



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Followership – An Essential Ingredient to Leadership

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If we were to compare Field Marshal Bill Slim, Martin Luther King Jr and a serving British Army JNCO it would be obvious that they came from very different backgrounds and were invested with varying levels of authority and status, but it would also be apparent that each was a leader. Yet I ask myself whether leadership is the dominant similarity or whether it is *followership* that binds them more closely? Slim and King were not weak and submissive, and yet 'good followers' – even if it is an essential ingredient in successful leadership – are often perceived as such. This Insight will argue why leaders must embrace and encourage followership by examining the three key components of permission, purpose and proactiveness and conclude that there is a need for formal inclusion in the Army Leadership Doctrine.

'So followership dominates our lives and organisations, but not our thinking, because our preoccupation with leadership keeps us from considering the nature and the importance of the follower.' Robert Kelley, 1988

Field Marshal Slim is famed for his command of the Fourteenth Army in Burma during the Second World War and in 2011 was voted by historians as Britain's greatest general of all time. At the top of a hierarchy it is leaders, like Slim, using transformational leadership that empowers followers. Transformational leadership, rather than pulling followers and creating *passive* followership, allows followers the freedom of thought and creativity required to develop *active* followership. It creates an essential environment for permission. There is, of course, a place for transactional or autocratic leadership in organisations, but it must be used carefully, proportionately and in the correct context. Overall, however, leaders should use and encourage *active* followership via permission, as a means of maximising efficiency, developing teams, increasing productivity and, in the military context, enhancing an operational effectiveness that will improve an ability to win the fight.

Active followership can only be achieved by developing leaders in a way that consistently emphasises the concept and the impact it can have. Active followers will act on opportunities to appropriately tell the leader that which they do not always wish to hear. They will provide alternative ideas outside of the usual dogmatic approaches and offer constructive criticism to steer a leader towards a more informed course of action, decision or behaviour. However, this can only occur in an atmosphere of permission, created by the leader valuing and inviting this input, outlining the route for it to occur, investing time to clarify intentions and expectations and discussing their leader and follower 'red-lines'. This requires not only deliberate organisational investment but also an encouragement of the individual to take personal responsibility for their own leader journey. At present, officers and soldiers do not study followership on mandated courses to the depth that they study leadership and yet there is copious evidence to support the benefits of rigorous followership education. If we take Slim as an example, we find throughout *Defeat into Victory* – his account of the Burman campaign during the Second World War published in 1956 - a leader who viewed his men not just as subordinates but as active followers who were the key to his success. If we seek to emulate this, then current training and development to enable good followership must move beyond the very limited position it currently occupies to foster the development of healthy leader/follower relationships. We must change the emphasis on the development of the leader to one with more equitable status that develops the follower. Accordingly, the first step is to formally include the concept, key principles and acknowledge the role of the follower in the Army Leadership Doctrine (ALD).

'I Have a Dream.' Martin Luther King, 1963

What allows then the contextual transition to Martin Luther King Jr, an Atlanta born African-American who led the black civil rights movement in 1950's and 60's America. The connection here to followership is purpose and its enabling function. The purpose is why we do what we do, why we care or engage or in layman's terms the reason we get out of bed in the morning and put on our uniform. Its power cannot therefore be underestimated.

A leader needs to know this, a leader needs to find a common purpose for all the followers to unite around, and this is what Martin Luther King Jr did so well. He was able to rally people around a purpose, not just any purpose, but *his* purpose – *his* dream. In the military we give purpose at a basic level by using orders in which the leader provides his/her mission and intent with an expectation for others to follow. But we also all have a personal purpose rooted in our individual needs and desires, because we all joined the Army for one reason or another be it money, security, housing or something else. This is different from Martin Luther King Jr who rather than thinking about the individual instead focused on a purpose for the many, a united purpose. In transformational leadership behaviours, we in the Army can benefit from this too because we need a clear, encompassing and inclusive purpose that unites us and reinforces the permission for engaged followership. The importance of purpose centrally resides in the ALD but it misses the opportunity to explicitly link this to followership. What we find in abundance in the Army today is an expectation of an understanding of purpose delivered through leadership from above, which makes subordinates passive through expectation. A good follower, however, is an active follower who thinks, in military parlance, '2-Up'. In doing so they start to make decisions for the greater good, for the team, for the organisation and they avoid parochialism. They offer solutions and recommendations to their leaders since they have a broader perspective of the variables that contribute to the purpose. They might even then start to shape the purpose itself through proactivity, with the secondary function of making the leader-follower relationship more equitable, rather than one purely based on 'send and receive'.

'Followership, like leadership, is a role and not a destination.' Michael McKinney, 1996

It is important to emphasise that although this *Insight* has utilised a Field Marshal and preeminent civil rights campaigner, followership is something that we should all recognise as important in our day-to-day work. On a personal level, I recently had a JNCO assigned to my

detachment and he immediately caught my eye due to the proactiveness he displayed in what was both a new rank and a new appointment. It became obvious that he understood the need to be accountable to himself for his performance rather than wait to be held accountable by me. This manifested itself through him volunteering to undertake additional professional development to increase his knowledge in role. That proactiveness revealed an individual that was not only willing and able to take ownership of his development, but also his role. Such proactiveness in followers also indicates someone who invites ways to improve but actively self-assesses in the first instance to drive the process. You might argue that this JNCO displayed good leadership, but ownership of role is not leadership it is followership.

This insight has highlighted permission, purpose and proactiveness as some of the key components that are required for successful followership. By understanding this not just as leaders but as individuals, the potential realignment of equity in the relationship between the follower and leader can be better enabled. As leaders we have the responsibility to break down submissive followership and through transformational behaviours create a more active follower that wants to achieve the purpose of the organisation, thus increasing operational effectiveness. I believe that this understanding is best enabled by formally establishing a conceptual start point and a framework for followership within the Army Leadership Doctrine.

Questions:

- What would your principles for active followership be? How could you encourage or apply them in your unit?
- How important is it for followers to believe in the mission (purpose) to achieve success? Can the commander solely rely on leadership from subordinates?
- Does the concept of followership reinforce a strict hierarchy and suppress initiative, or it is the opposite?
- What risks are posed by active followership?

Further Resources:

- **Must Read:** Leadership v Followership Maj Matt Nowax, BAR 171 : Winter 2018 and Robert Kelley's [*In Praise of Followers*](#), *Harvard Business Review* 1988.
- **Must Watch:** [Barbara Kellerman on Followership](#), YouTube and [Leader is Made By First Follower \(TED Talks Courtesy\)](#), YouTube.