

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

No. 47 – December 2023

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Followership: Do We Need a Code?

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He who cannot be a good follower cannot be a good leader.
Aristotle

Sitting in the back of the lecture theatre on Captains Warfare course, I thought that having a presentation on the Army [Leadership Code](#) would be one I could relax on. I have been a leader since 2001, I understand the Code, I have taught it on numerous courses. Yet, a comment made me sit up and think, 'is followership more important than leadership?' Surely not, I thought. We have a Centre for Army Leadership, there are thousands of books on the subject, and even more websites on leader and leadership development. How many are there on followership? Since then, I looked more into followership and read – among other things – the new [Followership Doctrine Note](#). I started to think, 'if followership is as important as – or perhaps even more than – leadership, why does followership not have its own Code?'

In this Insight, I explain why in my view we need a Followership Code and I try to define how it may look like. I do not expect to have all the answers, but I want to put my suggestions forward to start the discussion about what I think is an important issue for everybody across our organisation.

Why we need a Followership Code

By codifying our [Values and Standards](#) and by producing a Leadership Code, the Army tells us what it wants from its Soldiers and Officers. These documents define our beliefs in action and our behaviours, the doing of what is right. However, as we are all followers too, what should our behaviours be when not in command? By having a set of behaviours that we all agree to uphold we can directly challenge individuals and toxic leadership. There are numerous reasons, in my view, in support of having a Followership Code.

One is reporting. When sitting writing reports I struggle to grade someone on their values; how do I give a higher grade than a B (performing to the standard expected in all respects)?¹ If I had a set of behaviours to grade on then my reporting would be more accurate and there would be more consistency across the organisation as all reports would use the same sets of criteria and descriptors. Our values must not change or be removed, they are us, our core beliefs. It is difficult to show or assess values if they are not linked to specific behaviours. If this is true for leadership, it must be true for followers, too.

Another reason is its utility in making outstanding Followership part of our teaching and training across the organisation. How do we teach someone to become a better follower, to take ownership of themselves and identify areas of improvement? It is a hard lesson to teach, even harder to do when we do not have a reference framework at hand to describe followership behaviours.

In addition, a clear and well-defined Followership Code would play an important tool in fighting toxic leadership. As argued in the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#), susceptible followers are an intrinsic part of the Toxic Triangle as they act as enablers. To tackle toxic leadership, each side of the Toxic Triangle is dealt with in separate ways: 'Toxic leaders' by leadership (LEADERS) and command training; 'conducive environment' by our Values and Standards, stability, and governance. But what do we do about 'susceptible followers'? We often talk about individuals being able to challenge and have positive role models. However, without some form of guidelines where is that behaviour reference coming from? In a toxic environment, the likely main point of reference will be the very individuals who display behaviours not aligned with any code. In my view, there is a need for a codified list of behaviours for everyone to be held to account to, and to gain personal ownership.

The need for a code should not just be for annual reporting or signature blocks, it is for individuals to understand and act in accordance with the code. The behaviours that followers show are just as important if not more so than leaders. Having a code for followers will support a drive to eliminate the toxic triangle and develop the team and organisation in a better environment. The code will allow Army Followers at all ranks to take ownership of their behaviours in support of the wider mission or task. It holds individuals to account and clearly states the behaviours the British Army wants of its soldiers and officers.

What could a Followership Code look like?

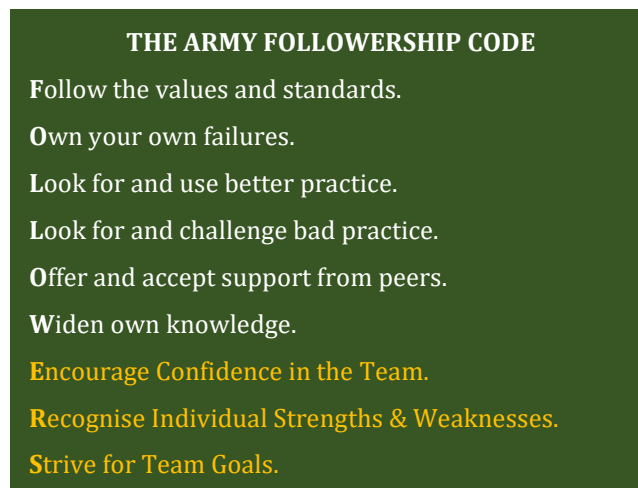
An individual's character, motivations, and experience, coupled with the environment they are working in, all influence their behaviours. [Followership Doctrine Note](#), Sect 5, para 39.

As detailed in the [Followership Doctrine Note](#) the British Army wants followers who are exemplary followers (Stars) rather than any of the other four followership behaviour types (Alienated; Passive; Conformist; Pragmatist). To do this we must teach our followers 'What British Army Followers Do - Action' (Adair 1979) the same way as we teach our leaders. The following suggestions are the author's attempt at drafting a Followership Code, consisting of six behaviours and three supporting behaviours that link with the Leadership Code and Action Centred Leadership (ALD 2021, point 4-2). The enduring characteristics, mirroring the characteristics of Army leaders (ALD 2021, points 2.09-2.10), Army Followers are also *Responsible, Influential and The Example*.

Before a Followership Code we must ensure that individuals understand the context of the situation and environment they are in to be able to bring the correct behaviours to the fore. This is a leadership task, but the follower must understand and ask for it when not given. This will give the leaders vision, a shared purpose and the 'why' for the individual and the team. Using the three headings (Individual Considerations, Team Considerations, Task Considerations) from

¹ [JSP 757 Tri-service appraisal reporting instructions](#), Section 5 grading scale.

the [Followership Doctrine Note](#) to bracket the proposed code into action areas. The proposed Followership Code using the mnemonic FOLLOWERS:



Develop individuals (Self-management, Motivation, High Professional Standards).

- **Follow the Values and Standards.** The Values and Standards *are* the British Army and must be at the top of any behaviour list. Each individual Army follower has a responsibility to maintain these Standards and live the Values we believe in; nothing is more important. By demonstrating these Values and Standards, individuals become the example to others, the role model of the peer. The responsibility and example setting will build and sustain trust in the team.
- **Own your own failures.** The Army follower must have humility in their successes and more importantly ownership of failure will allow development of teams with trust, discipline and the high professional standards of the British Army. Owning one's failures or mistakes takes moral courage but is not a get out of a jail card. Once a failure has happened the consequence of actions must be accounted for, but owning it is important as only then can individuals learn and improve. This ownership requires emotional intelligence from both Army followers and leaders.

Team Considerations Collaborate, Build and sustain trust, Support, Challenge, Adapt to change).

- **Look for and use better practice.** The development of future leaders starts with the Army follower. The search for better practice is constant and is key for individuals' development away from toxic cultures. Army followers should look for multiple leaders to find better practice and bring numerous ideas and ways together to form a method that works for them. This will develop independent thinking and learning, developing inspiration for peers, making better leaders of the future.
- **Look for and challenge bad practice.** The opposite to better practice is the harder challenge for the Army follower. What does bad practice look like? How can it affect the team? What can I do? These are all questions for Army followers to ask and challenge bad practice where it is found. Only once we have a culture of challenge (done in the correct manner – [Followership DN](#), Section 6), can the toxic environment triangle be broken. This will lead to a positive environment where trust and high professional standards are maintained.
- **Offer and accept support from peers.** The Army follower should be humble to accept support from peers and those below them. This support is not a slight on their character or capability but a desire to build a better, stronger team. When offering support to others, understanding individual's frustrations and reasoning as to why they might refuse support

is key. The collaboration of highly motivated individuals who support each other in this manner is critical in building a team full of trust, mutual respect, and confidence.

Task Considerations (Communicate, Independent critical thinking, Disciplined initiative, take risk).

- **Widen own knowledge.** The Army follower should always be aiming to improve their professional and personal knowledge to become better both in and out of work. In a modern world full of truths and counter truths only those who truly own their profession will shine. The example the follower sets will inspire peers and followers alike, driving change and building better teams and leaders of the future.
- **Encourage Confidence in the Team.** Army followers must be motivated. Openly demonstrating faith in the team and the individuals within it breeds confidence which can then be translated into improved performance. It is also important to show confidence in the wider team by displaying trust and faith in the chain of command. When this type of confidence is shared, it promotes loyalty within the team. Individuals are more likely to act with courage when they know they have the trust of their peers. Confidence within the team promotes self-discipline, shared trust, and respect of others.
- **Recognise Individual Strengths & Weaknesses.** Army followers must realise that every soldier has something to offer the team, and that the identification and recognition of that contribution is critical to meeting the needs of the individual and to making them an effective team member. Individuals and teams must be encouraged to play to their strengths and be given opportunities to showcase their talents. This promotes further confidence and provides motivation to improve further and maximise potential. Recognising the value that everyone brings to the team demonstrates respect for others. When they feel valued, individuals are more likely to display loyalty to each other.
- **Strive for Team Goals.** Great followers strive for team goals, challenge the team to accept and pursue shared objectives, understand the unifying purpose, and support their peers. Joint pursuit of success, especially when paired with shared adversity, can create a powerful team spirit. Shared team goals, particularly when they are achieved, promote identity and a loyalty to that team. They also encourage selfless commitment as individuals place the needs of the task and the team before their own.

If followership is more important than leadership then it must have its own code to support its development. By building a codified cohort of individuals from their earliest days in uniform we can break toxic triangles, and build stronger, more self-resilient individuals and teams with better behaviours. We need a code for the behaviours/actions we want not just from leaders but from the most important people we have, followers.

Questions.

1. Do we need another code? Should we not just do the right thing ?
2. Are we just all followers, some having more responsibility than others? If so, what then does it mean to be a leader?

Resources

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