

Why Great Followers Make the Best Leaders

by Chris Musselwhite

We are all followers. While we may prefer to focus on our roles as leaders within our organizations, almost all of us have a role in “following” someone else as well. The irony is that when we lose sight of this, we diminish our leadership effectiveness.

Why? Simply put, the qualities of great followers share much in common with those of great leaders.

With that in mind, it’s never a bad idea to brush up on your followership skills, no matter where on the org chart you sit. Here’s what to do:

1. Be honest

But be sure you do it in a way that doesn’t embarrass or blame. Consider when to share your opinion in public and when to share it in private. Telling the truth in a manner that does not result in a loss of credibility for your boss is likely to increase your influence.

2. Be supportive

Your job is to make your boss and your organization more successful. If your boss has missed something important, you should bring it to his attention or take care of it yourself—and do so *discreetly*, as stated above.

When you take the initiative to be supportive, you win your boss’s trust and boost your chances of gaining access to his inner circle. This, in turn, makes you more visible and more

valuable, and positions you for greater leadership responsibilities yourself.

3. Be reliable

When people can count on you, you become an asset to them, the organization, and to yourself—especially when it comes to handling duties

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outside the confines of your job description. Doing what needs to be done instead of avoiding or ignoring it because it’s not your responsibility shows you understand and work toward the bigger picture—a key characteristic of effective leaders.

4. Always seek the big picture

Working with the big picture firmly in focus not only will help others see you as a leader, but it will also help you be a better follower. When the boss’s actions or decisions appear unreasonable or inappropriate, remember that you may see only part of the picture that she sees. Instead of assuming your boss is wrong, seek

information that will help you put her actions into context. The better you understand the big picture, the better advocate you can be for the things that are important to you.

5. Ask good questions

When you ask constructive questions, you’re helping your boss slow down and reflect on decisions. The key here is to frame your questions thoughtfully. If you make it clear that you are not questioning your boss’s capabilities to make good decisions but, rather, your aim is to help him obtain the best possible outcome, your efforts will be appreciated and rewarded.

By employing this competency as a follower, you are acting as a leader. You are modeling for colleagues and direct reports one of the most effective tools available to any leader: the ability to ask good questions.

6. Be aware of your own assumptions

Being aware of how your own assumptions affect every situation is one of the most important traits of good followers and influential leaders. Instead of assuming you understand your boss’s motives, ask. You may find you are mistaken and learn something significant in the process.

Achieving awareness of your own assumptions or mental models can give you more personal power (and satisfaction) than any combination of the other traits discussed in this article. ♦

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