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# Leadership and Followership: Some Summary Propositions

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We choose to conclude the Special Issue by presenting a set of propositions regarding leadership and followership. We find these statements to have been clearly asserted by the authors whose work has appeared above. We offer this listing of propositions neither as established truth nor as a comprehensive list of learnings from the work of our authors. Rather, we present these statements as a selected list of what the papers have suggested about the relationship between leadership and followership and the importance of this area of study and concern.

## THE CONCEPTS: LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP

We begin with a series of definitional statements that relate to the concepts of leadership and followership:

***Proposition 1.*** *Leadership and followership are linked concepts, neither of*

*which can be comprehended without understanding the other.*

Our presumption in proposing the Special Issue on the interaction between leadership and followership was that the concepts were not only closely related, but that they were important to study in interaction with each other. As the papers began to take form in this issue, we became increasingly struck with the novelty provided by linking the two concepts. Not only were leadership and followership rarely discussed in the literature as co-

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equal concepts, but there was very little discussion about the phenomenon of followership itself.

Our perception that it was important to consider leadership in interaction with followership was not entirely our own hunch, obvious as it seemed to us on the basis of both scholarship and practice (see Heller, 1982; Van Til, 1973). After all, James MacGregor Burns (1978, p. 19) had clearly spelled out the interconnection when he wrote

I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations—the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations—of *both leaders and followers*. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their followers' values and motivations.

Writing with both eloquence and historical perspective, Burns confirmed for us the observation that the fate of leaders and followers was closely linked, each acting on the other, and each responding to shifting sands of social realities.

Leadership, unlike naked power-wielding, is thus inseparable from followers' needs and goals. The essence of the leader-follower relation is the interaction of persons with different levels of motivations and of power potential, including skill, in pursuit of a common or at least joint purpose. (Burns, 1978, p. 19)

**Proposition 2.** *The study of the follower, in particular, has been largely neglected.*

Wortman notes in his paper in this issue that "Although there are leadership studies that incorporate data about followers, none of them explicitly deals with followership" (p. 373).

This neglect seems particularly open to question in light of the conceptual linkage already discussed. To be sure, George Homans, in his remarkable list of 11 propositions about leadership in the "human group," had suggested this interaction, but the follower always seemed to end up as dependent in these theses. For instance, Homans (1950) asserted that "The leader must live up to the norms of the group," (p. 427) suggesting that the followers play a central role in determining norms. But Homans does not choose to develop that point, and instead moves to assert that the leader must live up to the norms of the group "better than any follower."

**Proposition 3.** *Leadership and followership are best seen as roles in relationship.*

Here we find Smircich and Morgan, and Blake and Mouton, persuasive. Leadership and followership are best seen, we believe, as interrelated roles that are available in every human organization. Leaders and followers, in any context, share a common fate of responsibility for their family, group, organization, or nation. From their joint participation emerges the success or failure of their enterprise.

Thus, Blake and Mouton link process and outcome with a comma, and not a dash, and signify that common fate. And Smircich and Morgan observe that

While individuals may look to a leader to frame and concretize their reality, they may also react against, reject, or change the reality thus defined (p. 259).

Nowhere do our authors speak of leaders as a distinct class of human beings, set aside from the rest of us by

their training, bearing, or competence. Where leaders have been so defined, as Davis indicates so powerfully, they become targets in the gallery of contemporary violence. Democratic leadership has as one of its strengths the ability to resist the suppression of the leadership cadre, as events in Poland in 1981-82 suggested. When leadership is shared, it is more difficult to eliminate the spirit that motivates it.

## LEADER-FOLLOWER DYNAMICS

**Proposition 4.** *The leader must lead, and do it well to retain leadership; the follower must follow, and do it well to retain followership.*

Here we build on one of Homans's (1950, p. 428) most persuasive and pithy propositions: "The leader will lead." Our first elementary proposition contends that, as well, the follower must follow.

Thomas N. Gilmore's research illustrates this contention. Legal services lawyers eschew the need for leadership in their diffuse egalitarian ideology. Therefore, they behave ineptly as followers, and their organizations do not function as effectively as they might, or achieve their goals as fully as they ought.

More self-conscious about the problem, but still troubled by it, are the lesbian activists studied by Andrea Baker. Here the aim is to achieve the functions of leadership without embodying individuals with invidious distinctions of the positions of "leaders." These women seek not only to criticize the hierarchical model, which is as far as the legal services lawyers

seem to get, but also to replace that model with an effective egalitarian one.

The school of nursing studied by Bonjean and his associates illustrates the gains available to the leader who is blessed by a productive collegueship with followers. The school became a place of greater productivity and warmer feelings after the designed organizational intervention. Unlike the insurance company that blunders through the ill-conceived miasma of "Operation June 30," the school of nursing saw leadership and followership affirmed by competence and openness to change.

**Proposition 5.** *Good leadership enhances followers, just as good followership enhances leaders.*

The point is clearly established negatively by the case studies of Gilmore and Smircich and Morgan. Operation June 30 is a case of blundering leadership that disorients both followers and the organization. The prevailing disorientation at legal services also retards effective action.

On the positive side, the case presented by Bonjean and associates (p. 368) clearly shows the gains that pertain to both the organization and the leader when leadership and followership are productively discharged. The dean of the school of nursing, relieved from the traditional "queen in her court" role, comes to question the degree to which leadership and followership actually differ from each other. She comes increasingly to "believe they are the same, only used in different degrees in different situations by different individuals" (Brown, 1980, p. 358).

**Proposition 6.** *In many cases, the follower is a potential leader who chooses*

*not to become active in a given situation.*

If leadership and followership are seen as interacting roles (Proposition 3), rather than fixed positions, the individual is provided with choices regarding which role to play in different organizations and situations.

The point has been most clearly made by Pearce, whose research indicates why so many potential leaders are choosing not to assume leadership roles in voluntary organizations. A not wholly dissimilar set of disincentives may be at work discouraging U.S. representatives from seeking re-election, or academics from aspiring to seats of deanly power.

An important implication of the reluctance of many potential leaders to assume formal roles of leadership is the increased need for quality followership in modern organizations. In some cases, as in the black movement chronicled by Davis, that potential awaits development. In the organizational theory of strategic management as developed by Wortman, it would seem to be an important human resource awaiting the effective facilitation of enlightened managers.

**Proposition 7.** *Where all seek to lead, or all seek to follow, there can be no leadership or followership.*

This statement, albeit simple and straightforward, is sorely in need of emphasis. Cases of spoiled leadership and followership are present in our volume and speak to the need for effective leader-follower patterning. Jone Pearce's studies suggest that we need to heed the voice of Ronald Lippitt (p. 399) once more, when he suggests that "Getting persons with very different backgrounds, specialties, and

disciplines to work together effectively is a great leadership challenge of the 1980s."

## **PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP REVISITED**

**Proposition 8.** *Students of leadership tend to maintain an advocacy of participative, democratic leadership styles and more flexible and egalitarian leader-follower roles.*

To hear this old song does not surprise us, yet we find some new tones in the refrain. A new sense of urgency has crept into these admonitions. We also find some fresh and interesting learnings by those who have experimented in this area and succeeded or failed.

The participative leadership-followership model is presented as being no longer an option or management fad, but an imperative. Lippitt (p. 397) contemplates the future and observes that one of our most important tasks for the eighties is to give up the "model of the vertical dimension of authority and dependency, of superordinate and subordinate, of decision maker and implementer, of master and servant."

Wortman takes a broad view of society's organizations in both the public and private sectors. He notes the lack of strategic management in these places and characterizes ours as a "follower society," rewarding stability and the status quo rather than innovation and creativity. He notes that in Japanese organizations where strategic management is successfully practiced, followers (subordinates) participate more fully in day-to-day decision making (operating management). Leaders are thus freed to do strategic planning.

Implicit in Wortman's analysis is the notion that our survival as an industrial nation may depend on the successful performance of those difficult tasks that Lippitt so eloquently describes: "Giving up authority and taking on more responsibility are both sources of stress for leader and the follower" (p. 398).

Another note of urgency concerning the need for less hierarchical forms of leadership and followership comes from Smircich and Morgan's discussion of a company president's private war against a backlog of paper work, Operation June 30. Underlining the potential for pathology, these authors describe the implications of a hierarchical leader-follower relationship:

Leaders may create situations in which individuals are crippled by purposelessness and inaction when left to guide efforts on their own account. Leadership may actually work against the development of self-responsibility, self-initiative, and self-control. (p. 271)

Even more disturbing than Smircich and Morgan's charge of pathology is Davis's description of the dire consequences of the "individual leadership model" for the black movement. He reminds us of the vulnerability and fragility of an institution where to be a leader is glorious and to be a follower is to be dependent and docile:

There have been substantive changes in all phases of the black movement: many traditional black leaders have died; alternative leaders have not yet attracted and sustained a following; followers have declined numerically, and in some instances, have attached themselves to organizations whose strategies are more conciliatory than confronting. (p. 319)

Another author, Miner, elsewhere has sounded the alarm and called for new (less hierarchical) organizational

designs to accommodate a decline in motivation to manage. Miner and Smith (1981, p. 29) tracked the motivation of business students for two decades and concluded that:

America may be running short of the kind of people it will need for top management roles in the near future. The heart of the problem is not numbers but motivation; test results suggest that compared to the students of two decades ago, today's business students have values and attitudes that make them far less suited to run the typical American corporation.

The sense of urgency that these authors bring to their unanimous call for new, nonhierarchical models of the leader-follower relationship reminds us of the "leadership crisis" cliché. If we are running short of people who choose to lead in hierarchical organizations (Miner), and our industrial productivity is at stake (Wortman), and our leaders in public life are subject to violent attack (Davis), and a hierarchical leader-follower relationship is inherently pathological and alienating (Smircich & Morgan), is this not a crisis of national (or international) proportions?

The nature of the crisis now becomes clearer. The old order (hierarchical leader-follower relationship) no longer looks or feels right, nor holds promise for the future; yet a new order has not been found, proven, or achieved consensus.

Our authors do provide some valuable learnings from those who have tried other models of the leader-follower relationship. The results are mixed, providing both encouragement and precautions. We shall first consider three cautionary propositions:

***Proposition 9. Leveling or equalizing the leader-follower relationship does***

*not eliminate the need for role differentiation.*

Gilmore points out the difficulty of negotiating leader-follower roles at each interaction while at the same time seeking to transact the business at hand. In the anti-authoritarian environment of the legal services organization, Gilmore describes how role ambiguity (leader-follower) interferes with the conduct of business:

Politics pervades the organization. Each transaction is taxed with the additional burden of establishing the relationship as well as conducting the business. Leader and follower begin to be less permanent roles with respect to specific tasks and more a starting place for the struggle. (p. 350)

Similarly confusing the delegation of leader and follower roles with role differentiation in general, Baker's group of radical feminists chose disorganization. Realizing that functioning as a large group required some role differentiation reminiscent of the despised leader-follower roles, the group reverted to small splinter groups. These "collectives" could function without role distinctions. Baker describes the transient large-group phase of the community:

Leaders experienced the complications of translating feminist ideals about leadership methods into everyday practices. They faced problems of meeting the expectations of a large, diverse group, hoping that a new, formal structure of authority would make their work easier. Conscious of the tension between the efficiency and specialization of a bureaucratic organization and the intimacy and spontaneity of a small "rap" group, they risked failure in exchange for the chance to maintain a community-wide, lesbian-feminist group. (p. 334)

**Proposition 10.** *Leaders and followers may become so independent of each other that the synergy of the relationship is lost.*

In the voluntary organizations studied by Pearce, where followers do not depend on leaders for their livelihoods, the leadership role becomes unappealing and unsupported, and recruitment to such positions becomes difficult. Such problems may also be encountered in Miner's professional systems where "[Leadership] need not have anything to do with a specific position, and it may emanate from outside the employing organization completely" (p. 296).

**Proposition 11.** *By shortening or removing the distance between leader and follower, the leader may lose much-needed protection.*

Limits prescribe the optimum psychological distance between leader and follower. The "bad guy" tasks of leaders, e.g., firing a subordinate or flunking a student, become extremely stressful without some distance from followers. Gilmore clearly describes the perils of the leader whose followers expect her or him not to shield themselves or "hide" behind the leadership role:

In the wider society the concept of role, like the concept of bureaucracy, has increasingly become loaded with negative connotations. Consequently, to stay in role, or to make decisions based on one's role rather than based on one's person are now the hallmarks of the bureaucrat. An undesirable by-product of this shift is that the leader may experience less support in tolerating staff aggression. (p. 346)

On a more positive note, our authors also provide examples of successful



efforts to develop some rapprochement between leader and follower. These cases illustrate the contention by Blake and Mouton that when leadership is as it should be there are no followers, only members. Thus, in the nursing school studied by Bonjean and his associates, morale and satisfaction improved when followers were given a greater voice in decision making and the leader became more accessible to them. A series of propositions contrasts these successes with failures:

**Proposition 12.** *In the successful cases, the behavior of both leaders and followers changes for the better.*

The dual stressors described by Lippitt, that on the leader in giving up authority and that on the follower in assuming responsibility, are both addressed in these cases. The model of the leader and follower in relationship serves well here.

**Proposition 13.** *Deviations from the hierarchical leader-follower model are still unusual.*

This proposition applies to each of the cases save that involving the lesbian feminists. The organizations in the successful cases remain fundamentally bureaucratic in their structure. Improvement in satisfaction is achieved within them without fundamental shifts in organizational structure. A little bit of intervention, it appears, can go a long way.

**Proposition 14.** *The successful cases involved some outside intervention aimed at organization development.*

This proposition focuses on the impact of outside interventions on leader-

ship and followership. Techniques such as action research and feedback, team building, and goal clarification were used to effect change. What did leaders and followers actually learn through these interventions? The following section offers some clues.

## TRAINING AND LEARNING

**Proposition 15.** *Leadership and followership may be arts in which people can become more highly skilled.*

The case described by Bonjean and his associates includes examples of how training may enhance the leader-follower relationship. Blake and Mouton reiterate their belief in the power of the T Group as a learning tool:

In the T Group, members, it might be said, are learning some of the disciplines of phenomenology: learning to observe experiences that are occurring within the group and to associate their feelings with these events in order to understand them more fully. (p. 288)

Lippitt describes specific skills or competencies that will be needed by leaders (e.g., proactive responses to change, diverse person team building, and viewing outsiders as potential resources) and followers (e.g., reversing sibling rivalry, balancing self-satisfaction and contributions to others) in the 1980s. Contrary to the prevalent assumption that leaders need training and support while everyone knows how to follow, we find that the follower role is itself challenging and stressful. Thus Lippitt mentions that his workshop on "Influencing Upward" trains participants to become more active and effective followers and members.

In sum, we find our authors creating a vision of a mature notion of author-



ity, one in which followers are not childlike, passive, or docile. Nor in this vision are leaders omnipotent, paternal/maternal, or tyrannical. Rather, we find a vision of leader-follower interaction at the adult level. We are reminded of Sennett's (1980, p. 168) call for authority that is "visible" and "legible":

Visible means that those who are in positions of control be explicit about themselves: clear about what they can and cannot do; explicit about their promises. "Legible" specifies how this statement could come about. No person in power can be trusted to serve as his own judge and jury. It is the subjects who have to decide what power means; the servants have to read the master's actions as though trying to make sense of a difficult text.

One happy consequence of visible, legible authority is "to remove the quality of omnipotence from figures of authority in the chain of command." Another is "taking seriously the ideal of democracy."

## THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Leadership and followership, like so many other social phenomena, may be importantly affected by prevailing societal conditions and trends. Both the pace and direction of change may critically constrain the forms available for leadership and followership in a changing society. Perhaps Seymour Sarason has put it most clearly in the literature. In his study of leadership and its settings, Sarason (1972, p. 242) writes:

As long as we permit ourselves to be endlessly fascinated by the personality of

leaders in new settings, we cannot gain perspective on the social complexity of the process of institutional creation and the way in which it influences and is influenced by the surrounding society.

Summarizing recent literature on leadership, Hunt and Osborn (1982, p. 206) note that it has not been customary to study leadership in its many contexts. Rather, they arrive at the conclusion that "progress will come by systematically considering a wider range of variables, primarily macro in nature. . . ."

The papers in the Special Issue have all, we find, addressed the broader societal context of changing patterns of leadership and followership.

***Proposition 16. A rapidly changing environment places changing demands on leaders and followers alike.***

Whether we consider the harried insurance company executive devising dubious strategies of productivity enhancement (Smircich & Morgan), the legal services executive seeking to control the work of the unruly lawyers in the organization (Gilmore), the volunteer participant contemplating leadership (Pearce), or the black movement leader threatened by violent forces beyond any direct control (Davis), the pattern is the same—temporary leader-follower roles are in great flux.

This dislocation is exacerbated in what Lippitt calls the society of reduced resources. High on the agenda of every organization is the question of whom to fire or lay off (Gilmore), or how to increase the workload without adding additional staff (Smircich & Morgan). In such a "cutback society," the leader's role shifts from a central focus on program development

to a preoccupation with equity and the minimization of pain (see Hirschhorn, Note 1).

In such an era, the “good feelings” that have often accompanied the expansion of participation in organizations and communities become replaced by the anxieties of deciding what and whom to do without. The happy experiences documented by Bonjean and his associates become replaced by organization travail detailed by Smircich and Morgan, Gilmore, and Davis.

**Proposition 17.** *In a society of reduced resources, the leader acts less often as a facilitator of program and more frequently as the adversary of followers—the one who fires them.*

How long our social fabric will be plagued by the anxieties and inequities of economic decline is of course impossible to foretell. What Daniel Yankelovich (1981, part III) has called “the great reversal” in postwar patterns of increasing affluence may be a long-term pattern, or may yield to a happier pattern in a period of several years. The “ground” against which leadership “figures” act, to use Gilmore’s apt image, shifts suddenly and far in contemporary society. We do well to remember, as Smircich and Morgan (p. 258) remind us, that a leader can act effectively “only when he or she achieves a situation in which an obligation, expectation, or right to frame experience is presumed, or offered and accepted by others.”

Social scientists argue both positions. To futurists like Willis Harman (1979), our present malaise is best seen as a time of troubles that will soon develop into a time of societal transformation, in which the discontinuities

of our dilemmas will yield to new and more harmonious ways of life. On the other hand, there are those like political scientist Clarence Stone (Note 2), who argue that ours are the travails of a postindustrial society in decline, and that things will get much worse before there is any improvement.

**Proposition 18.** *In a transformational crisis, leadership and followership become profoundly disoriented.*

As Burns (1978) notes, in such times of change, “transformational” forms of leadership replace “transactional” forms. One can only hope that the transformation will be toward the Utopia Harman foresees, well-suited to the democratic and egalitarian leader-follower relations sought by the lesbian activists Baker studies, the nursing faculty Bonjean and associates discuss, and the potential black movement foreseen by Davis. But the darker possibility is very real as well, presaged by the agony of so many recent black leaders, the immobilization of so many professionals (Gilmore), and the pathetic caricaturing of so many well-paid corporate leaders (Smircich & Morgan).

In this era of overload, violence, crisis, and decline, the editors take heart from Theodore Friend’s final report on his presidency of Swarthmore College, in which he noted, well-aware that an immediate predecessor of his had died of a heart attack in his office while facing the tension of a student occupation of a college building:

As a president in his final year, I ask simply to be considered in the temper of Lao-Tse: “Of a good leader . . . when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, ‘We did this ourselves.’” (1981, p. 24)

No more fitting description can be offered of the proper relation between leaders and followers in a time of change.

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