leaders and followers struggle. In fact, many times due to the stress of their position and influence, leaders do not always make the wisest choices concerning their followers. Rather than blaming the leader for their inappropriate actions, the follower should proactively find ways to take the high ground.

David in the Old Testament faced a tremendous challenge when his leader, King Saul, grew jealous of him and wanted him killed. David spared Saul's life even though the power was shifting to him. Your power is found in the trust you have in the relationship. How are you growing your relationship with your leader? What are proactive actions you take to assist your leader during times of stress and challenge?

- **Followers communicate clearly with the leader.** Communication holds the key for both leaders and follower, but sometimes we place the majority of the responsibility on the leader. Followers should be open and forthright in their communication with the leader. Leaders do not need to find out about actions or spoken words from other people. Effective followers take the time and energy to keep them informed on things that are taking place in the congregation. How do you communicate with your leader? What are you doing to make sure that your leader knows about the actions of your team or your congregation? How do you share with your leader what you are hearing about the ministry of your congregation or organization?
- **Followers serve the leader through actions of compassion and care.** Leaders face significant stress from their role. Effective followers find actions of compassion and care to relieve some of the stress. Your relationship with your leader will be forwarded in magnificent ways when you freely serve the needs of your leader. Leaders who follow the example of Jesus find ways to serve their followers. We call that servant leadership. I think we need to also develop a branch called servant followership. What actions of compassion and care have you practiced toward your leader? When are times of stress that your leader needs extra compassion?
- **Followers assume responsibility for their actions and growth.** Many followers blame their leaders or their organization for their lack of growth. If the leader would just put them in the right place or would just use their gifts more effectively, they rationalize they would be more effective. Effective followers take responsibility and perform actions that will both help the leader succeed and the follower grow. What are your goals for this year? How do they help your leader succeed? How do you communicate your goals and commitment to your leader?
- **Followers challenge the leader appropriately and handle conflict with the leader gracefully.** Strong leaders want followers who will challenge them at appropriate times. Blind loyalty is not a positive virtue for followers. If a leader is going in an uncomfortable direction, an effective follower will challenge the direction of the leader. The key thing for a follower is to only challenge in appropriate settings that honor and respect the leader. In the context of a growing relationship, an effective leader expects a faithful follower to express his or her concerns. Unfortunately, many followers choose inappropriate places and situations to share their challenges. Effective followers will invest time with their leader to find out how the leader would like them to respond if the followers disagree or want to challenge an idea. When will you have a conversation with your leader to talk about challenges and conflict? How does your leader expect you to challenge ideas and thoughts?

- **Followers model transformation and change.** How do you model for others the transformation and change for which your leader calls? People are watching to see how the vision will be lived out not only in the leader, but also in those who follow.
- **Followers understand that they must be thick-skinned and courageous.** Leaders will disappoint you and will make choices that will create challenges for you. I have faced situations in my ministry journey where leaders I have served have made decisions that have affected my life negatively. One leader to which I was very loyal and committed broke my trust. After being forced out of the ministry situation, I honored my commitment to the congregation and did not create difficult problems for him. When you are following a leader, you make yourself very vulnerable to the actions of the leader. Sometimes, you do what is best for the organization even if it is not best for you personally.

These characteristics are just a beginning point. I think we need to craft a followership development plan in order to continue our growth. Remember, the most effective leaders first must learn how to be a good follower. How are you developing your followership skills? If you are leader, how you are helping your followers improve their skills? What would you add to this list?

Note: Join us Wednesday, June 15th, at 2:00 p.m. EDT for the Travel Free Learning Dialogue as we discuss these characteristics of followership. Help us add other key characteristics to being a good follower. If you miss this live dialogue, go to www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org and the *Travel Free Learning Dialogues* link to listen to the recording of this session.

Important Things to Know

Ken Kessler is a Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership. He is the current board president, and co-leads the Coaching Leaders Team. He is also on staff with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board. The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. **Travel Free Learning** is a knowledge sharing emphasis. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.