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Do you follow? Understanding followership before leadership

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Introduction

I've spent most of my life in education, as a pupil, student, teacher, lecturer and manager. At every moment, I have had a sense of being a bit of a leader: for example, I led an investigation into the Incas while in primary school, later, I led half a university. At the same time, I had a sense I was a follower. Yes, I admit it: I was a follower. There were teachers, head teacher, tutors, supervisors, heads of department and vice chancellors, all, at various times, in leadership positions over me. Why is that so hard to admit? Leadership is much talked about, written about, researched and celebrated. But followership seems to me to be leadership's forgotten companion, ignored, an embarrassment. Followership is the f-word that we hate to use. Chaleff, one of the few enthusiastic writers on followership, nevertheless writes of the 'deepest discomfort with the term *follower*', as '[i]t conjures up images of docility, conformity, weakness, and failure to excel' (Chaleff, 2009: 3).

I want to explore the ethics and the politics of followership because, without it, leadership cannot be justified.

Leadership illusions and followership models

There is a natural tension in debates on leadership when people consider democracy. If a leader has more power than others, this undermines a sense of an equal distribution of power – the core meaning of democracy. Many writers have attempted to resolve that tension, for example, by describing distributed leadership or servant leadership, or by tweaking the meaning of democracy to allow for systematic power inequalities. These approaches generate many valuable insights; they also (unintentionally) generate some misleading ideas about leadership that confuse leaders and non-leaders alike and may prevent the development of a robust ethical model of followership. Here are five of the problematic ideas. Most are very familiar to school leaders. It is important to repeat: they all generate valuable insights, that is, they are all true in some senses.¹

We are all leaders

Yes, but if we are all leaders, a teacher might say, how come the head teacher get paid so much more than me?

Why can head teachers (or CEOs or other leaders) make budget decisions, and HR decisions, but I can't? The principles of distributed leadership are excellent in describing how there are many people doing responsible work in a school, and there is not simply one leader controlling a bunch of irresponsible drudges. It is important to remember that, and distributed leadership literature dominated educational leadership research in the early part of this century (Diamond and Spillane, 2016). However, it does little to explain how leadership is distributed differently in different schools and simply points us to the idea that many people have responsibilities. Calling everyone a leader does nothing to describe or justify the degree of inequality in the distribution of power (Gronn, 2016). 'We are all leaders' is no more helpful than 'all children can learn' or 'every child matters': even though they are true, they do not explain inequalities in power, learning or mattering. They 'all suggest rather a level playing field, which by and large is false' (Kellerman, 2008: 6). It implies a 'homeopathic' followership model, in which followership is diluted to a point at which it is invisible.

We are all working to the same end

Yes, that can happen, but it is far from universally true. 'We are all working to the same end' is – understandably – a popular saying of leaders, but it is also built into many definitions of leadership. Northouse, in an excellent textbook of leadership, defines leadership as 'a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (Northouse, 2019: 6). This, he contrasts with 'coercion', which 'involves the use of threats and punishment to *induce change* in followers for the sake of the leaders' (Northouse, 2019: 15). Rather than coercion being one of the ways in which leaders lead, it is excluded from being leadership at all: it 'runs counter to leadership because it does not treat leadership as a process that emphasizes working *with* followers to achieve shared objectives' (Northouse, 2019: 15–16). A major leadership textbook that defines leadership as working to achieve a common goal: this is at least explicit and honest about what

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it does. Most leadership literature hides that assumption. As a consequence, leaders are convinced by their own textbooks that they are working to a shared goal, and non-leaders who question the leaders are all-too-often marginalised by being told they are questioning the shared goals. The implied followership model is one of obedience, as followers are not obeying leaders so much as they are supporting the needs of the organisation. Or, rather, they are obeying leaders because they and the leaders are together supporting the needs of the organisation.

Northouse does, to his considerable credit, give examples throughout the book of ‘the dark side’ of leadership and, contrary to his own definitions, accepts that some ‘leaders use their leadership to achieve their own personal ends and lead in toxic and destructive ways’ (Northouse, 2019: 9). Yet his examples – Hitler, Alexander the Great, and, later in the book, the Penn State sexual abuse scandal – are not examples of everyday distinctions between the goals of leaders and of non-leaders. Everyday schools are not as ‘same end’ish, any more than everyday people look like the pictures in their social media posts. As Tourish says, leaders should avoid ‘pursu[ing] the illusory goal of a unified corporate culture, invariably characterised by excessive degrees of conformity around leader decreed values and norms’ (Tourish, 2013: 214), and followers should not expect to conform either. Closely related to this is the following idea.

We are all in this together

Yes, it is true that we are all in this together, whether the ‘this’ is a school, a profession, a country or the world. The statement is one of solidarity. What is confusing is that asking for increased solidarity within a system that is unfair can be a way of reinforcing injustice, or it can be a call for rebellion against the injustice; asking for increased solidarity within a system that is fair can be a way of reinforcing justice, or can be a call for a populist takeover of the system. So the meaning of ‘we are all in this together’ is wholly dependent on what the ‘this’ is like and what the intentions are of the person saying the statement. The statement *on its own* has almost no significance and fails to imply either a leadership model or a followership model. Its only use is as an intensifier of other ideas on leadership and followership.

We are working for the leader

There is an innocuous sense in which people work for their leaders: leaders can generally expect followers to do what the leaders ask. Leaders may also act as employers: strategic leaders in organisations are often legally regarded as employers, and what they say can be attributed to the employer. Yet ‘who is working for whom?’ has been at the centre of debates on the ethics of leadership for millennia. Aristotle was relatively neutral on political structures – whether there should be one ruler, a few rulers or rule by all people (by which he meant all citizens, adult free men). His ethical judgement of leadership was whether the leader

works for the led, or the led work for the leader. The distinction between good and bad forms of rule-by-one is that a monarch ‘is concerned for the welfare’ of the people ruled (Aristotle, 1976: 276), whereas a tyrant expects the people to work for him, as slaves work for a master (Aristotle, 1976: 278). He makes the same distinction between aristocracy and oligarchy, and between polity (what we might today call democracy) and democracy (what we might today call mob rule) (Aristotle, 1962: 116). Incidentally, Aristotle also uses the ‘we are all working to the same end’ argument, for good leaders, which I find less convincing. But Aristotle always makes it clear that what makes leadership better is working for the led and not the other way around. It was put with great simplicity in a cartoon in the 1990s, where the teacher ‘Miss Givings’ asks the head teacher: ‘do you work for or with teachers as colleagues, or do you assume they work for you?’ (Long, 1997). So ‘we all work for the leader’ is, at a deep level, an admission of unethical leadership (according to Aristotle): ethical leadership involves *working for the led*. In more recent times, the inversion implied by this ethical approach (i.e. of leaders working for the led) has been embedded in a leadership theory that Aristotle would be unlikely to recognise: servant leadership.

Servant leadership and servant followership

Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) is a leadership theory in part inspired by the biblical account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, an act of humility that would normally be carried out by a servant. It is self-consciously paradoxical, in saying the leaders should act like the servants of the led. In the days of corporal punishment in schools, it was a cliché for a teacher about to beat a child to say ‘this is going to hurt me more than it is going to hurt you’. If it were meant sincerely, then the child could reasonably say ‘it would be better, in that case, if I beat you, wouldn’t it?’² The same might be said of servant leadership. If leaders are really servants of the led, then why not pay them less than the led, and give them the low status of servants? And yet (servant) leaders continue with high status and high salaries. Rather than suggesting an inversion (in terms of status and salary), we might instead say that servant leadership promotes servant *followership*. This is the recommendation of Northouse, who says servant leadership ‘puts the leader in the role of servant, who utilizes “caring principles” to focus on followers’ needs to help these followers become more autonomous, knowledgeable, and like servants themselves’ (Northouse, 2019: 4). In that case, ‘we are all servants’. There is a danger that such a theory would suffer from the same problem as the ‘we are all leaders’ theories: it would fail to describe the articulation of power relations, while disguising any distinctions between roles. For Aristotle – who, like Greenleaf, was committed to leaders caring for the led – referring to this as being a ‘servant’ would be evidence of false modesty or ‘pusillanimity’ (Aristotle, 1976: 105).

Can followership escape from all these dilemmas and illusions?

Ethical followership

Tourish uses followership – as I do – to critique theories of leadership and to understand the ethics of both leadership and followership. For him, we need a ‘different view of agency’ in any account of followership and in any ‘reimagining of leadership’ (Tourish, 2013: 215). If the prime virtue of followership is obedience, then agency is limited, and we will not even pass the Nuremburg test – that is, the principle established in international law such that ‘I was only obeying orders’ would not in itself justify illegal–unethical conduct, even for those in the military (Mitscherlich and Mielke, 1949; Tourish, 2013: 202). Tourish sees ‘leadership and followership as co-constructed phenomena embedded in fluid social structures that we have barely begun to understand’ (Tourish, 2013: 215), which is a good start (if not conclusion) of an argument. The distinctive feature of followership, for him, is dissent. An appropriate model of followership would be one that ‘acknowledges the productive potential of dissent’ (Tourish, 2013: 215) rather than being expected to be part of the ‘illusory... unified corporate culture’ (Tourish, 2013: 214). ‘This’, he concludes, ‘means accepting that ambiguity and conflict are enduring traits of all organizational life, including interaction between leaders and... followers’ (Tourish, 2013: 214).

I think this a valuable starting point for a theory of followership, in stressing agency and avoiding the various pitfalls of ‘we are all leaders’, ‘we are all working to the same end’, ‘we are all in this together’, ‘we are working for the leader’ and servant leadership/followership. It is also helpful in understanding the value of dissent. I agree that a symptom of an organisation with good leadership and followership may be the presence of (respected) dissent. Machiavelli valued dissent. He devotes a whole chapter of *The Prince* to ‘how flatterers must be shunned’ and recommends that the Prince’s ‘attitude towards his councils and towards each one of his advisers should be such that they will recognize that the more freely they speak out the more acceptable they will be’ (Machiavelli, 1975: 126).³ However, I am not so sure that individual followers should think of dissent as a necessary followership virtue. This is my three-point model of followership ethics, a model that responds to all that has been said above.

Each role combines leadership and followership

In every professional or political role in life (other than ‘world king’, perhaps), there is a mixture of leadership and followership, and I’m at a loss as to why this is so rarely recognised, in all the literature that separates out leaders and followers, or leadership and followership. As children, we might lead a project on the Incas (as I did) and might even be a tyrant over a younger sibling or a dog or a spider or a set of toys, while also being a follower in most of what we did, following parents or teachers perhaps. It is one of the illusions of childhood that, when we grow up, we will do what we like. It is true that there may be more areas of life over which we have leadership roles: an adult who

becomes a teacher will lead classes of children, for example. But it is one of the disappointments of adulthood that we still have leaders above us, we are expected to follow these leaders in many ways that are just as annoying (or infantilising) as anything a parent might expect of us as children. Within the teaching profession, head teachers may have more power than teachers, but I have yet to find a head teacher who does not feel like a ‘follower’ of various other groups – whether governors, or local policymakers, or inspection agencies, or governments. It is essential that every person who is ‘labelled’ a leader recognises the elements of followership in their role, and vice versa. No-one is a ‘pure’ leader or a ‘pure’ follower.

A nominal follower should lead ethically, with care

We can use Aristotle’s ethic of leadership to apply to such leadership as each of us has. It is essential that every person who is ‘labelled’ a follower recognises the elements of leadership in their role. As a school pupil, I may lead some elements of my own learning, especially the more investigative types of learning, and I may have a leadership role over some younger pupils. This leadership (‘a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals’, to cut short and therefore improve the definition of Northouse, 2019: 6, quoted above) may be more or less ethical. Am I ‘caring for’ those I lead? In terms of studying, am I acting with curiosity, or ‘care for the object of study’ (Stern, 2018: 86), and in terms of people, am I caring for them? Recognising that each of us is both leader and follower, and recognising that in the midst of following, each of us should also lead ethically: these are the first two principles of followership. The third element is what a follower should expect from a leader.

Good followers allow good leaders to support them; good followers do not ignore their own leadership roles in order to satisfy bad leaders

Again, I suggest that we should expect a leader to support our work and should in that sense care for us. As a good follower, we should be prepared to accept such support from such leaders. This does not mean we obey without question: that would be ignoring our own leadership responsibilities. (It should also be recognised that on one day, a leader may be good, on another day, bad: how good or bad, ethical or unethical, a leader can change.) If leaders expect followers to work for the leaders (rather than the other way around), these are Aristotle’s tyrants, and a good follower (someone whose followership is ethical, in my terms) may well dissent or ignore or otherwise use ‘tactics’ (de Certeau, 1984: xix) to avoid meeting a leader’s expectations. So there are some circumstances where ‘doing what the leader tells you to do’ would be an example of good followership, and some circumstances where it would be poor followership. Working well for a tyrant is, *prima facie*, poor (unethical) followership.

Conclusion

It is true, then, that we are all leaders and that leaders should care for the led. It is also true that dissent is an important element of followership and leadership. But the ethics of followership can only be understood if the 'direction of support' is recognised (leaders care for the led) and accepted by nominal leaders and nominal followers. Followership should not be a taboo f-word. A leadership theory without a complementary followership theory is like the sound of one hand clapping: it has no impact at all. Research on leadership needs to articulate the leadership elements in every role (an insight given by distributed leadership theories) and also needs to articulate the followership elements in every role (rather than pretending to explore the workings of world kings). The ethics of followership and of leadership are co-dependent, and in a culture that fails to recognise good followership and seems to recognise only agency-free obedience, it is most important to be clear about followership before we get on to leadership. Do you follow?


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Notes

1. We are all more susceptible to be misled by partial truths than by complete falsehoods.
2. I don't wish to imply either is ethical, of course.
3. Machiavelli goes on to note that if the advisers dissent too much, they should of course be executed. On that point, I am sure Tourish would disagree.

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Julian Stern is Professor of Education and Religion at York St John University. He was a school teacher for 14 years and has worked in universities for 28 years. Julian has wide publications, with 16 books (plus 5 second or subsequent editions), contributions to 21 other books and over 30 peer-reviewed articles. He is Editor of the *British Journal of Religious Education*, and General Secretary of ISREV, the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values. His research ranges across education, including the philosophy of schooling; religion and spirituality; and solitude, silence and loneliness.

