

“First Followers” as Leaders

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When I have the privilege of initial conversations with leaders, I often ask, “Do you lead followers, or do you lead leaders?” After a typically uneasy pause and a somewhat confused look, the response is usually something like, “Followers. Of course I lead followers.”

I then ask, “How would their behaviors be different if you led leaders instead of followers?” Another awkward pause ends with thoughtful imaginations about the sizable improvement that might exist.

A final follow-up question: “How would your behaviors be different if you led leaders instead of leading followers?” Another uncomfortable and slightly embarrassed silence typically yields to thoughts of sharing more information and gathering more input on critical decisions.

My final thought-provoking question is, “Considering the current culture of your organization, would it be easier for those under your authority to change their behavior, or could you change your behaviors more easily?”

Think about those questions for yourself. They obviously bring up questions about the meaning of “leadership” and “following.” Further, they likely cause you to think in a different way about the influence you have on establishing the culture of your organization.

I had the experience recently of thinking in a fresh way about the overlapping roles of followers and leaders. The facilitator at a recent seminar shared an intriguing three-minute video. To shake your perspective in a productive and beneficial way, please look at this video narrated by a creative entrepreneur named Derek Sivers: www.dereksivers.com/ff

The video itself (filmed originally by Michael Hughes and posted separately on www.youtube.com) is of a dancing man who initiates a movement at a rock concert, but Derek’s analysis is worthy of study by any leader. For the rest of this article, I want to highlight some gems of information taken from Derek’s narrative.

The first follower serves a crucial role. The first follower courageously shows others how to follow. Subsequent followers emulate the first followers more than they do the leader. Being a first follower is a very under-appreciated form of leadership.

The leader embraces the first follower as an equal. It’s no longer about the leader and a creative, unique idea. The welcome collaboration between the leader and the first follower puts the focus now on the joint effort, not on either individual. The concept becomes the attraction, and the leader and first follower merely facilitate the involvement of additional interested individuals.

The second follower is the tipping point. Notice that the first two individuals invite others to join in. Had the effort been exclusive, subsequent followers would not have felt welcome. However, the receptive environment builds momentum as more individuals choose to engage in the effort.

This video and its narration helped me understand my role over thirty years. I was never the visionary, but I was an excellent “vision runner.” In terms of this video, I was the “first follower.”

If you are typically a “first follower” or a “vision runner,” be inspired by your unique contributions as you contemplate this video. You may rarely receive accolades, but your leadership role is crucial!

If you are a visionary, learn in a fresh way the importance of welcoming those who join with you to make your ventures successful. Express intentional appreciation to your “first followers” and “vision runners,” as they likely feel undervalued much of the time.

For more on this concept, visit my website, click on the “Article Archives” page, and scroll down to the article entitled “Visionaries and Vision Runners.” And please know that I welcome your comments!

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