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Better Follower, Better Leader

Skills and Professional Development



Despite what we tend to think about followers, they can make us better leaders. Just as it is true that we lead in various aspects of our lives, there are times when even the leaders among us are followers. We can take the lessons from those opportunities or spend more time simply observing those we lead to become better leaders.

There are five attributes of followers that will benefit us as we grow in our leadership.

Awareness. It is the basis for strong emotional intelligence. Emotionally intelligent people are aware of themselves and those around them. Self-awareness is what allows us to recognize our strengths and weaknesses, the truths about ourselves, and not feel defensive about those truths. Truly aware people accept who they are, what they contribute, and how they affect those around them. Emotional intelligence also extends to awareness of others and their needs.

When we follow, it is our responsibility to have this awareness so that we can support the leader. All too often as leaders we are looking for people to simply act for us and forget to recognize the reciprocal responsibility we have to those we lead. Keeping our follower hat on while leading can help us be stronger leaders.

Good listeners. One of the things leaders need to do more of is listen. Just because we are in positions of leadership does not mean we have all the answers. Therefore it is imperative that we learn to listen more and speak less. By listening, we learn what the problems are, other perspectives that may resolve those problems, or how our decisions are impacting projects or people.

Team focused. Followers make up the supporting cast. There can only be so many leaders on a team. Even on a team full of leaders, one or two rise above the rest to lead and the rest... follow. But teams do not survive or thrive because of leaders. Without those who make the team move forward,

without followers, a leader is just a name at the top of an org chart. Good followers are focused on what it takes for the team to succeed. They take the vision and direction the leader sets and put the plan in place for the sake of the team. What leaders need to learn here is that it is about the team, NOT about the leader. When this lesson is internalized and decisions are made with the organization's welfare in mind, a clear vision articulated and bought into, and proper tools and resources available, there is nothing the team cannot achieve.

Trustworthy. This almost goes without saying. Followers need to be trusted to do the job assigned and keep appropriate confidences. Without trust we know there are no relationships — and it is the relationships between followers and leaders that determine whether a team is truly successful or if they simply get work done. While the latter may be acceptable for a while, being part of a truly good team should be the goal of every leader and follower.

Self-starters. Contrary to what people might think of followers, they are not passive and useless. Just as there are poor leaders, there are poor followers. But we are not talking about poor followers here. We are talking about the followers who make the engines of our organizations hum, rather than grind to a halt. Self-initiating followers take these characteristics and then put them into action — on their own volition.

Followers understand their role and how they fit into the bigger picture of the team and the task that needs accomplishing after having taken the time to listen to the input from the other team members and direction of the leader. Once it is clear the direction the team is moving in, followers don't wait to be told what to do but will take the initiative to do their part. The point of leading is not to tell people what to do, but to empower them and support them as they do what they know to do.

The difference between following and leading is slight and, when done well, nearly imperceptible. We are always leading and therefore we are always following. As we learn to move back and forth between the two, we develop the abilities that will allow us to be the kinds of leaders people actually want to follow, as we are focused on the team, inclusive of the value of others, and consciously giving people a place to exhibit their talents and contribute to the greater good.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



Former ACC Docket Columnist

Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.