

# Leadership from the Viewpoint of Followers

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2009, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on February 7, 2009

Leaders are only as strong as the connections they make with each person in their constituency, whether they have one follower or one million. What is it that causes individuals to engage with and follow the direction of some leaders, yet reject or actively resist the guidance of others?

That's the question researchers at the Gallup organization sought to answer. Leadership has been studied for centuries from the viewpoint of the leader. (For example, successful leaders mentor younger, developing leaders.) Very little scientific insight, however, is available to leaders from the viewpoint of followers, those who experience the attitudes and behavioral impacts of their leaders.

Over the past three years, Gallup interviewers sought information from 10,000 random followers. They avoided academicians, historians, CEOs, and other leadership "experts." The information gathered consisted of these two simple questions:

- What leader has the most positive influence in your daily life? (To reduce hypothetical responses, this question focused the respondent's attention on an actual individual in his or her life.)
- Please list three words that best describe what this person contributes to your life.

Note that no options or categories were provided. Yet four major themes emerged from the responses.

As you read the descriptions, consider how well you and your colleagues satisfy these basic needs for individuals in your organization. If you fall short on any of these, consider initiating some heart-to-heart conversations with the individuals under your authority. You may be surprised at the information you learn from the feedback you receive. Fortunately, improvement is possible in each of these categories.

**Trust.** Similar words cited by followers included *honesty, integrity, and respect*. Followers clearly expect their leaders to be competent, honorably motivated, and deeply committed to keeping the promises they make. The research indicates that the chances of employees being engaged at work are only 1 in 12 when they do not trust the organization's leadership, yet much improved at 1 in 2 if they trust the organization's leaders.

**Compassion.** Similar words cited by followers included *caring, friendship, happiness, and love*. Individuals who feel their supervisors support them and care about them as a person:

- are significantly more likely to stay with their organization,
- have much more engaged customers, and
- are substantially more productive.

**Stability.** Similar words cited by followers included *security, strength, support, and peace*. At a very basic level, employees need a paycheck, and they need to feel secure about having a job. Employees who have high confidence in their company's financial future are nine times more likely to be engaged in their jobs when compared to those who have lower confidence about their organization's financial future. One of the ways in which you can link personal commitment to organizational security is to show each employee how he or she can directly affect key measures such as sales, costs, and rework.

**Hope.** Similar words cited by followers include *direction, faith, and guidance*. Followers seem to want stability in the moment and hope for the future. Chaos and complexity are characteristic of the marketplace in today's world, and followers want some anticipation of making it through to a brighter future. When hope is absent, people lose confidence, they disengage, and they feel helpless.

Gallup researchers have also discovered the many leaders spend more time reacting to the needs of the day than initiating progressive movement toward a visionary future. Despite the beneficial effect on followers of clear direction, the reality is that many leaders are pressured more to respond to real-life current needs than they are encouraged to plan for future opportunities.

Life as a leader is not easy! These four characteristics are outcomes of research as reported by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie in their recent book, *Strengths Based Leadership*.

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*Dennis Hooper helps leaders of healthy organizations improve their culture, processes, and results. Would you like to improve your leadership skills? Take a look at [www.buildingfutureleaders.com](http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com).*