

Leadership from the Viewpoint of Followers

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Leaders are only as strong as the connections they make with each person in their constituency, whether they have one follower or millions. 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?

Researchers from the Gallup organization sought to answer that question. Leadership has been studied and taught 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.

In a Gallup poll, 1,000 random leaders rated their own leadership abilities. Of these individuals, 97% rated their ability to lead as being at or above average. Of course, that's not mathematically possible. Having confirmed their suspicions that leaders view their skills with bias, they turned to followers.

Gallup interviewers sought information from 10,000 random followers. They avoided academicians, historians, CEOs, and others who might consider themselves leadership "experts." The information gathered consisted of these two simple questions:

- What leader has the most positive influence in your daily life? (The purpose of this question was to focus the respondent's attention on an actual individual in order to reduce hypothetical responses to the primary question in the research, the one following.)
- Please list three words that best describe what this person contributes to your life.

Note that the research sought only open-ended responses. Intentionally, no options or suggestions were provided. Asking individuals to select from categories based on any leadership theory would likely bias the descriptions. Yet, four major themes emerged from the responses.

As you read the descriptions, consider first how well they represent your feelings about your leaders. Consider initiating a discussion with your colleagues, comparing how each of you might have responded to the questions. Further, and perhaps more important, consider whether you might offer some feedback to your existing leaders based on what you discover about your collective needs.

Next, consider how well you personally satisfy these basic needs for individuals you influence. 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 that many leaders spend more time reacting to the demands of the day than initiating progressive movement toward a visionary future. Clear direction toward a hopeful tomorrow is obviously beneficial for followers. Consider, however, the extent to which you are pressured to respond to current needs than you are encouraged to plan for future opportunities.

Based on the examined needs of followers, leadership is not easy! The above information comes from research reported by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie in their 2008 book, *Strengths Based Leadership*.

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