

Moving Beyond Leadership and Followership

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Our local safari guide looked me in the eye through the rear view mirror. “We have bad leaders. That’s the problem!” he said gloomily.

We were bouncing about on a small dirt road, heading back to Mombasa after a two-day safari in Tsavo, Kenya’s largest natural park.

I used to live in Kenya as a child. Now I was back to show my own children this beautiful country.

Although it felt like most of my organs were hopelessly entangled somewhere below my ankles, I was happy. This is the Kenya I remembered - rough dirt roads, small clay buildings, and a savannah that seems to go on forever.

In every little village we passed, children came running out to greet us. They waved in anticipation, shouting at us to throw them some candy.

Much has changed since I lived here in the 1980’s. As our guide pointed out, children back then would call out for pencils, not candy.

I guess that’s a sign of improvement. It means more children have access to pencils and notebooks than they did when I lived here. Unfortunately, many people in Kenya still suffer from poverty, and it was this fact that led our guide to make his comment about bad leaders.

FOCUSING ON LEADERS

When people, like our guide, talk about the state of a country (or a company/organization for that matter), leadership is often concluded to be the key factor explaining either development success or failure. Typically, followers are hardly mentioned at all.

The idea that leaders are omnipotent and the key to success, is so widespread that few ever question it. As a consequence, billions of dollars are spent every year on leadership development.

In the US alone, companies spend somewhere between 13.6 to 170 billion dollars annually on developing their “leaders” (depending on who conducted the research and what is defined as ‘leadership development’). Add to that all the revenues from book sales, university courses and membership fees etc., and leadership undoubtedly becomes one of the largest industries in the world.

On the other hand, most people have never heard of “followership” (the art of following a leader) and many couldn’t care less about the people who are supposed to be led.

This attitude strikes me as peculiar. I thought the whole point of leadership development was to get these “non-leaders” to follow. Wouldn’t it therefore make sense to pay them a little more attention?

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ASKING THE UNTHINKABLE QUESTION: ARE LEADERS REALLY IMPORTANT?

The lack of interest in followers and the extreme focus on leaders can only mean one thing – people believe that investing in leaders gives far better results than investing in followers. If that's true, then it makes sense to assume that with all the investments made in leadership development, we should over time see some astonishing results. Particularly in fields such as employer engagement or the public's trust in their government – areas said to be greatly affected by leadership.

In 2011-2012, the internationally renowned public opinion research company, Gallup, conducted a survey of more than 230,000 employees in 142 countries. This survey concluded that 87 percent of workers around the world are either "disengaged" or "actively disengaged" in their work. In America, the number has been more or less stable at 70 - 74 percent since year 2000.

Looking at the Americans' trust in their government, surveys show a continuous decrease in trust. In 1958, 73 percent of Americans trusted their government. In 2013 only 19 percent did.

If leadership is as important as many people believe, and considering the amount of money spent on improving people's leadership skills, why is there so little evidence of its impact?

The answer can partly be found in an interesting fact that is rarely mentioned by experts and leadership gurus, namely: scholars and researchers haven't been able to agree on what differentiates a leader from a non-leader.

If we don't know what a leader is, how do we know that leaders are more important than followers? And what exactly are we spending our money on when investing in leadership development?

These are important questions because they help us reevaluate our obsession with leaders. And it's about time. Albert Einstein is known to have said that "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Focusing on leadership is obviously not giving us the results we want. It's time to move on.

FOCUSING ON THE RIGHT THINGS

So, what's your point, you may ask. Should we focus on followers instead of leaders? No, I don't think so, and here's why:

Imagine that you want to build a house. What will be your main focus? Will you spend 90 percent of your time focusing on getting the perfect tools? Probably not. Instead I'm sure your main focus will be on the end result – the house. The tools are simply there to help you reach your goal.

The same goes for leadership and followership. They are just tools we use to build something I've come to call collaborationship.

To explain collaborationship, a good place to start is to identify the origin of true leadership and followership.

COLLABORATIONSHIP

Modern Man (sic) first appear in Africa about 200,000 years ago. Since then, more than 90% of our history has been spent living as hunters and gatherers in small, so called band societies.

These highly egalitarian societies were made up of no more than 20 – 40 individuals. Contrary to popular beliefs, these societies functioned without chiefs or formal headmen. There was no hierarchy, no one ruled the others. Instead, society was structured around cooperation and any sign of dominance was unacceptable and quickly smothered by the members of the group.

These egalitarian band societies have been called leaderless societies but that's not actually true. There were leaders and followers, but not in the sense we are used to define them.

Today people think of leaders as one or more persons leading others for a specified period of time. They also tend to equate leaders with decision makers, i.e. individuals who have the power to make decisions on behalf of others. For example, if someone talks about leaders in a company, they usually refer to managers not subordinates. If they talk about political leaders they mean political decision makers not voters.

The problem with these two assumptions is that they don't take true followership into consideration. They instead assume that followers are just sheep that need to be guided and controlled. But this is not the case.

Our foraging ancestors had an ingenious way of leading and following without involving dominance and hierarchy. For example, when a group of men decided to hunt, they would begin by discussing their different options. During these discussions, successful hunters would take a more prominent role. They would do so, not by telling the others what to do, but simply by presenting their opinions and experiences. Because they were good hunters, the others would be more likely to listen to their advice. In other words, it was the group that decided who they would follow.

By following a successful hunter, the group would maximize its chances of success. It's this process, in which people who share a common vision or goal unite in order to build synergies, that I call collaborationship.

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"Followers choose their leaders, not the other way around."

LEADERSHIP IS BASED ON A ROLE – NOT A PERSON

Few things are more powerful than strong collaboration. It has made human beings able to travel around the world, fight diseases, overthrow dictators, fly into space, and so on. When a group of people are able to build strong collaboration, few things can stop them.

An important part of building strong collaboration is something I call shifting leadership.

Our foraging ancestors fiercely rejected dominance and hierarchy. Why? Because they knew that having just one person rule the others was less effective than opening up for everyone to share the leader role.

Because different people excel in different areas, our ancestors chose to follow different people at different times.

Even today, people use shifting leadership to maximize success. A simple example is if I decide to lose some weight I might go to a gym and get a personal trainer. I don't hire a taxi driver or a librarian because they wouldn't be able to help me. Of course, if I want to make a difference in society, then I'll join a political party or organization. I don't join a gym.

This may probably seem logical but that's just because shifting leadership and collaboration are part of our natural behavior.

Leadership is the means to an end, not the end itself. Along with followership, it's a tool used to build strong collaboration. So, people are not born either leaders or followers – we have different roles at different times, depending on our particular usefulness at any given time.

THE NEXT STEP

Heading down the dirt road towards Mombasa, passing those small, poor villages, I thought about what our guide had said – that poverty exists because of bad leadership. I don't think it's that simple.

Yes, there are many bad decision makers and leaders in the world, but far more serious is our traditional obsession with leadership.

If we want to eradicate poverty, save the environment or improve human rights etc., then the answer isn't leadership. And although there is much work to be done in improving people's follower skills, our primary focus shouldn't be on followers either. It should be on building strong collaboration.

It's not uncommon that people who are supposed to collaborate towards a common goal or vision will spend more energy and money on power struggles and leadership training than on the actual vision. I'm sure you can think of a few examples where you've seen this occur.

One reason this happens is because of the belief that leadership is about making or manipulating others to obey orders. As a result, if you're not in a decision-making position, then you're the one being dominated. Because people generally don't like to be dominated or controlled, one way out of this dilemma is to become a decision maker yourself.

This, along with all the perks that follow a decision maker role, encourages people to strive for power. As a result, power struggles appear along with an obsession with leadership development. Meanwhile, the very reason a group of people cooperate (or should cooperate) is all but forgotten.

Our ancestors knew that power, hierarchy, dominance and control aren't part of a successful collaboration. They seem to have instinctively understood that to maximize the potential of a group, one needs to maximize the potential of each individual.

Therefore, they chose who and when to follow, a choice they didn't just do once or twice in their lives. They did it every day, in all aspects of society. It was their recipe for success.

If we want to move beyond the old leadership myth, I believe this is a good place to start – by understanding that followers choose their leaders, not the other way around.

As followers we have far more power and responsibility than most of us understand.



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is an accomplished speaker and the author of *Beyond the Leadership Myth: Why we follow leaders and lead followers*. You can read the first chapters of his book at www.collaboration.se. Christian has worked at the UNDP in Serbia, where he led trainings in conflict management for NGOs, amongst other responsibilities. Since his return to Sweden in 2006 Monö has studied the art of followership and its relationship with leadership, while simultaneously testing his theories in practice - both as a subordinate and a manager.