
Complementing Traditional Leadership

The Value of Followership

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Webster defines a follower as “someone who does what other people say to do.” In other words, followers take their cues from others—their leaders. But in recent years, management literature has explored the concept that excellent followers play a key role in successful operations by bringing their own, unique strengths to the organizational mix—ones that, in effect, complement and enhance conventional leadership. In this column, Jane Currie examines several attributes of effective followers and suggests that the relationship between leadership and followership in libraries is not that cut and dried. Currie not only acknowledges the value of followership, but also recommends strategies to traditional leaders for developing and expanding the ranks of their excellent followers.—*Editor*

The path from reference librarian or cataloger to department head to administrator is one many librarians travel, becoming organizational leaders as they do. Much has been written about how to acquire leadership skills, while mentoring programs and seminars support emerging leaders. But what of those whose career takes a different direction, one not distinguished by a transition into formal leadership through the ranks of department head and administrator?

Another kind of leadership exists alongside that first well-trodden path. Long-time reference librarians, catalogers, and others outside the ranks of more traditional leadership positions bestow on their departments a depth of experience and dedication to excellence that is needed in a stable, thriving, and successful operation. In the world of business management, these characteristics fall under the rubric of followership. Effective followers are as important to organizational success as are leaders.

Business literature is replete with research and advice for leaders: how to become a leader, how to lead more effectively, servant leadership, and countless other topics. The literature of our own profession keeps pace with articles, books, conferences, and institutes to enrich current and emerging leaders. In neither field is the breadth and depth of literature on followership comparable to what exists on the subject of leadership. Some business research and writing on followership does exist, and it is applicable to libraries and librarians. Library administrators and librarians at all levels owe themselves thoughtful consideration of what makes an effective follower and the crucial part followers can have in ensuring organizational success.

Several interconnected characteristics distinguish the highly effective follower. Here are brief discussions of each, with examples to illustrate:

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The best followers align their goals with those of the organization and commit themselves to achieving them. This is accomplished first by seeking employment in organizations that inspire them and that they are compatible with. Deep commitment to the success of the organization and to individual accomplishment within it distinguishes an excellent follower from other high-achieving employees whose focus is primarily on individual, personal success and advancement.

It is worth noting here that librarianship may have an advantage over most for-profit businesses and other organizations in this regard. Librarians come to the profession by choice, often after first pursuing another career. We typically enter librarianship dedicated to libraries, information access, and a set of ethical standards that naturally lead us to promote organizational success every bit as much as we pursue our own.

For example, a cataloger who believes that making resources findable to readers is an essential part of her library's mission will be inspired to catalog thoroughly and accurately. In doing so, she not only ensures the integrity of each individual catalog record, but also contributes to the quality of the catalog as a whole and fosters her own excellence as a cataloger.

The best followers recognize connections between their work and the broader organizational mission. They acquire a thorough understanding of the organization's mission statement, vision, strategic plan, goals, and assessment measures. Though some employees might question the relevance of these organizational frameworks to their daily efforts, effective followers seek connections and use them to motivate their work, even aspects of it that might otherwise be perceived as mundane.

To illustrate, a user experience librarian reads in his library's new strategic plan that the web interface will integrate internally- and externally-sourced search tools. He recognizes that this is not only a web design issue, but also a mechanism intended to improve user experience. In hopes of providing the best possible experience to the user, he commits to participating in all aspects of the redesign, contacts the web team leader, and asks to be involved from the outset.

The best followers exhibit advanced levels of competence and seek opportunities to continue their own skill development, even when in doing so they incur personal costs in terms of time or money. They are invested in preventing skill obsolescence, knowing that a failure to keep pace with changing systems or technologies will deter individual and organizational achievement. In addition, they seek to learn more about operations outside their own areas of responsibility. Excellent followers understand that knowledge of the organization as a whole will create for them a complete picture of it and a greater awareness of their role within it.

For example, a systems librarian reads about a conference that will feature an influential design expert whose work has been used to improve virtual and physical spaces. Though the conference's stated purpose is too far removed from the

librarian's position description to warrant receiving professional development funding, he decides to pay the registration fee himself and attend. He knows that the content will be interesting and the opportunity to meet professionals from varied industries—all present out of an interest in design—will be invaluable.

The best followers are able to self-manage and self-assess. They know how to plan their work, monitor deadlines, and communicate problems to their leader. Excellent followers reflect on completed tasks or projects to identify what went well and what could have been done better. They consider areas for improvement and apply those to future projects. They can look at assessment data and identify their part in making those outcomes possible.

For instance, an instruction librarian faithfully uses the ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation) model to plan her instruction sessions. Though time is often at a premium during the semester, she sets some aside after each session to attend to the evaluative portion of the model, noting how the session can be improved for the next class. Her attentiveness to self-assessment enhances her ability to design and develop effective instruction.

The best followers understand organizational relationships, formal and informal. Formally, they know whose efforts contribute to their ability to do the work they do. Effective followers develop connections with those individuals and credit them for their part in success. Effective followers also know whose work is made possible by their own and are mindful that the quality and timeliness of their efforts are crucial to the success of others.

In this case, a faculty member might ask a reference librarian for assistance using an obscure resource that the librarian has rarely used. After receiving a tutorial from a more experienced colleague, she successfully helps the faculty member. Later, that colleague asks for help staffing an outreach event. Though her schedule is tight that day, she signs up and also offers to take care of the event set-up.

The best followers value collegial, informal relationships with trusted colleagues. They take time to learn what is important to the people they work with and to share what matters to them. They are supportive during trying times and joyous when their colleagues have something to celebrate.

For example, an interlibrary loan librarian whose colleague in technical services is in the midst of a childcare dilemma offers the colleague suggestions from her own experience and recommends a childcare program located near the library. Through this interaction, the colleagues develop a sense of trust in one another that increases the quality of their working relationship.

The best followers are compliant. They manage time effectively, monitor deadlines carefully, and conscientiously

conserve the library's financial resources as if those resources were their own. As soon as it becomes evident that a project will exceed the established timeline or budget, the effective follower acknowledges this to the appropriate individuals, suggests an alternate timeline or budget, and strives to complete the project accordingly.

For instance, an outreach librarian might realize that the promotional materials planned for a fall event will cost more than the supplier first estimated. Although ordering time is tight, the librarian negotiates a delay with the supplier so that she can submit an urgent updated funding request to the library's administration. In the request, the librarian acknowledges the error, the close deadline, and the value the promotional materials will have during the planned event.

The best followers interact effectively with their leader.

They contribute to the leader's success by focusing their own work on key goals and pursuing them with the kind of commitment already discussed. While an excellent follower trusts the leader's vision, if the follower recognizes a flaw in it, a contrary viewpoint is presented. When documenting a problem, the excellent follower brings constructive suggestions to the conversation and seeks to be part of the solution.

In this situation, an instruction librarian might learn that his department head is considering a proposal to move a first-year information literacy program to an online platform. Recognizing the importance of the face time librarians have with the incoming students and fearing valuable connections to students may be lost, the librarian suggests that his leader reconsider. He presents evidence found in assessment data as well as anecdotal experiences to document the value of in-person instruction and offers to design a shared scheduling platform to improve a problematic aspect of the existing instruction program.

Finally, the best followers inspire their colleagues by example. Through dedication, persistence, and fair-mindedness, they demonstrate the characteristics that, if adopted, will contribute to another's individual achievement and excellence within the organization.

It is through these characteristics that the best followers excel individually and contribute to organizational advancement. The best followers are good organizational citizens in every sense. Their personal success is the result of their dedication to the success of the organization even when it is the organizational leaders who receive attribution for those achievements.

Business literature on followership often reminds the reader that, in another context, most followers find themselves leading—while, in other settings, every leader might be a follower. Among the opportunities to step into the leadership role is through a mentoring relationship. Mentoring programs may exist within the library organization, or they can be pursued in regional, state, and national professional

associations. For example, included in the Instruction Section (IS) of the Association for College & Research Libraries is the IS Mentoring Program, a professional development opportunity that offers new instruction librarians the chance to collaborate with a mentor to raise confidence and receive support. Though excellent followers set an example for their colleagues, the more intentional mentoring relationship is another way in which they can provide guidance and inspire the work of others.

Experienced librarians can also seek leadership positions on internal committees and in professional organizations. By leading teams, working groups, and committees, an individual whose essential duties do not include leadership can receive insight into the challenges and rewards of taking the lead. Such perspective can only make the individual an even more effective follower. As chair of an internal committee, an experienced librarian is able to demonstrate a holistic understanding of the organization, as well as a grasp of its immediate and long-term goals to committee members and to those to whom the committee reports. When the committee's work is completed successfully, its chair will have demonstrated organizational dedication and the ability to lead as well as to follow.

Similarly, as leaders in professional organizations, experienced librarians are able to demonstrate dedication to librarianship as a vocation. Librarians enter the profession committed to the principles of librarianship. By actively participating in professional organizations and reaching leadership positions within them, experienced librarians are able to confirm their ongoing engagement with the profession more globally.

Library administrators would be wise to consider enriching excellent followers (and cultivating more of them) through special programs that focus on the characteristics and potential of the highly effective follower. Such programs may be held within the organization, or select employees might be sent to them elsewhere. Relevant areas to develop might include self-management, critical thinking, problem solving, and effective communication.

Administrators may also encourage excellent followers by including performance measures related to followership in employee evaluations. When the performance evaluation includes such measures, the importance of followership becomes evident to staff members. Excellent followers will know that they are valued for this, and others may be encouraged to develop the characteristics of an effective follower.

Joining the management team and becoming an administrator need not be the only markers of a successful career. A librarian also can be considered a success by doing the work of the excellent follower: spending a career developing new skills and refining existing ones; learning new technologies and contributing to the phasing out of obsolete ones; pursuing ambitious goals, both their own and those of the organization; being a good organizational citizen; and serving as a mentor to newer colleagues. These are among the ways a follower can serve as an exemplar, not only to others in the

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follower role, but also to administrators and other leaders. The combined character, work ethic, and product of the excellent follower will speak for itself.

FOR FURTHER READING

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