

THE POWER OF EFFECTIVE FOLLOWERS

Leaders need followers – without them there is no one to execute on a vision or deliver to meet a goal. Effective followers are much more than worker bees following directions or executing by directive. Successful, productive and efficient organizations know better than to underappreciate or marginalize the role of followership. Rather, they develop followers with the same fervor as developing leaders. That's important because the most effective employees are followers, not simply workers. They are focused on the mission and not just doing their jobs.

Followers are usually subordinates – lower down on the org charts, whether or not they're direct reports. There are also followers who are influenced by leaders without being part of a formal hierarchy. Either way, it's important to develop the traits and behaviors that make successful, effective followers.

Followers Are Not Second-Class Employees

A good first step is to address the false perception that followers are submissive, weak and less able. In fact, good followers can influence leaders, contribute ideas, add value and identify when a change of direction may be needed. These are not the attributes of a weak link. Effective followers are partners of sorts, adding value beyond completing tasks.

What Makes a Good Follower?

Having the presence of mind to support the activities of a good leader and resist the bad direction of a poor leader are the most obvious traits of good followers. A good deal of research has been done to determine the qualities that make good followers. Professor John McCallum says judgement, work ethic, competence, honesty, courage, discretion, loyalty and ego management are qualities of a good follower. Other traits to look for and groom in good followers are the ability to work without supervision, commitment to the organization, desire for self-improvement, credibility, enthusiasm and intelligence.

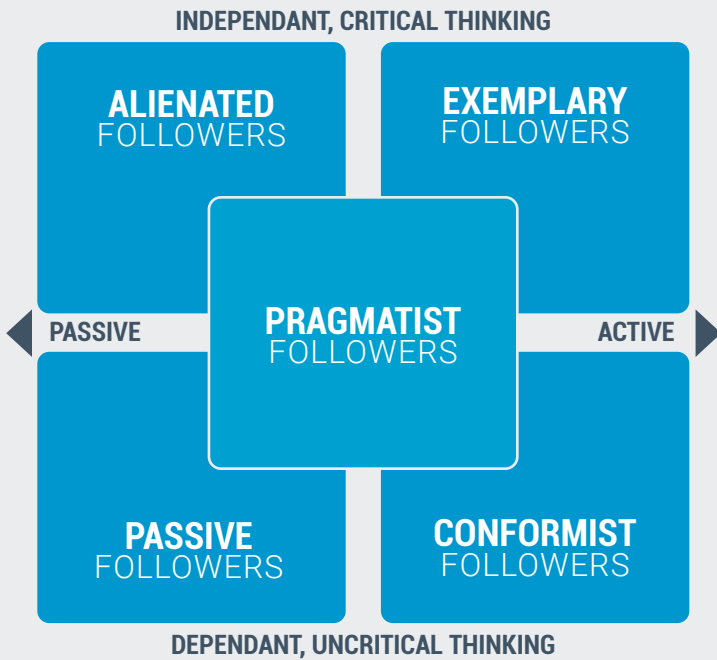
The Dangers of Poor Followership

Poor followers can hurt an organization and their leaders. Their activities undermine the work of others and make it harder to achieve goals. They tend to do the wrong things, such as not being honest or covering up problems. They affect morale, productivity and the performance of others by being overly critical, cynical, apathetic and focusing on problems instead of seeking solutions. They can bring down their co-workers and their organization.

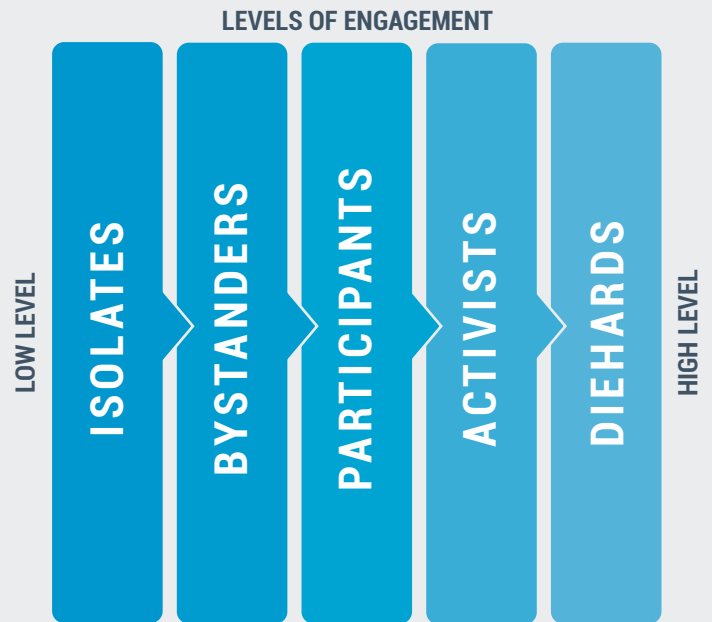
Visualizing Traits to Identify Ideal Followers

Robert Kelly and Barbara Kellerman are social scientists who each created their own frameworks for understanding how followers influence leaders and outcomes. Let's take a look at what they've found.

Kelley's Model of Followership



Kellerman's Model of Followership



Alienated Followers: skeptical, independent thinkers. They are capable but cynical.

Conformist Followers: "yes" people within an organization. Active, follow orders yet need direction.

Passive Followers: look to the leader for constant direction.

Exemplary Followers: independent, innovative, positive, offer constructive feedback.

Pragmatist Followers: support the status quo and maintain characteristics from the other categories.

(Derived from Bjugstad et al. 2006)

Isolates: completely unengaged and by doing nothing passively support the status quo.

Bystanders: somewhat detached and observe yet do not participate.

Participants: are engaged enough to share their views on an issue and invest some of their own time to influence the outcome at a company.

Activists: very engaged and willing to show their support or opposition for a leader and their vision based on the follower's beliefs.

Diehards: are extremely engaged. They are deeply committed to their cause and will show support or opposition to a leader.

(Derived from Kellerman, 2007)



Take a Look at Your Team

Kelley's and Kellerman's models can help you visualize the playing field and spectrum of your organization's followers and how they engage with their leaders and teams. You can see how these varying followership personas can affect your organization's performance. Leverage that insight for hiring, training and evaluating when you need to act to modify behavior.

Take the time to understand, evaluate, guide and motivate your followers. It will improve productivity, performance and your ability to achieve corporate goals.

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