

The Courageous Follower

STANDING UP TO &
FOR OUR LEADERS

Updated and expanded to address the new
power dynamics between leaders & followers

I R A C H A L E F F

T H I R D E D I T I O N

An Excerpt From

***The Courageous Follower:
Standing Up To & For Our Leaders
Third Edition***

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INTRODUCTION

IN MANY ORGANIZATIONS, there has been a movement away from the extremes of all-powerful leaders and powerless, submissive followers. We hear about “shared leadership,” a helpful concept in softening the rigid demarcation lines often found between leaders and followers. But there is a limit to the usefulness of this concept. Despite the fact that many people experience visceral discomfort with the term *follower*, it is not realistic to erase all distinctions between the roles of leaders and followers.

Instead, we need a dynamic model of followership that balances and supports dynamic leadership. We need a model that helps us embrace rather than reject the identity of follower because the model speaks to our courage, power, integrity, responsibility, and sense of service. This book proposes a proactive view of the follower’s role, which brings it into parity with the leader’s role. Parity is approached when we recognize that leaders rarely use their power wisely or effectively over long periods unless they are supported by followers who have the stature to help them do so. Regrettably, recent history is strewn with examples that support this observation.

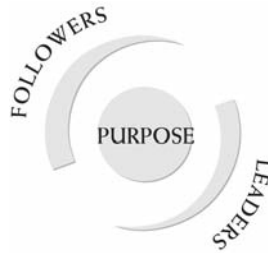
In many situations, no matter how much partnership or empowerment exists, the leader has ultimate authority and responsibility. The CEO of a business, the commander of a fleet, the head of a government agency, the director of a nonprofit organization, the bishop of a diocese, all have certain powers they retain for themselves and accountability that is not transferrable.

It is difficult to appreciate the external pressures on leaders until you have walked in their shoes, until you have had to make payroll, bring a squadron through safely, or respond to the outraged constituents who elected you. The internal pressures on leaders are often equally potent. "Ego strength," one of the qualities that propels an individual to leadership, is reinforced in ways that can deform it into "ego driven." If these pressures aren't managed well, with adroit help from followers, they can distort the leader's decision-making processes and interpersonal dynamics. Usually, the distortion will be in the direction of more authoritarian behavior and away from the partnering we desire.

How does a follower effectively support a leader and relieve these pressures? How does a follower become a "shaper" rather than simply an "implementer"? How does a follower contribute to leadership development rather than become a critic of leadership failings?

As in all human endeavor, many of us do some of these things quite naturally. But most of us can readily identify times we felt frustrated in our "second fiddle" situation as we watched our leaders make a mess of things, whether from the best of intentions or the worst. The increasingly egalitarian age we live in does not allow us to comfortably shirk responsibility and say, "Well, she's the boss!" We've grown beyond authoritarian models that strip followers of accountability. But we haven't necessarily grown fully comfortable with a new way of operating.

Most of us are leaders in some situations and followers in others. On one level we understand and fully accept this. You can't, by definition, have a world of only leaders! To think of leaders without followers is like thinking of teachers without students. Both are impossible. They are two sides of one process, two parts of a whole. Teachers and students form a learning circle around a body of knowledge or skills; leaders and followers form an action circle around a common purpose.



But on another level there seems to exist the deepest discomfort with the term *follower*. It conjures up images of docility, conformity, weakness, and failure to excel. Often, none of this is the least bit true. The sooner we move beyond these images and get comfortable with the idea of *powerful* followers supporting *powerful* leaders, the sooner we can fully develop and test models for dynamic, self-responsible, synergistic relationships in our organizations.

If we are to attain the empowerment we crave, we must accept responsibility for both our own roles and the roles of our leaders. Only by accepting this dual responsibility do we ultimately accept responsibility for our organizations and the people they serve. We need to understand three things to fully assume this responsibility:

First, we must understand our own power and how to use it. As followers, we have far more power than we usually acknowledge. We must understand the sources of our power, whom we serve, and what tools we have to carry forward the group's mission from our unique vantage point.

Second, we must appreciate the value of leaders and cherish the critical contributions they make to our endeavors. We must understand the forces that chisel away at their creativity, good humor, and resolve. We must learn how to minimize these forces and create a climate in which a leader's strengths are magnified, so a leader can better serve the common purpose.

Third, we must understand the seductiveness and pitfalls of the power of leadership. We are all familiar with Lord Acton's quote: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." We are all witnesses to the many examples that support its assertion. Yet we are like the person who has never taken hard drugs: though we can intellectually understand

that they are addictive, we cannot appreciate their force. We must learn how to counteract this dark tendency of power.

The changes occurring in the world make it an opportune time to develop new models of followership. In the past, centralized organizations used relatively crude instruments and blunt force to coordinate resources in pursuit of their objectives. If you were building a pyramid, this method of organization worked terrifically. If you were laying a railroad, it also worked well. It even worked for a while if you were building cars on an assembly line. Dominant leaders and compliant followers were able to get the job done. In information age organizations, however, hundreds of decentralized units process and rapidly act on highly varied information within the design and purpose of the organization. This requires an entirely different relationship between leaders and followers.

Additionally, in both the West and the East, a new social contract is being formulated. In the largest organizations, we are no longer guaranteed employment. Our health benefits and retirement plans are being made portable. Leaders and organizations will no longer take care of us. Paternalism is gone. We need to take care of ourselves and each other.

In a deep way this is liberating. A central problem in the leader-follower relationship is its tendency to become a parent-child relationship, a relationship in which the follower is dependent and unable to relate to the leader on an equal footing.

A new model of followership can help us reorient ourselves and our relationships with leaders. I am choosing the image of the "courageous follower" to build a model of followership because courage is so antithetical to the prevailing image of followers and so crucial to balancing the relationship with leaders.

Courageous followership is built on the platform of courageous relationship. The courage to be right, the courage to be wrong, the courage to be different from each other. Each of us sees the world through our own eyes and experiences. Our interpretation of the world thus differs. In relationships, we struggle to maintain the validity of our own interpretation while learning to respect the validity of other interpretations.

The danger in the leader-follower relationship is the assumption that the leader's interpretation must dominate. If this assumption exists on

the part of either the leader or the follower, they are both at risk. The leader's openness to diversity, empowering others, breakthrough thinking, and being challenged and learning from followers will drop precipitously. Followers will abandon their unique perspectives and healthy dissension, which are at the heart of the creative process and innovation.

Contemporary leadership texts make compelling arguments for leaders to drive fear out of organizations, to share power, to invite feedback, to encourage participation. The leaders likely to read and respond to these arguments are the ones already open to change. What about those who cannot be their own agents of change, who do not walk the talk? I believe that courageous followers can and must be agents of change for such leaders.

But powerful socialization mechanisms, which served centralized bureaucracies well and taught followers to obediently follow, are still largely in force. The awesome shaping powers of school, organized religion, sports teams, the military, and large corporations are weakening, but still, whatever else they teach, they condition followers to obey. Expulsion for nonconformity is a very real threat. The conditioning begins at an age when children are still utterly dependent on their parents for survival and experience considerable anxiety about the consequences of not obeying. Our institutions play on this anxiety and, wittingly or not, reinforce it until followers often do become the timid creatures we emotionally reject identifying with.

We must examine this programming of the follower's role and envision what the role can become. What are our attitudes toward leaders? Where do our loyalties ultimately lie? What outcomes are worse than expulsion? What power do we have to support leaders who are striving to serve their group? And what obligation and power do we have to change things when higher loyalties are betrayed? How courageous do we dare to be?

We have not had a lot of cultural support for doing this. Our mythology until recently has focused on hero-leaders who perform remarkable feats and successfully challenge villain-leaders. We have lacked common-man, common-woman heroes who stay true to their own lights while helping leaders follow theirs. Supportive "number twos" have not historically attracted much press coverage or six-figure publishing advances. Whistle-blowers have fared considerably less well, their lives often seriously disrupted, with few rallying to their support. It is only very recently that we have

begun to see exceptions to this pattern. The time has come for leaders and followers to develop and honor new models for relating to each other.

I will first explore the dynamics of the leader-follower relationship. What binds the leader and follower together? What are the underlying moral, emotional, and psychological forces at work? What are the respective powers each has in the relationship? I will then present a model of how courageous followers can improve that relationship for the benefit of themselves, their leaders, and the organization.

There are four dimensions in which a courageous follower operates within a group, and a fifth dimension in which the follower operates either within or outside the group depending on the response of the leadership. The model will explore each of these dimensions as a way to compare our current followership practices with how we might develop the follower role.

THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF COURAGEOUS FOLLOWERSHIP

THE COURAGE TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY

Courageous followers assume responsibility for themselves and the organization. They do not hold a paternalistic image of the leader or organization; they do not expect the leader or organization to provide for their security and growth, or to give them permission to act. Courageous followers discover or create opportunities to fulfill their potential and maximize their value to the organization. They initiate values-based action to improve the organization's external activities and its internal processes. The "authority" to initiate comes from the courageous follower's understanding and ownership of the common purpose, and from the needs of those the organization serves.

THE COURAGE TO SERVE

Courageous followers are not afraid of the hard work required to serve a leader. They assume new or additional responsibilities to unburden the

leader and serve the organization. They stay alert for areas in which their strengths complement the leader's and assert themselves in these areas. Courageous followers stand up for their leader and the tough decisions a leader must make if the organization is to achieve its purpose. They are as passionate as the leader in pursuing the common purpose.

THE COURAGE TO CHALLENGE

Courageous followers give voice to the discomfort they feel when the behaviors or policies of the leader or group conflict with their sense of what is right. They are willing to stand up, to stand out, to risk rejection, to initiate conflict in order to examine the actions of the leader and group when appropriate. They are willing to deal with the emotions their challenge evokes in the leader and group. Courageous followers value organizational harmony and their relationship with the leader, but not at the expense of the common purpose and their integrity.

THE COURAGE TO PARTICIPATE IN TRANSFORMATION

When behavior that jeopardizes the common purpose remains unchanged, courageous followers recognize the need for transformation. They champion the need for change and stay with the leader and group while they mutually struggle with the difficulty of real change. They examine their own need for transformation and become full participants in the change process as appropriate.

THE COURAGE TO TAKE MORAL ACTION

Courageous followers know when it is time to take a stand that is different from that of the leader's. They are answering to a higher set of values. The stand may involve refusing to obey a direct order, appealing the order to the next level of authority, or tendering one's resignation. These and other forms of moral action involve personal risk. But service to the common purpose justifies and sometimes demands acting. If attempts to redress the morally objectionable situation fail, a follower faces the more difficult

prospect of whether to become a whistleblower, with the greatly increased risks this poses to both the follower and the organization.

Enriching the original model are two chapters added in the subsequent editions.

THE COURAGE TO SPEAK TO THE HIERARCHY

The five classes of courageous follower behaviors assume a degree of relationship with the leader. In large hierarchical and global organizations, policies or directives often originate several levels above the follower, from individuals with whom the follower has little or no contact. How do those lower in the hierarchy, or far removed from the formal power centers, effectively communicate with those near the top of the hierarchy? How do they ensure that the most senior leaders of the organization have the data they need to make well-informed decisions? And how do nonhierarchical methods of communication that leverage the power of networks interface with these hierarchies? Courageous followers give careful thought to the application of courageous follower principles in these contexts and develop the sensitivities and strategies required to speak effectively to the hierarchy.

THE COURAGE TO LISTEN TO FOLLOWERS

After exploring the model and applications of courageous followership, I will conclude with an exploration of the leader's responsibility to support the conditions of courageous followership and to respond productively to acts of courageous followership. This is harder to do than it appears to be on the surface. When done well, it offers powerful paybacks for the leader and the organization. When done poorly, both leaders' careers and their organizations suffer.

The world is fitfully evolving to a more egalitarian culture. Leadership and followership are evolving. Leaders are increasingly becoming a hub in a complex system of multiple wheels and hubs and spokes. Dynamic follower-follower relations are becoming as essential as dynamic leader-fol-

lower and follower-leader relations. The realities of knowledge-driven organizations require this evolution. Nevertheless, in all evolutionary processes, the prospects for the emerging stage of development often look dubious. There will be times while reading this book when you might wince at suggested behaviors and think, "Get real!" For some leaders the suggested approach will be unreal or at least uncomfortable. For others, who have allowed contemporary cultural changes to seep into their patterning, the approach presented here will be recognizable and welcome. The leader's reactions are of secondary importance, however, to the actions of the follower. That is why this book focuses on the courage of the follower; we are not talking about comfortable, risk-free behavior.

Most of us will have ample opportunity to experiment with and develop new models of courageous followership in the course of "ordinary" living. We will help our organizations compete more efficiently, make them more humane and environmentally thoughtful, help our community groups function more responsively, perhaps even teach our children to be more courageous in relating to legitimate authority figures and illegitimate ones such as schoolyard bullies who, unchecked, grow into workplace or political bullies.

But the extraordinary also occurs: the opportunity to help a leader make a bold peace initiative, the discovery of abusive practices that demand reversal, the chance to influence leadership practices that may bring an organization to a crossroads in choosing the core values by which it will live. To the degree we have become strong and comfortable with new models of followership, those models will serve us well when we find ourselves in situations where the consequences are profound.

Whether we are dealing with the ordinary or extraordinary, the challenge a follower faces is significant. This book is designed to give the courageous follower the insights and tools needed to meet that challenge.

1

THE DYNAMICS OF THE LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP



I USED TO HAVE ASPIRATIONS to work closely with prominent leaders but found that when I was actually with them, I would clutch, become tongue-tied, or engage more in flattery than dialogue. In doing this, I wasted whatever opportunity there may have been to develop a meaningful relationship with the leader in which we learned from each other.

When still in the “aspiring” state, I would look forward to being seated at the same table as the head of the organization at a company banquet. Later, as I discovered my nervousness about the interaction, I purposely avoided this close contact. Yet a colleague of mine, who was affable but not normally ingratiating, always aggressively sat himself next to the

president of the company if he could. He was incredulous that others did not fight for the opportunity to bring themselves to the president's attention. For both my colleague and me, the mere fact of close contact with the leader produced changes in how we usually behaved with other people.

As a leader myself, I observed who would influence me and whom I was prone to ignore or dismiss. The people who influenced me from a lateral or subordinate position seemed to have a deep, natural sense of self-worth. They needed this quality because at times I could present a pretty gruff image, which would intimidate a less confident person. They were able to separate out this aspect of my personality and not interpret it as their own failing. They knew their specialties, observed and respected my strengths, supported my efforts, and spoke to me forthrightly when they thought I was off the mark. They also cared as much as I did about the organization's purpose and our success in achieving it.

In this chapter I examine the challenges we face in establishing and maintaining a true relationship with a leader. By "true," I mean a relationship in which we can comfortably meet a leader as one human being to another. In a true relationship, we are neither retiring nor fawning nor manipulative. We work together with mutual respect and honesty to achieve our common purpose.

THE COMMON PURPOSE AND CORE VALUES

Any organization is a triad consisting of leaders and followers joined in a common purpose. The purpose is the atomic glue that binds us. It gives meaning to our activities.



**Followers and leaders both orbit around the purpose;
followers do not orbit around the leader.**

Often the purpose exists and we come together around it. Sometimes the leader envisions it and draws us to it. At other times we formulate or redefine the purpose together. If the purpose is not clear and motivating, leaders and followers can only pursue their perceived self-interest, not their common interest. The process of clarifying purpose can mobilize a group, heal painful rifts, and help the group steer through treacherous passages. It is a critical act of strong leadership and courageous followership.

Equally fundamental are the group's shared values. Clarifying core values validates the purpose and determines how we will and how we won't pursue it. If the purpose is pursued in the context of decent human values, it serves as a guiding light in navigating our relationship with a leader. If the purpose intrinsically violates or is pursued in a way that violates decent human values, however, it is not an ethically valid guide. For example, "making a profit for shareholders" is a purpose we can use to guide our actions. "Making a profit regardless of the impact on the community or environment" nullifies its validity in determining appropriate action.

A common purpose pursued with decent values is the heart of the healthy leader-follower relationship.

THE PARADOX OF FOLLOWERSHIP

We are responsible. Whether we lead or follow, we are responsible for our own actions, and we share responsibility for the actions of those whom we can influence.

All important social accomplishments require complex group effort and, therefore, leadership and followership. Both are necessary in the pursuit of a common purpose. Some believe that influence in the leader-follower relationship is largely one-way. This is far from true. Followers have great capacity to influence the relationship.

Just as a leader is accountable for the actions and performance of followers, so followers are accountable for their leaders. We must support

leaders and, when necessary, help them correct their actions, just as they must support us and help us correct our actions. This is partnership. Both sides must be proactive. If we have followers who are partners with leaders, we will not have leaders who are tyrants.

Leadership may be informal and distributed throughout an organization. But formal leadership, which has final accountability and authority, is usually vested in an elected or appointed or self-proclaimed leader or small group. At the extremes, the formal leaders of a group may be wise or arrogant, servants or parasites, visionaries or demagogues. More commonly, leaders are a rich blend of strengths and weaknesses, of qualities that add and subtract value, and there is the potential for either side of their personalities to grow while in office. The quality and courage of followers influence which of the leader's characteristics will grow.

If we amplify our leaders' strengths and modulate their weaknesses, we are the gem cutters of leadership, coaxing out its full brilliance. If we amplify our leaders' weaknesses, we may stress existing fracture lines in their characters, and these fracture lines may become fatal flaws. Followers who are closest to a leader carry pivotal responsibility; they markedly shape the tone and outcomes of a leader's tenure.

Courageous followership is full of paradox:

A courageous follower has a clear internal vision of service while being attracted to a leader who articulates and embodies its external manifestation.

Courageous followers remain fully accountable for their actions while relinquishing some autonomy and conceding certain authority to a leader.

A central dichotomy of courageous followership is the need to energetically perform two opposite roles: implementer and challenger of the leader's ideas.

There is inherent tension between the identity a follower derives from group membership and the individuation required to question and creatively challenge the group and its leadership.

Followers often benefit from the leader as mentor, learning crucial things, yet at the same time must be willing to teach the leader.

At times, courageous followers need to lead from behind, breathing life into their leader's vision or even vision into the leader's life.

Senior followers often are important leaders in their own right and must integrate within themselves the perspectives of both leadership and followership.

The concept of a "courageous follower" appears to some to be an oxymoron but, if embraced, enables followers to join leaders fully as stewards of the group's trust.

WHO DOES A FOLLOWER SERVE?

Follower is not synonymous with *subordinate*. A subordinate reports to an individual of higher rank and may in practice be a supporter, an antagonist, or indifferent. A follower shares a common purpose with the leader, believes in what the organization is trying to accomplish, wants both the leader and organization to succeed, and works energetically to this end.

Like the leader, the follower is a steward of the resources an organization can draw on to carry out its work. The resources of a group include its leaders. Thus, a follower is a leader's steward every bit as much as a leader is the follower's steward.

We can perform our role as followers at different levels:

At the purest level, we serve those whom the organization exists to serve—its members, clients, constituents, customers, communities—often called stakeholders because of their stake in the outcome of the group's actions.

Below that, and quite functionally, we simultaneously serve the organization's stakeholders, its leaders, and ourselves, with no conflict of interest.

Below that, we serve the leaders and ourselves but not the stakeholders. While we may be rewarded for this in the short run, we sow the seeds of the organization's failure.

At the lowest level, we serve the leaders while permitting them to harm the organization and its stakeholders through corruption, and we participate in that corruption ourselves.

If we serve only ourselves and not the leaders or the stakeholders, we are not followers but opportunists siphoning off the energy of the group to serve our own agendas.

SELF-INTEREST AND COMMON PURPOSE

True leaders and followers are dedicated to the common purpose. At the same time, other than in rare cases of idealism and self-sacrifice, leaders and followers also bring their self-interest to the relationship and their work.

There is nothing inherently problematic about self-interest as long as it does not eclipse the common purpose. There is tremendous energy generated in the pursuit of self-interest. It is energy that if properly aligned brings great value to the organization.

Leaders who remain aware and supportive of the self interest of their followers generate loyalty and commitment. It is similarly valuable for followers to remain aware of the self-interest of leaders. What are their aspirations? What would help a leader realize the aspiration? What would jeopardize the dream?

There are many priorities and voices competing for leaders' attention. To sufficiently interest leaders in adding another item to their overflowing plates, it is sometimes necessary to frame the matter in terms of both purpose and aspirations.

Similarly, while pursuing one's own interests, followers need to stay self-aware that these align with the mission, rather than compete with it. Honest self-appraisal is required for appropriate balance. Be careful here. It is human to rationalize. Courageous followership demands rigorous self-honesty.

We have the right to be advocates for our self-interest within service to the purpose. We can ask for support and, within reason, expect to receive it. We do not have the right to manipulate the leader and group to serve our self-interest at the expense of the common purpose.

LOYALTY OF A FOLLOWER

In the past, when relationships were more stable and lifelong social contracts were the norm, loyalty was unquestioningly given—to the clan, to the feudal lord, to the sole employer. Unquestioning loyalty is, of course, fraught with moral peril. Today, relationships are constantly shifting and loyalty is problematic—who deserves it and why? Yet the lifting of cultural pressure to give blind loyalty allows us the freedom to make conscious moral choices based on our core values.

Placing our loyalty somewhere is an important act of identity. We can place it in ourselves, and often this is important to help us stay a difficult course. But if we place no loyalty outside ourselves, we become a kind of brigand, justifying any action regardless of its cost to others.

Leaders and followers who find themselves in constantly shifting configurations need to find a mutual place for their loyalty that transcends the impermanence of their relationship yet bonds them in a framework of trust. This is the importance of the contemporary emphasis on vision, values, and mission statements: well formulated, these define the loyalty that leaders and followers pledge to those who have a stake in the group.

The values statement evokes a circumscribed loyalty—to fairness, to quality, to honesty, to service, to a common purpose. Circumscribed loyalty to worthy values avoids the pitfalls of unlimited loyalty and may be an evolutionary step forward. Both leaders and followers are entering into a contract to pursue the common purpose within the context of their values. The loyalty of each is to the purpose and to helping each other stay true to that purpose.

If leadership and followership are both forms of stewardship, then loyalty is correctly directed to the organization's purpose and its stakeholders. It appropriately includes and embraces the principles, people, and environments affected by the organization's actions. Once appropriate

loyalty is clarified, it can inform our decisions to support or challenge a leader's agenda.

POWER IN THE LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP

Wherever an organization lies on the spectrum from "hierarchical" to "shared" leadership, some power is always vested in the leaders and some in the followers. In shared leadership, the power is more balanced although one faction may accumulate power over other factions. In an autocratic hierarchy, power appears to reside almost entirely with the leader until something occurs that causes the followers to depose the leader and reclaim their power.

The situation in which power appears to reside entirely with the leader is very dangerous both for the follower, who can be ruined at the leader's whim, and for the leader, whose followers become sycophantic. Sycophants act according to what they have learned is expected of them in a situation. They do not observe or think well for themselves, and often fail to take appropriate actions. This hurts the leader and the organization.

As followers, our formal powers are unequal to the leader's, and we must learn to participate effectively in the relationship despite this imbalance. We may have far more power than we imagine, however, and too often fail to exercise the power we do have. It is critical for followers to connect with their power and learn how to use it. To maintain and strengthen power, it must be used; otherwise, it will wither.

The sources of a follower's power are varied:

The power of purpose, the strength that comes from commitment to the common good

The power of knowledge, the possession of skills and resources the organization and its leadership value and do not want to lose

The power of personal history, a record of successes and unsailable contributions to the leader and the organization

The power of faith in self, belief in our observations and intentions, in our integrity and commitment

The power to speak the truth, as we see it, to the leadership

The power to set a standard that influences others, to model values and behavior for the leader and group members

The power to choose how to react in a situation regardless of what is done or threatened by others

The power to follow or not follow in a given direction

The power of relationships, of networks of people who know and trust us

The power to communicate through a variety of channels

The power to organize others of like mind

The power to withdraw support if the leadership's actions violate our values

If we are to be effective partners with leaders, it is important to remember that as followers we possess our own power, quite apart from the reflected power of the leader.

VALUE OF THE FOLLOWER

Follower is not a term of weakness but the condition that permits leadership to exist and gives it strength. Dynamic followers recognize their own aspirations in the leader's vision. They follow their own light, which the leader intensifies. They give 110 percent, not because the leader "motivates them" but because they are inspired—the spirit of the activity is within them. They are interdependent with, not dependent on, the leader. They add value to both themselves and the leader through this relationship.

The value of a follower is measured by how completely the follower helps the leader and organization pursue their common purpose within the context of their values. Certain characteristics help to do this:

Effective followers are cooperative and collaborative, qualities essential to all human progress.

Trusted followers integrate their ego needs sufficiently into their communal responsibilities to serve rather than compete with the leader.

Well-balanced followers are less prone to the pitfalls that await leaders with strong egos and can serve as guides around these pitfalls.

Caring followers perceive the needs of both the leader and other group members and try to form a bridge between them.

We retain our value as followers to the degree we remain true to those whom our organization serves, to the degree we are courageous in doing this. If we bend to the will of a leader when it conflicts with the interests of our stakeholders, or if we bend to the will of our stakeholders when it conflicts with the higher values of humanity, our value is greatly diminished.

COURAGE OF THE FOLLOWER

Courage is the great balancer of power in relationships. An individual who is not afraid to speak and act on the truth as she perceives it, despite external inequities in a relationship, is a force to be reckoned with.

Courage implies risk. If there is no risk, courage is not needed. Life, of course, is full of risk at every turn, at every moment. We usually structure our lives to reduce risk to an acceptable level. Courage requires a willingness to consciously raise our level of risk, at least in the short term.

A priest must be willing to tell the bishop that moral turpitude is being covered up in his see. An aide must be willing to tell the governor that her policies will cause severe hardship. A midlevel manager must be willing to tell senior management that by only paying lip service to quality or customer service they are undermining its implementation.

While silence may appear the safe choice, it often leaves our relationships with leaders or peers sapped of the vitality that honest dialogue produces. A follower needs the courage of an inquisitive child who asks questions without fear, but also needs the courage of an adult who bears the responsibility for a family. The family's need for security may clash with the need to risk that security for higher principles. This is a core issue,

for without the willingness to risk on this profound level, we won't speak the truth. From where can we draw the courage to speak and act our truth and not be inhibited from doing so by the potential consequences?

On a practical level, if our livelihood depends on our position with the leader, it is healthy for us to develop contingency plans should we fall out of favor. Another job opportunity, money in the bank to support us for a year, a working spouse or partner—any of these can provide a safety net that makes our leap of courage less intimidating. If our career will be jeopardized by a clash with the leader, plotting alternate career paths can reduce the potential severity of the consequences. Being prepared to be fired or blackballed in our industry is the antidote to silencing ourselves.

On a deeper level, each of us may find our own courage springs from a different source:

Our religious beliefs

Our philosophy

A role model

A vision of the future

A vow made from past experience

An event that tested us

A conviction we hold

Our values

Our empathy for others

Our self-esteem

Commitment to our comrades

Outrage felt toward injustice

If we are clear on the source of our courage, it prepares us to accept the consequences of our actions. To act courageously, we may not need to free ourselves from fear but to experience our fear in the context of our source of courage. If you have ever been in a situation you believed was

truly dangerous, you know the intensity of the emotional energy generated by fear. Suppressing the energy contained in this fear and "rising above it" is one strategy. Another strategy, perhaps more effective, is to let the fear rise up fully, acknowledge it, and then channel the energy locked within that fear into the service of our principles and goals. If our principles and goals are clear, enormous self-empowerment can occur.

We probably have to fail a few times before we succeed. The first time we are confronted with the use of raw power, with its assumptions and attitude and force, it is so startling that we may well flinch or freeze. We may need to go away and prepare ourselves to meet it again.

Our "courage muscle" will develop to the degree we exercise it. If we exercise it when the risks are small, it will be strong enough to meet the challenge when the risks are large. Ultimately, there are no formulas for courage: we develop it through determination and practice, self-forgiveness when we fail, and growth when we learn.

BALANCE THROUGH RELATIONSHIP

In different situations, different qualities are most needed and productive—courage, diplomacy, consistency, firmness—all are virtues that have their place. But any virtue taken to an extreme and used in the wrong situation can become a vice: courage becomes recklessness, diplomacy becomes appeasement, consistency becomes rigidity, firmness becomes brutality.

As a leader acquires power, qualities that contribute to success are affirmed and reinforced and may begin to be relied on excessively. When a leader receives only positive feedback, these qualities can be reinforced to the point where they become dysfunctional. Similarly, flaws that may be of minor consequence when power is small can become magnified with the increase of power. In either case, the leader's talents may be eclipsed by weaknesses.

Dynamic leaders are the spark, the flame that ignites action. With vision, they generate and focus power. But followers are the guarantors of the beneficial use of that power. Dynamic leaders may use power well, but they cannot be the guarantors. In their passion, their expansiveness, their

drive, dynamic leaders are prone to excess: a deal too large, a bottom line too important, a cause too righteous, an image too pure, a lifestyle too rich, an enemy too hated, a bridge too far. We provide the balance *if* we can stand up to our leaders.

At the heart of balance is the dual nature of the universe—I and the other—and the necessity for relationship. Genuine relationships will not tolerate extremes, which become abusive. The key to personal balance for leaders is the quality of their relationships with followers. Honest, open relationships will provide a steady stream of uncensored feedback. It is only through this feedback that leaders can accurately perceive and modulate their behavior, policies, and strategies.

Because of the unknowns, it takes courage for us to be open and direct with a leader while building a relationship.

How open is this leader willing to be with anyone?

How open can I be about myself?

Do I know how to read this person yet?

How does this individual respond to feedback?

If an issue is emotionally laden for me, how do I know my concern isn't exaggerated, or that I'll present it well?

As I am rewarded for serving a leader well, how do I make sure I don't begin seeing the leader through self-serving lenses?

If we are not willing to risk whatever relationship we have built with a leader by providing honest feedback, we instead risk losing the whole dream for which we have both been working. We will grow more cynical about the leader, and the leader will grow increasingly unreal about the impact of his actions. Two essential elements of relationship are developing trust and then using that trust to speak honestly when appropriate; one without the other is meaningless. The challenge for the courageous follower is to maintain a genuine relationship with the leader, not the pseudorelationship of the sycophant.

MATURE RELATIONSHIPS

Oddly enough, one of the challenges followers often face is helping leaders develop tolerance, decency, and, in a sense, maturity. All humans struggle with the need to grow up, to accept that the rest of the world is not here to serve us, that people are going to differ with us, and that this is okay. The world soon teaches most of us these lessons, and we find ways of coping with our younger egocentric view of life even if we do not fully transform it.

When skill and circumstances combine to put us in a position of formal leadership, our early egocentric impulses are vulnerable to reemergence. If, as too often happens, leaders are surrounded by followers who kowtow to them, the immature parts of their personality, which have not been fully transformed, tend to regain dominance.

If the immature aspects of a leader's personality appear with increased frequency, this leaves us in the odd and difficult position of serving a leader who is competent, even brilliant in some dimensions, and a spoiled brat in other respects. The internal confusion and conflict that a follower may feel when confronted by the discrepancy between the mature and immature traits of a leader should not be underestimated: is this brilliant, sometimes abusive leader deserving of my support or not?

This would not be such a difficult question if we felt empowered to challenge a leader about the immature behavior while supporting the mature skills and judgment he brings to the group. If our behavior is disruptive to the group, the leader is expected to raise the issue with us; similarly, we need to break the taboo against our raising behavior issues with the leader.

It is difficult to break the taboo because our early conditioning about leaders takes place in childhood, at home and school, where others are held responsible for our behavior but we are not held responsible for theirs. The power of our early conditioning is so strong that for most of us it is an act of courage to confront a leader about counterproductive behavior, instead of an ordinary act of relationship.

As in so many aspects of relationship, if we have difficulty with a leader who displays immaturity, it is because we also have issues with maturity. Too often, because of our sense of powerlessness, we complain protractedly to others about a leader's behavior instead of taking effective action.

We do not serve the leader or organization well by immaturity whining about a leader's behavior instead of confronting the leader and participating in a process of mutual development.

It requires a courageous follower to confront a powerful leader about immature behavior. The situation can resemble confronting a young child holding a loaded gun: you may be shot persuading the child to put it down. It requires a skillful follower to confront a leader in a way that simultaneously respects the accomplished adult, preserves the adult's self-esteem, and challenges the immature behavior.

DIFFERENCES IN ELEVATION

Overcoming the sometimes very large differences in position within an organization can be a challenge in establishing a true relationship with a leader. Though we may work closely with the leader, the difference in the relative status or elevation of our positions can form a chasm in the relationship. The sources of an elevation gap are varied:

The leader has been elected, and the follower has been hired.

The leader founded the organization.

The leader owns the company.

The leader is considerably older and has held many elevated positions.

The leader holds a formal senior rank.

The leader is wealthy.

The leader has made major contributions to the organization.

The leader is widely regarded as a genius, a hero, or a celebrity.

These conditions may prompt us to think, "Who am I to question this person?" and disregard our perceptions or interpretations of events. We must stay highly alert to this reflex reaction and question it carefully. If it is the premise of our relationship, we will fail both ourselves and the leader.

Warren Bennis, the great student and teacher of leadership, reports that 70 percent of followers will not question a leader's point of view even when they feel the leader is about to make a mistake. From their elevated positions, leaders are prone to losing touch with the common reality. This is sometimes referred to as "the king's disease." Leaders are often dependent on the perceptions of followers to reconnect them to external realities.

If we have thoughtfully considered the merits of our observations, our challenge is to rise above the intimidating nature of the difference in elevation and present our ideas. Speaking forthrightly to an "elevated" leader is not presumptuous; it is an essential part of courageous followership.

FINDING EQUAL FOOTING WITH THE LEADER

To look a leader in the eye and credibly deliver unpalatable observations or sharply differing opinions requires an internal sense of equal worth. Metaphorically, a pygmy cannot look a giant in the eye. Followers usually cannot match up to a leader's external qualities, such as the trappings of formal power, and must find their equal footing on intellectual, moral, or spiritual ground. How can we do this?

If we remember and speak to our common humanity, we need not be seduced, dazzled, or intimidated by the symbols of higher office. Neither we nor the leaders we support are our titles, whether this be secretary, boss, president, or emperor. We are human beings who pass through this existence with gifts and needs, anxieties and dreams, strengths and vulnerabilities. If we, as leaders and followers, remember our common nature, we will deal with each other out of mutual respect, not out of disdain or awe.

We need to closely observe ourselves in the presence of power to see how we behave. If we find ourselves speaking or acting with exaggerated deference, we are relating to the title, not to the person carrying it. If we observe ourselves being even subtly obsequious toward a leader, we should try to look past the title, trappings, and power of office to see the human being occupying the office. Who is the leader outside this specific role?

Where has he come from?

What are his values?

Does his private persona differ from his professional one?

Does he feel supported or lonely?

Is he genuinely confident or perhaps masking insecurity?

Can he be playful?

Does he have a sense of serving a higher ideal or power?

Can we envision him as a parent, a son, a husband?

What failures and tragedies has he experienced?

What are his fears?

What are his aspirations?

Depending on how private the leader is, we may not be able to answer all these questions. And the answers are not as important as our ability to touch the leader's humanity. We need to demythologize leaders, to see them holistically, to be able to identify with their pain and joy so we can talk to them as one human being to another. We need to be able to comfortably ask ourselves, "How can I help this fellow human being whose lot has been cast together with mine?" As we answer this, we affirm the worth we bring to the relationship and find our equal footing.

WHEN THE LEADER ISN'T AN EQUAL

A different challenge exists when a leader isn't as qualified for the role as a follower or, in a sense, isn't the follower's equal. There are many circumstances in which this can occur:

Organizational politics

Discrimination

Diversity values and policies

Rotational assignments

Seniority promotion

Family ownership

Election

Appointment

High public profile

Connections

Amiability and charm

When the most capable person is not the leader, a courageous follower faces several challenges. Most important is to deal with our own feelings about the matter. We often find it difficult to work for someone who is slower than we are, who fails to fully and rapidly grasp situations confronting the organization. Rather than feeling intimidated by their position, we may have difficulty masking our disdain. There may be bitterness if we hoped for the number one position ourselves.

We may also find ourselves in situations in which we must decide whether to cover for the leader or to publicly let the leader appear unprepared and unknowledgeable. We may experience ego-based conflict or ethical confusion about this.

Our workload often increases if the leader falls short of the role. Not only do we assume parts of what should be the leader's role, but we also spend extra time educating the leader through memos and briefings. We usually do this for a lot less money and recognition than the leader is receiving. Our resentment can run high.

As difficult as it may be in this situation, our guiding principle should remain service to the organization. It is important to acknowledge our feelings and frustrations, but if we are committed to the common purpose, we will keep working with our leader for its accomplishment. We will use our talent and competencies to help the leader grow and succeed. As long as the leader is giving his best energy to the role, he deserves our private and public support. And it's surprising how much we can learn from even the leaders who don't excel.

Sometimes it is simply that a capable person is given a job for which he has little experience. A newly elected legislator may have a great vision but be an ingenue on how to craft passable legislation. A seasoned aide may need to guide the legislator through the nuances of the issues and

politics and the labyrinths of the policy-making process. Eventually, the legislator will master the subject and the process.

The mark of a great leader is the development and growth of followers. The mark of a great follower is the growth of leaders.

TRUST

Leadership surveys show that trust is the single most important factor on which followers evaluate a leader. The reverse is equally true although the word *reliability* is often substituted when speaking of followers. Reliability is a composite of trust and competence, and a leader needs to experience both in a follower. Competence itself, while valued, can be threatening if the leader senses that the follower is motivated more by a personal agenda than by a desire to support the leader and group.

Trust is essential in the leader-follower relationship if followers are to serve and influence the leader and organization. Yet sometimes it is elusive. How is trust won?

Trust is a subtle state between two people formed from an assessment of each other's internal motives and external actions—if either are questionable trust does not gel.

The gelling agents of trust are our word and the judgment and effectiveness we display in our actions.

To earn trust we must go to great lengths to keep our word, and, if we cannot keep it, we must communicate this as soon as possible.

To maintain trust we must listen carefully to both external signals and our inner voice, which quietly warn us against actions that may be in poor judgment.

To enhance trust we must understand the outcomes needed by the leader and group, and overcome the obstacles to those outcomes without violating our core values.

Trust is a quality of relationship that can quickly return to its fluid, uncertain state in response to events and perceptions. Often we sense the change in trust before anything specific has been said or done about it,

much as we sense an oncoming storm. If we sense a weakening of trust, we should make aggressive efforts to find out why, as it is the foundation of our relationship. It may be that we appear to have violated trust when we have not. In this case we should take great pains to clarify the situation, using any available documentation to dispel doubt.

If we have, indeed, violated trust through poor judgment or otherwise, the instinct to rationalize it can deliver a death knell to the relationship. Only by genuinely accepting responsibility for our actions and doing what we can to alleviate their consequences can we begin repairing trust.

If we have given genuine cause for trust to be lowered, it may dismay us to find how much time and contribution to the group is required before the breach is healed. A strong commitment to achieving the common purpose will be needed to sustain us through a difficult period.

FOLLOWERS AS LEADERS

In different situations, at different times, we are all followers or leaders. The best way to learn to lead is to work closely with a capable leader. But whether or not the leader is a positive role model, to the degree we are courageous followers we prepare ourselves to be courageous leaders.

Even as we follow, we often are simultaneously expected to lead others in a chain of authority. The dual role of follower and leader gives us ample opportunity to learn to perform better in both roles. It is an art to move fluidly between these roles and remain consistent in our treatment of others.

By staying aware of our reactions to those we follow, we learn to be more sensitive to our effect on those we lead.

By staying aware of our reactions to those we lead, we learn to be more sensitive in our efforts to support those we follow.

By modeling good leadership with our own followers, we can often influence our leaders. They observe us in our roles and borrow from our successes as we do from theirs. If we cannot influence our leader, we can transform even a miserable relationship into a rich learning opportunity if

we use it to learn what demotivates followers and commit to not repeating these mistakes ourselves.

To effectively support a leader, we often need to create our own support, our own group to execute that part of the mission with which we are entrusted. There is a danger we will be perceived as empire building if the team we create is especially strong. While leaders value our creating top-notch operations, they may also feel threatened by it. Our intention is of the essence. If we are genuinely serving the organization and its stakeholders, we won't use our strength to thwart the leader's initiatives or jockey for the leader's position. Our team will know they serve the common purpose, not us.

In the dance of leaders and followers, we change partners and roles throughout our lives. With each new partner we must subtly adjust our movements and avoid the other's toes. If we are leading, we must lead; and if we are not, we must follow, but always as a strong partner. We constantly learn from each other and improve our gracefulness in a wide diversity of styles and tempos.

WORKING WITH OTHER FOLLOWERS

While examining the leader-follower relationship, it is important to bear in mind that the dynamics are much more complex than those between two individuals. There are usually at least several followers who are close to the leader, and the interaction between followers profoundly affects the group. Trust between the members of this group is as critical as trust between a leader and follower.

As in a family, there are issues of alliances and shifting alliances, favoritism and perceived favoritism, treatment according to birth order and gender, competing needs and demands for attention, differing styles and invidious comparisons, and limited resources. If these issues can be managed, the group will find strength in both diversity and unity.

There are at least two broad dimensions in these group relationships that courageous followers must stay alert to—how followers relate to each other and how they relate collectively to the leader.

How followers relate to each other:

Staying alert to the individual needs of each member brings us into collaborative unity rather than fractious competitiveness.

Appreciating our differences enables us to utilize those differences in the service of the common purpose.

Respecting each other's boundaries allows us to cross them by mutual consent without triggering turf warfare.

Building strong lateral communication and coordination among ourselves enables us to accomplish our functions.

Participating in creative thinking about issues instead of rigidly defending our positions invites the power of synergy into the group.

Remembering whom we serve will help us find common ground when we seem to be splitting into factions.

If we need to compete, it is best to outdo each other in forwarding the common purpose rather than in undermining each others' efforts.

Being willing to both lead and follow our peers, as the situation warrants, permits competency-based leadership.

How followers relate to the leader:

A follower's need to shine for the leader at the expense of the other stars in the group will cause stellar explosions in the group dynamics.

When presenting our counsel to the leader, we will earn both our peers' and the leader's trust if we also present full and fair descriptions of our peers' positions.

When followers bring their internal squabbles to the leader, it drains the leader and evokes impatient and poorly thought-out responses.

If a leader plays one follower against another, we need to resist the attractiveness of temporarily being in favor, and work collectively to change the dynamic.

When our peers act courageously toward the leader, it is critical that we support them and do not leave them out on the proverbial limb alone.

An effective follower stays sensitive to the complex dynamics within the leader's close support group. The dance has now become a lively reel, and we pay attention to all the whirling partners continuously changing positions within the dance's framework.

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