Leading Ideas:

The Shared Leadership Principle: Creating Leaders Throughout the Organization

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Introduction

To meet the challenges of the next decade, libraries will increasingly require staff at all levels to have an expanded set of skills and competencies. Few would argue that leadership skills are primary among the necessary and, indeed, critical skills. However, Robert Kelley, Professor at Carnegie Mellon University, argues that for organizations to grow and flourish, another less well known set of skills is also needed. Those skills revolve around the concept of followership.

Robert Kelley defines effective followers as people who:

- manage themselves well;
- are committed to the organization and to a purpose, principle, or person outside themselves;
- build their competence and focus their efforts for maximum impact; and
- are courageous, honest, and credible.

Leadership and Effective Followers

Jill Janov, in her book, *The Inventive Organization*, states that, "Leadership is not the purview of a few nor is followership the purview of the many. To lead is to guide the development of the system. To follow is to pursue the common cause.... Leading and following are dormant or active depending on the nature of relationships between people or between people and their environment in the context we call 'organization.' "[1] In order to discuss the role of effective followership in an organization, it is important to understand leadership and followership as a symbiotic relationship. In other words, people may play leading or following roles depending on the situation and the organizational needs.

In his ground-breaking book, *The Power of Followership,* Kelley states, "If there is anything the nineties have already taught us, it's that most people are both leaders and followers."[2] Kelley's research shows, however, that most people ascribe negative qualities to the word "follower." Among some of the words used to describe followers, he found "sheep" (the most prevalent response), "yes-people," "apathetic people," and "happy losers." His work investigates the ways in which individuals in follower roles can be effective and powerful contributors to the organization. In other words, people may play leading or following roles depending on the situation and they therefore require the ability to determine which role to take at any given time. Skills that an effective follower possesses include: critical thinking, knowing oneself, and understanding the needs and/or qualities of the people around them. Assessing the situation, an effective follower will decide whether or not to assume a leadership role.

All too often in libraries, people are cast in either follower or leader roles- static positions, frequently to the detriment of the organization's goals and needs. How can this be changed? It can be changed by giving staff the tools needed to be skilled followers and leaders at the same time. With effective training, library staff can become individuals who feel equal to any person taking a leadership role at any given point, individuals committed to the organization's mission and goals, individuals not afraid to participate and to differ constructively.

James Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of *Creditbility: How Leaders Gain and Lose it, Why People Demand It,* believe there is a natural and sometimes overt tension between the leadership role and the followership or what they call the "colleague" role.[3] Their research findings show that, despite distinct differences between expectations of individuals in leadership roles and individuals in followership roles, the characteristic most critical to work relationships is "credibility," or the ability to believe in another.

By developing skillful and credible followers, institutions will by default enhance staff leadership skills. By developing followership skills such as the power of self-reflection and self-management, libraries will create stronger and more perceptive leaders, and a staff that can effectively shift roles as necessary. In addition, building the follower's ability to work alongside others may diminish the competitive urge that is fostered by a view of the leader as superior.

Virginia Vanderslice discusses the importance of separating leadership functions from leadership. She says, "Not only is it possible to fulfill leadership functions without creating static leader roles, but also there may be negative organizational consequences to leader-follower distinctions.... In fact, lodging leadership functions in leaders may actually undermine the very goals leaders are supposed to achieve."[4] Vanderslice, along with Charles Manz, Henry Sims, and others, agrees that power is the line along which we most often draw distinctions
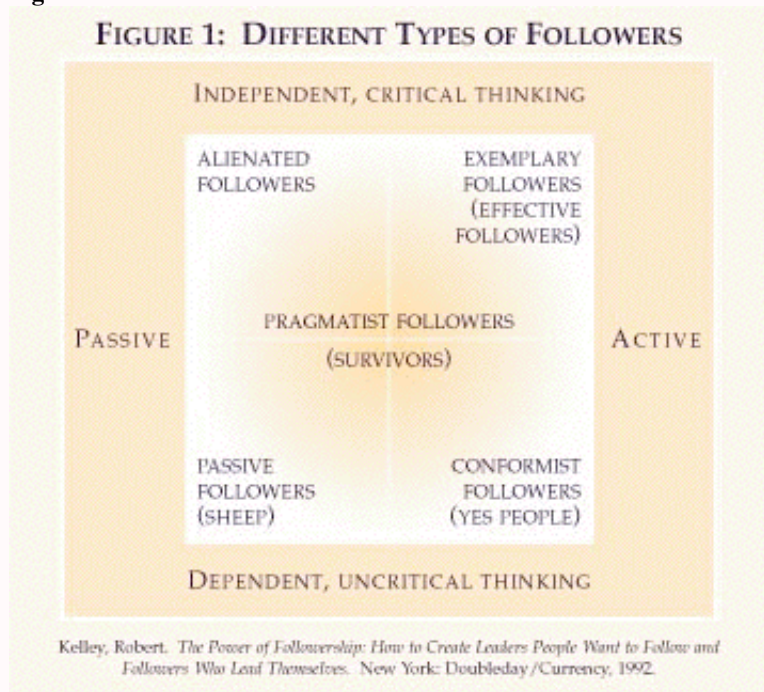
between leaders and followers.[5]

As organizations adapt to changing environments and changing user expectations and needs and as they continue their organizational learning process, this delineation along the lines of power loses its meaning. While issues of personal power will always exist, the new view of the cooperative workplace provides an opportunity to reduce individual and collective fixations on power.

Douglas K. Smith writes in consonance with Vanderslice, stating that people in leadership positions (i.e. those with vested higher level authority) also need to be able to consider when and where they might choose to follow rather than lead others. Smith, in the book *The Leader of the Future*, writes, "Top leaders who hope to set the energies and performance of people on fire through rich, promising visions must know when to follow their people's interpretation of those visions in order to truly benefit from the creativity and meaning that any vision-driven enterprise requires." [6]

Why Followership?

One might very well ask in what way followers differ from leaders. We have a propensity for viewing followers as negative elements in the organization; that is, a follower is seen as weak, passive, and unmotivated. To clarify, followers, while sharing responsibility, play a supportive and contributing role while leaders lead other individuals in a collaborative effort.

Figure 1

FIGURE 1: DIFFERENT TYPES OF FOLLOWERS

INDEPENDENT, CRITICAL THINKING

ALIENATED FOLLOWERS

EXEMPLARY FOLLOWERS (EFFECTIVE FOLLOWERS)

PRAGMATIST FOLLOWERS (SURVIVORS)

PASSIVE   ACTIVE

PASSIVE FOLLOWERS (SHEEP)

CONFORMIST FOLLOWERS (YES PEOPLE)

DEPENDENT, UNCRITICAL THINKING

Kelley, Robert. *The Power of Followership: How to Create Leaders People Want to Follow and Followers Who Lead Themselves.* New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1992.

Kelley's model (Fig. 1) of the different types of followers in an organization makes clear what most organizations would prefer: the effective or skillful follower [7] The model is designed with two axes: a horizontal axis defining the behavior of the individual on a continuum from passive to active, and a vertical axis describing the individual's abilities on a continuum from dependent, uncritical thinking to independent, critical thinking. The three ineffective follower behaviors are: 1) the passive, or sheep-like, follower who is not a critical and independent thinker; 2) the conformist follower who, though on the active end of the horizontal continuum, is nevertheless still dependent and uncritical in his/her thinking; and 3) the alienated follower who is quite independent and critical in his/her thinking, but is passive. In the center of the model is a group of people Kelley refers to as the pragmatist followers, the survivors. These people choose their actions, roles, and behaviors based upon which way the "corporate" wind is blowing. They are not so much engaged in the issues facing the organization as they are concerned with protecting themselves. Though often able to adapt to change, these followers do not perform at a level that is productive and do not contribute substantively to the organization's effectiveness.

Charles Manz and Henry Sims also categorize followers into four categories: 1) yes people, 2) calculative compliers, 3) enthusiastic sheep, and 4) self-leaders. The "yes people" are the same as Kelley's, but the other two dysfunctional types of followers are a bit different. Calculative compliance implies a "What's in it for me?" attitude and it is this type of follower who will comply if it is in his or her perceived best interests. Manz and Sims' "enthusiastic sheep," as opposed to Kelley's more passive sheep, are undiscerning, cheerleading followers who are unable/unwilling to acknowledge flaws in the person(s) in the leadership role, and hence cannot apply critical thinking skills to the actions and thoughts of that person(s). "Self-leaders" are equivalent to "effective followers" in Kelley's nomenclature.

Douglas Smith describes a stigmatized, almost visceral response to following, "Following suffers from a serious image problem. Few children aspire to grow up to be followers. Following is not included in selection for colleges, professional schools, scholarships, or awards.... 'Real leaders,' we believe, are made of sterner, more iconoclastic stuff. Consequently, even in its most admirable aspects, following has remained a

dirty secret, a closet phenomenon that few of us enthusiastically or consistently embrace and celebrate."[8]

"How did we come to see followership as the antithesis of leadership rather than followers as collaborators in the effort of organizational work?" asks Kelley.[9] This question is at the root of many libraries' inability to engage the vital issues of the information age in a dynamic and cohesive way.

Roles vs. Positions New Environment

As libraries look for ways to become more agile, responsive, and resilient to the environment and to the growing information needs of their clients, they look for ways to use both the adaptive and the innovative capabilities they have developed. By maximizing the varied talents and skills of a diverse staff, the organization can best approach decisions, problem-solving, and innovation. Staff members will be increasingly free to choose the roles they will play.

An agile and perpetually learning organization is an interdependent organization, one in which individuals, teams, departments, and divisions work in ever-changing combinatory collaboration.

Jill Janov states that, "The demands of the Information Era require us to examine our entrenched assumptions about leading, following, and how work gets done. If we seek to build an inventive organization one capable of continuous renewal we must operate on the basis of self-regulation and interdependence at every level of the system, not on control of the many by the few."[10]

While some libraries have done away with hierarchical structures entirely, many still operate within structures that are more or less hierarchical in nature. It is safe to say, however, that many libraries are looking for new ways to share decision making and leadership at some level or another. Some libraries have established team-based structures and others, while altering the hierarchical structures less radically, are attempting to share some of the decision making, or move it to more appropriate levels of the organization. Whatever the organizational structure, leadership and followership roles will be required. In the words of Ira Chaleff, "Followers and leaders both orbit around the purpose; followers do not orbit around the leader."[11]

Followership is a *role* one may play at appropriate times, not a particular person or position. Organizations with flatter structures those in which leadership is shared need people who will *share* leadership. This implies that, at times, some will choose to follow as opposed to lead. These two roles are integral parts of a whole; they are the ebb and flow of the organization. Since no discussion of what exemplary followership is takes place in most organizations, and since there has been considerable emphasis on leadership competencies, clearly followership skills now need and will need in the future the specific attention and focus of the human resource and staff development professionals.

Recognizing this ebb and flow, human resources and staff development professionals need to develop followership skills in library staff in the same way leadership skills have been emphasized in recent years. Additionally, in developing followership skills or in training staff to assume effective followership roles, it will be important to demonstrate and recognize effective followership skills, acknowledge and understand the different types of followers within an organization, and determine how best to build reward systems for followership.

Douglas Smith argues for an abandonment of positional reference to the issue of who is a follower and who is a leader. He powerfully states, "Position was a powerful engine for organizations that depended on people as cogs. But today's organizations require fast and flexible networks of engaged and empowered people, not human robots who contribute coglike efficiency to organizational machines. Today, performance challenges not position should determine when you should follow and when you should lead."[12]

Characteristics and Skills of Effective Followers

Robert Kelley delineates the basic characteristics of an effective follower: "What distinguishes an effective follower from an ineffective follower is enthusiastic, intelligent, and self-reliant participation without star billing in the pursuit of an organizational goal."[13]

One of the keys to effective followership is the concept of "self-management." This is the ability to determine one's own goals within a larger context, to take control of one's own development, and to decide what role to take at any given time. In a similar vein, Charles Manz and Henry Sims describe their concept of "self-leadership" as being "...an extensive set of strategies focused on the behaviors and thoughts that can be used to exert self-influence. Self-leadership is what people do to lead themselves. In some ways, self-leadership might also be thought of as a form of responsible followership...."[14]

Apart from a commitment to their own goals and futures, effective followers are committed to something larger than themselves. They show commitment to the organization they work in through the application of self-leadership and the ability to work with others to reach organizational goals.

Being committed is not enough, however. Kelley points out that incompetent commitment is not worth much. Competence and focus, then, are two other qualities of effective followers. These employees strive to reach higher levels of competence through continuous learning. They focus on the work of the organization and not on the "soap opera" that can sometimes absorb ineffective followers.

Finally, a follower also needs to exhibit courage. This implies and requires independent and critical thinking skills as well as the ability to feel comfortable challenging others and taking risks, being innovative, and dealing with "wicked problems." In other words, a person choosing a

followership role at any given time feels she/he is contributing at an equitable level with the person assuming the leadership role at that time. An effective follower, then, is a person who knows when to choose the followership role over the leadership role, a person who exhibits confidence, courage, competence, and critical thinking skills, and a person who is committed to the larger aim of the organization.

Creating Leadership by Building Followership Skills

What can staff development and human resource officers do to encourage the development of effective followership skills among library staff, from clerical or mailroom staff to senior management?

Making changes in the systems already in place in the library is an important first step in achieving a synergy between the followership and leadership roles. Systemareas needing change might include: the reward and recognition system; the organizational decision-making system; the communication patterns; the planning or shared visioning activities; work redesign; classification and compensation structures; staff development; resource allocation; and recruitment and retention. In each of these areas, redefinition and change is needed before effective followership can be employed by library staff.

In addition to changes in the systems areas, libraries need to organize staff in such a way as to encourage effective followership. One way is through the encouragement of independent and empowered working groups. These groups should be allowed creative freedom in order for the organization to tap the talents and knowledge that are sometimes buried in staff levels where it can't be expressed. Problem-solving is an area in which followers can show their strengths and model effective behaviors.

Based on the work of Robert Kelley, below are four areas that human resource and staff development officers should address to help staff to become more effective in the followership role. *1. Help the organization define/re-define leadership and followership.* Through open discussion and sharing experiences as both followers and leaders, staff can begin to define for themselves how these roles might be viewed differently than they have been in the past. This redefinition can also surface by listing the characteristics of ineffective followers as well as of effective followers and leaders. This activity can spur staff participation in reshaping the potential roles available to them as committed employees.

2. Attend to the development of the specific skills needed to be an effective follower. This includes improving self-management skills; focusing on critical thinking, continuous learning; building confidence and the ability to disagree with others (including those taking leadership roles) in a constructive way; and encouraging contribution and participation in the shaping of the organization's direction. Again, Douglas Smith has strong words, "The corollary to 'People are our most important asset' is, inevitably, 'We want everyone to be a leader.' How many companies, nonprofit organizations, or government institutions have training courses in 'followership'?"[15]

Human resource officers can focus employees on potential areas of development and share information about specific learning opportunities that incorporate skill training in one or more areas in the list of effective followers characteristics.

3. Review performance assessment and feedback documents and guidelines. This is an important area, as it is often the case that performance assessment rewards only leadership activities and not effective followership activities. If libraries are to achieve balance between these two necessary roles, followership behaviors must be addressed in the performance assessment process. Indeed, followership behaviors can be built into position descriptions and performance expectations, as well as being a part of performance assessment.

Further, there must be rewards and positive feedback for effective followership behaviors. Recognition of the contributions of people taking followership roles is an important signal to others in the organization that this is a valued role and one that, when chosen and acted on effectively, will be noted and honored.

4. Collaborate to create organizational structures that encourage the taking of followership roles. Genuine shared-leadership structures must be in place before effective followership can truly be a viable role for employees to take. Team work is demonstrated as an effective way to accomplish organizational goals. Using that knowledge to create an environment in which both leadership and followership roles are expected and useful roles for people to take will create a more cooperative, vital, and thoughtful organization. Maintaining rigid hierarchical structures provides a climate that fosters ineffective followership. By broadening the opportunity to either lead or follow, the organization is more likely to tap the talents and energies of its employees. Out of such participation commitment grows.

Leaders can also do much to model effective followership by looking at their own behaviors and determining how to choose/exemplify followership. Smith suggests that leaders do so by:

- Asking questions instead of giving answers.
- Providing opportunities for others to lead you.
- Doing real work in support of others instead of only the reverse.
- Becoming a matchmaker instead of a "central switch."
- Seeking common understanding instead of [superficial] consensus.[16]

Conclusion

How can libraries benefit from building effective followership skills at all levels of the organization? As we have seen in this brief exploration of the followership terrain, organizations of all kinds rely on individuals in follower roles to do a great deal of the work. For there to be a strong consonance between the mission of the organization, the goals developed by the members of the organization, and the methods by which those

missions and goals are pursued, there has to be effective interpersonal collaboration amongst the staff members of the organization.

Further, in tapping the potential in each employee (sometimes termed "empowerment") and in releasing the creative powers of those employees, the library can benefit and, indeed, innovate. With every employee, regardless of title, position, or rank, working effectively together in an environment that respects the individual's ability to consciously choose either the followership or the leadership role at any given moment, the library will unleash tremendous collaborative capacity within the organization.

Smith writes "We need to craft a different organizational culture, one that self-consciously practices and celebrates both the following and the leading skills in all of its people. In this culture, people are not 'assets.' They are continually shifting collaborations of individuals who make performance and change happen."[17]

Notes

1 Janov, Jill. *The Inventive Organization: Hope and Daring at Work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994. 224.

2 Kelley, Robert E. *The Power of Followership*. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 9.

Kelley's research is articulated both in this book as well as in his article, "In Praise of Followers" (*Harvard Business Review:* 66.6 [Nov.-Dec. 1988]: 142-48).

3 Kouzes, James M., and Barry Z. Posner. *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993. 252-58.

4 Vanderslice, Virginia J. "Separating Leadership from Leaders: An Assessment of the Effect of Leader and Follower Roles in Organizations." *Human Relations* 41.9 (1988): 677-96. p. 679.

5 See Charles C. Manz and Henry P. Sims, Jr.'s *Superleadership* (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1990).

6 Smith, Douglas K. "The Following Part of Leading." In *The Leader of the Future: New Visions, Strategies, and Practices for the Next Era*. Ed. Frances Hesselbein, et al. The Drucker Foundation Future Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997. pp. 199-207. 202.

7 Kelley, *Power of Followership* 97.

8 Smith, 202-03.

9 Kelley, *Power of Followership* 33.

10 Janov, 224.

11 Chaleff, Ira. *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up To and For Our Leaders*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1995. 14.

12 Smith, 204.

13 Kelley, "In Praise" 143.

14 Manz and Sims, 4.

15 Smith, 203.

16 Smith, 205-06.

17 Smith, 207.