Leading through Following: Understanding the Intersection of Followership, Leadership and Collaboration

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There is a popular saying around education that, "a bad principal can convince a teacher to leave a good school; while a good principal can convince a teacher to stay at a bad school." In a blog post titled *Teachers Quit Principals, Not Schools,*Barnes (2017) writes about teacher and administrator interactions and how those relationships effect personal decision-making and school climate. Both the popular educational saying and Barnes's writing, while not directly, speak to the relationship between leaders and followers and how that dynamic sometimes plays out in educational settings. Broadly speaking, the dynamic between leadership and followership is important, yet historically in education, only leadership has seen emphasis and examination.

Followership in itself is not a new concept because virtually every individual spends more time in the role of follower than leader and there have been both leaders and followers throughout the course of history. However, the examination followership as a construction for examination is relatively fresh. Understandably, the military arena, due to the nature of the enterprise, establishes followership as a construct to develop (see Figure 1 for principles of followership [Meilinger, 1994]). Aside from the military, other hierarchical entities (i.e. business/corporate structures) intentionally focus on followership as a construct for examination (for a review of followership see Yung & Tsai, 2013). Additionally, situations related to cultural phenomena (i.e., large populations of people with shared experiences) unintentionally and indirectly cast focus on followership (for an example related to higher education see Kellerman, 2008). Even within the described structures (i.e., military, business, culture), there is still scant research on followership which unsurprisingly results in virtually no research on followership in K-12 educational settings. As schools are comprised of teachers and administrators in the roles of followers and leaders, understanding nuances in the leadership-followership dynamic provides opportunities for improving collaboration and thus school climate.

In her book *Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders*, Barbara Kellerman (2008) defines followership, what it means to be a follower, and identifies types of followers in four different contexts/industries. While Kellerman's work does not specifically focus on K-12 educational settings, the current authors feel that the theories and ideas she posits can apply to the teacher/administrator dynamic found in schools. Further, we feel that Kellerman's work can support effective collaboration between teachers and

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administration. As such, the authors will apply Kellerman's ideas regarding followership to K-12 school settings to answer the following questions:

1. What is followership and how does it influence leadership?
2. What are the characteristics, types, and behavior of followers?
3. How does the followership/leadership dynamic intersect with improved collaboration?

Figure 1. Adapted from "The Ten Rules of Good Followership" by Colonel Phillip S. Meilinger, 1994, *Military Review*, 74(8), p. 32-37. Copyright 1994 by the Army University Press.

Meilinger's Ten Rules of Good Followership

1) Don't blame your boss for an unpopular decision or policy; your job is support, not undermine.

2) Fight with your boss if necessary; but do it in private, avoid embarrassing situations, and never reveal to others what was discussed.

3) Make the decision, then run it past the boss; use your initiative.

4) Accept responsibility whenever it is offered.

5) Tell the truth and don't quibble; your boss will be giving advice up the chain of command based on what you said.

6) Do your homework; give your boss all the information needed to make a decision; anticipate possible questions.

7) When making a recommendation, remember who will probably have to implement it. This means you must know your own limitations and weaknesses as well as your strengths.

8) Keep your boss informed of what's going on in the unit; people will be reluctant to tell him or her their problems and successes. You should do it for them, and assume someone will tell the boss about yours.

9) If you see a problem, fix it. Don't worry about who would have gotten the blame or who now gets the praise.

10) Put in more than an honest day's work, but don't ever forget the needs of your family. If they are unhappy, you will be too, and your job performance will suffer accordingly.

What is Followership and How Does it Influence Leadership?

If leaders effect change, both good and bad, followers enable it (Kellerman, 2007). There are numerous programs and structures in place to create and improve leaders. So many in fact, that leadership training is its own profitable industry (Kellerman, 2008; Ready & Conger 2003). Unfortunately, the practices of followership are rarely (if ever) part of the discussion on leadership. This includes the practices of following established rules, implementing policy, complying with instructions, supervising or being supervised by others. As followership applies to teachers, the role of follower is in addition to teaching students daily.

So what is followership? As defined by Kellerman (2008), followership "implies a relationship (rank), between subordinates and superiors, and a response (behavior), of the former to the latter" (p. xx). Applying this definition to school settings, followership refers to the behaviors of teachers in response to the overt or implied behaviors of the administration. For example, what do teachers (both individually and as a collective group) respond to the directives or requests of the principal of the school? More specifically, if a principal continuously requests a small group of preferred teachers to perform preferred tasks, the followership for those teachers may be different (more positive) than that of other non-preferred teachers. Based on this scenario, the overall school climate and effective collaboration between teachers and teachers/administrators may be adversely affected.

Exhibiting good followership mirrors the traits that make for good future leadership. Kelley (1996) focused on two behavioral dimensions of effective followership; critical thinking and participation. Critical thinkers process situational information for implications and possibilities before action, a skill valued by most successful leaders. Participation involves anticipating requirements and planning in accordance with them. Effective followership involves working well with others, embracing change, building trust, and communicating with courage. Competent followership from teachers can translate to productive administrative leadership in creating atmospheres where all team members adopt the vision of the administration as their own through communication and joint collaboration (Kelley, 1996; Maxwell, 2007).

What are the Characteristics, Types, and Behavior of Followers?

The idea of a person being a follower is fraught with the trappings of negative connotations and negative associations. Subsequently, we think of followers as the opposite of leaders who lack influence, power, and/or importance. To dismiss followers as only as subordinates to be controlled, manipulated, or deployed as agents of the leaders' desires is to underestimate the importance of followers in the leadership/followership dynamic. In fact, Keller (2008) asserts that followers are more important than ever due to their ability to enact change and sometimes become more influential than the leader. As defined by Kellerman (2008) followers can be identified by rank (as subordinates in the hierarchical structure) or by behavior (enacting the intentions of another). Although Kellerman focuses her work on the rank of followers, for the purpose of the current discussion and applying her ideas to K-12 schools, we focus on the behaviors of followers by type. Followers fall into five types (i.e., isolates, bystanders, participants, activists, and diehards) with behaviors specific to each type (Kellerman, 2008). In examining types of followers, we can ascribe behaviors to each and identify those behaviors in

teachers. This allows us to both identify how each type of follower influences the teacher/administrator dynamic but also identify qualities that may help predict future leadership skills.

Isolates. Isolates are uninterested in the leadership or their agenda and through there detachment enhance the strength of the leaders who are already in a position of power (Kellerman, 2008). In school settings, teachers who are isolates can be problematic to school climate if leadership is poor. While most teachers are dedicated to their students and schools, there can be teachers who are completely disengaged from the school climate that may be due to a number of reasons (e.g., retirement, moving to new school, etc.). Isolate teachers are easy scapegoats for poor leaders and ineffective leadership. For example, they provide an excuse for leaders when their agendas fail in that administrators can purport that their poor outcomes are less a reflection of their poor leadership abilities and more a direct reflection on poor followership by isolate teachers.

Bystanders. Bystanders stand on the sidelines and follow the status quo of the situation or people in charge, and generally remain neutral (Kellerman, 2008). Bystander teachers conscientiously just follow the administration and/or the zeitgeist of the moment. Most generally perform duties and tasks related to the purview of their teaching responsibilities and possibly nothing more. Equally important, bystanders complete tasks tacitly without question. Expressed differently, bystanders keep their heads down and do little to influence the overall climate of the school.

Participants. Participants actively engage in activities either for or against the leadership the leadership's agenda and/or the organization itself by investing whatever resources they have based on their own perspectives (Kellerman, 2008). Teachers who are participants can have a definite impact on the outcomes put forth by administration. Either in support of or against leadership's ideas, participants engage to influence the outcomes. For example, if the administration wants to invest in using a commercial reading program, a participant teacher could be an asset (if they believe in the program) in seeing that program successful. Conversely, if that participant teacher does not think the program is viable for students, he or she may prove to detrimental to its implementation and success.

Activists. Activist act strongly, eagerly, and energetically on behalf of the leader or institution (i.e., the school or district) (Kellerman, 2008). Activist teachers who have a heavy investment in the administration or the school can be of significant importance to school climate. Activists may enthusiastically support the administration and promote their agenda wholeheartedly. However, if he activist's loyalty is to the institution and they feel that the administration is ineffective or poor, that teacher may actively engage in behaviors to remove them from administrative positions.

Diehards. Diehards will go to the extreme for whatever the cause, institution, or person they believe in (Kellerman, 2008). Diehard teachers are exemplified by the phrases "teacher x bleeds [insert school color of choice]" or "teacher x would go to the ends of the earth for administrator y". If a diehard teacher is completely dedicated to the school, they will go to the ends of the earth for the betterment of that school even at the expense of leadership. Conversely, if a diehard

is dedicated to the any particular administrator, they would be willing to risk their livelihood (i.e., their job or career) for their belief in that administrator.

None of these typographies described are absolute. It is completely possible and likely that any teacher may exhibit any of the behaviors above and be associated with any or all of the typographies at any given time during their career. Nonetheless, having a general idea of the characteristics and types of followers can improve leaders, leadership, and the collaborative process, which is essential to fostering a productive school climate.

How Does the Followership/Leadership Dynamic Intersect with Improved Collaboration?

Collaboration with parents, general and special education teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and support staff and professionals is required daily in K-12 school settings. Without effective collaboration coupled with effective leadership/followership skills, stress from poor communication will contribute to teacher attrition and poor student outcomes. Effective collaboration skills improve organizational health and are an integral part in fostering academic and behavioral success for all students. Administrators who foster effective followership and collaboration skills in teachers will reap the benefits.

McGrath (2007) stresses continuous communication and notes that when classroom teachers are oriented toward inclusion and collaboration, professionals share leader-follower responsibilities; they establish goals that can be achieved, understand the mission, and work together to solve problems on behalf of the student. For these reasons, it is imperative to develop strategies aimed at reducing stress, increasing collaboration, sharing leader/follower responsibilities, improving school climate, and developing effective future administrative leaders by demonstrating and encouraging good followership. Although originally designed to foster collaboration between general education and special education teachers, Simpson (2007) developed eleven strategies for overcoming barriers to collaboration (see Figure 2) which apply to K-12 settings and implementation by leaders or followers.

Coupling followership skills with the skills requisite to overcoming barriers can be extremely helpful to educators, especially since training time for teachers is limited (Lerman, Vorndran, Addison, & Kuhn, 2004). These strategies have the potential to enhance retention, job satisfaction, collaboration, and professionalism, and improve the teaching environment for students. Administrators (i.e., leaders) should demonstrate and encourage the skills for effective collaboration as a model for followers to foster a positive working environment.

Conclusion

Administrators who foster effective followership and collaboration skills in teachers will reap the benefits. In school settings, as there are more teachers (as followers) than administrators (as leaders), having a positive dynamic is essential for effective successful. Cox, Plagenes, and Sylla (2010) suggested that the leader-follower relationship could be interchangeable. Furthering this notion, Hollander (1992) posited that those who are effective followers have the potential to demonstrate effective leadership capabilities. Ultimately, understanding the types and behaviors of followers can enhance a leaders ability to lead as well help develop those who aspire to be

successful future leaders. Developing collaboration skills is important to enhancing the distributed leadership responsibilities across principals, assistant principals, and teachers within schools and across districts (Crockett, 2007; Seltzer, 2011). Understanding effective followership and nurturing the practices associated with good followership can provide the basis for effective leadership later. This base can set the example to model professionalism and active followership to other teachers (Price, 2008). Developing good leadership, followership and collaboration skills are essential to making the transition to 21st century schools and effective educational leaders.

Figure 2. Adapted from "Professional Collaboration" by Robert G. Simpson, 2007, *Behavior Management: RSED 4010 Course Packet*, p. 67. Copyright 2007 by Auburn University.

Strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Consultation and Collaboration

1) Demonstration of a willingness to share knowledge and expertise.

2) Acknowledgement of colleague's specific field expertise.

3) Acknowledgement of the demands of the each colleague's position.

4) Avoidance of a condescending tone, expression, or body language.

5) Listening actively to what colleagues say.

6) Communicating clearly.

7) Reacting gracefully to differences of opinion.

8) Minimizing personal pride.

9) Being patient

10) Sharing follow-up and problem solving responsibilities.

11) Setting up simple systems to enhance communication between colleagues.

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