



Following from the kitchen table

- more us, less you and me

The relationship between leaders and followers is key for their shared success

It's hard to believe only a handful of articles have been written about followership - the intentional practice, on the part of a team member, to enhance the interactions between themselves and their leader. This is extraordinary given the plethora of research and points of view on leadership that we see every day.

An article published by Robert E. Kelley in 1988 suggests that followers shouldn't be viewed as "passive sheep", but rather, an integral part of effective leadership and organisational performance.¹ Kelley observed there was a universal belief that investment in leaders is the key determinant for whether an organisation will succeed or fail. The article raises a key question...how can you be a great follower, so you get the best out of your leader?

1 + 1 = 3 - the formula for good followership (and leadership)

You can imagine Kelley's work caused quite a stir at the time. What's perplexing though, is that views on leadership continue to reinforce a central premise - that leaders matter the most, and followers hardly at all.

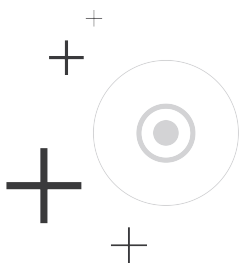
If you Google "effective leadership" you'll be buried under a mountain of search results that describe the various behaviours and traits great leaders 'must' possess. From our experience we know too, that the level of investment in bespoke leadership programs is growing exponentially.

But, have you ever Googled "effective followership"? It returns only a handful of results - a molehill by comparison. Plus the number of organisations designing programs on how to be great followers? Only a handful.

In this exciting yet daunting time of disruption where assumptions are being challenged daily, surely it's time to think differently about the interplay between leaders and followers. By doing this, we can explore the dynamics of the relationship so that we actually get a 1 + 1 = 3 outcome, creating positive ripples across the organisation.

Is the romance of leadership over?

People's bias towards leaders is known as "the romance of leadership".² It describes our tendency to overestimate the amount of influence leaders have on the performance of their teams or organisations. It doesn't matter if they're "the charismatic ones, the retiring ones, or even the crooked ones" (Kellerman, 2007, p. 84),³ we want to know what makes them tick. And, from what we observe in organisations, most of us have a reasonably good understanding of what that is.



Can the same be said for followers? Do we know what separates a great follower from a poor one? What impact would the behaviour of leaders have on different types of followers? How might a follower influence a leader?

And... does it matter that we can't answer these questions? We would argue it does and that's due to a number of factors that we've described below.

To get the payoff the focus has to be on more than just leaders

Despite the huge amount of investment in leadership development, research suggests that between 50 to 90% of interventions fail.⁴ The reasons given vary from programs being too generic, lack of alignment on purpose or that they don't measure the results with enough rigour - and from what we have observed in the market, all are true.

We'd like to suggest another perspective - programs don't deliver their forecast outcomes or impacts because they're *only* about leaders.

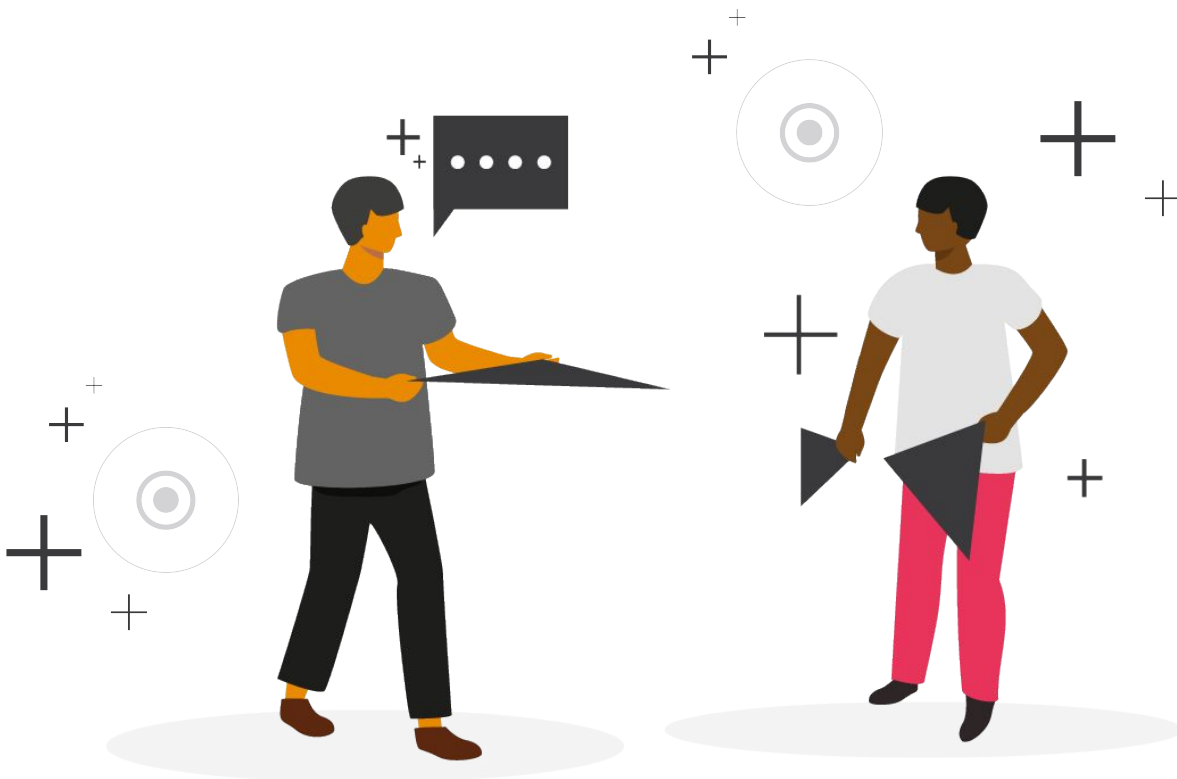
In most efforts to drive organisational improvement, the environment created to support the change needs to be of equal importance, if not greater, than the change itself. The same is also true of growing modern, highly impactful leaders. The 'environment' in which those leaders operate day-to-day, the relationships they have with their followers, are what matters.

Leadership isn't just about one person. It's a dynamic relationship between two people, where one exerts their influence, and the other allows themselves to be influenced.⁵ This interplay happens subtly, unconsciously and leaves those involved with either a positive or negative memory of the experience.

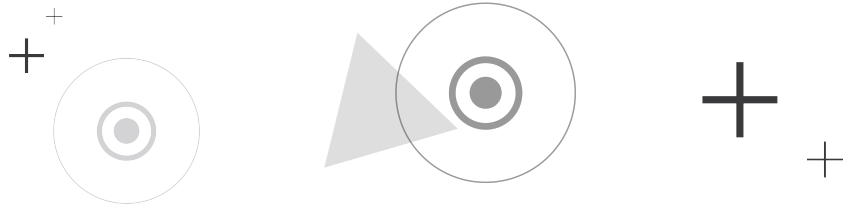
It takes two (to tango)

And, just like the flawless precision between two tango partners, research tells us that the relationship between a leader and a follower works best when it's reciprocal - they each need to put in effort to achieve an outcome that benefits them both.⁶

Let's consider a few examples where this 'to and fro' commonly plays out to highlight the role of the follower.



The relationship between leaders and followers



The mutually beneficial outcome	Role of the leader to help achieve it	Role of the follower to help achieve it	Symptoms when both leader and follower aren't getting what they need from the relationship
Setting clear direction	Provide context as to why the follower needs to head in the specific direction; clearly outline what's expected and what success looks like	Ask the right questions to make sense of what it means for them and to understand what's expected; adopt a positive mindset and be open to new challenges; be prepared to give things a go to see what's possible	The team lacks efficacy, prioritising work that may not contribute to organisational objectives; followers feel confused and could become disengaged; leaders feel frustrated their team is not making adequate progress
Nurturing talent	Make clear and transparent their intentions for nurturing talent; invest time with the follower to understand their career goals; provide growth opportunities for those who show potential and willingness to help develop their capabilities	Value feedback as a way to achieve personal growth; communicate their career aspirations to their leader; seek out opportunities to grow new skills and capabilities	High turnover, as followers seek opportunities outside the team / organisation; team becomes stagnant and performance falls behind other teams who continue to grow; competition and back channelling for opportunities driven by lack of transparency
Clear and timely decision making	Provide context for the decision, open the debate when it's possible to do so; explore with followers the trade-offs between different decision pathways; take an enterprise mindset when evaluating the different options available; be decisive when needed to keep moving forward	Ask questions to understand the implications of choices made for them and the team; put forward their view and once a decision is made, accept it has been made for the greater good and move to implement rather than relitigate the outcomes	Negative impact on performance as rationale for unexpected/unpopular decisions is not provided, or decisions are made too slowly; leaders aren't challenged when it's required, resulting in complacency and suboptimal outcomes; followers undermine decisions they don't understand and are resistant to change; a drop in engagement due to a lack of consultation in decision making
Managing conflict	Ask questions without bias to understand the root cause of the conflict; create opportunities for those involved to come together and share their views; focus on positive resolution; encourage those involved to agree on a way forward	Escalate conflict if unable to resolve themselves; approach any discussion with openness and willingness to listen; offer views in a pragmatic and unemotional way; accept the outcomes and work constructively to move forward, even if it's not the one they sought	The conflict isn't resolved, becoming harmful and negatively impacting the team's ability to be productive and meet their objectives; relationships between leaders and followers sour if it's perceived that someone is being unnecessarily difficult, or if there's favouritism or bias
Allocation of resources to enable strategic implementation	Take an 'enterprise view' to allocate resources to areas where they will create the best outcome for the organisation; actively engage with followers to provide context for decisions; identify opportunities for cross-functional collaboration where possible	Ask questions to understand the implications of different decisions on their workload, what work is involved and their potential career paths; embrace opportunities to work cross-functionally as a way to build their capability	Drop in the team's productivity which subsequently impacts organisational performance if resources aren't allocated to the areas where they're needed; leaders become frustrated if followers act individually to the detriment of the team; followers sabotage projects (e.g. withhold effort) if leaders make decisions to benefit themselves rather than the team



There's a difference between general learning and development and developing followership

Conventional wisdom typically suggests that if you want your team members to be good at what they do, provide them with training in the technical and interpersonal skills to do their jobs - this might even extend to understanding personal leadership. This is generally provided by your organisation's learning and development (L&D) team and has served well up to now.

However, that's not the same as learning how to be a good follower.

Good followers:

- Are engaged and empowered, they understand leaders and how to get the best from them through the actions they [followers] take
- Are visible and relied on because they actively support their leaders and help them [leaders] to be better at what they do
- Show courage and confidence to speak up for themselves and for others, they challenge the status quo and also accept reality when they need to
- Invest time and effort to think critically and form their own opinions
- Show initiative and take the appropriate action for each situation they encounter.³

These skills and behaviours are almost always implied, and are rarely the focus of dedicated development programs - have you ever seen an L&D module designed to teach a follower how to accept and adapt to the hard decisions leaders need to make with a positive mindset?

Post COVID-19, leadership development must embrace followers

We've been hearing it for a few months now - COVID-19 has upended well-intentioned plans for business. The pressure is well and truly on for leaders to adapt to this new normal, and also, prepare for life post the pandemic. They have been [leading from their kitchen tables](#); followers following from theirs, building completely different types of relationships to the ones prior to the disruption - that means the time is ripe for change.

The future of leadership development will entail elements of follower development. And, vice versa, where followership development (*if it exists*) will include aspects of leadership development.

Let's get practical - some no regrets focus areas

Let's go to first principles - leaders and followers should be considered in the same sentence - two sides of the same coin, the yin and the yang - you get the picture. If we accept that premise, there are two areas on which to focus.

The first... *it's a relationship - so build it.*

The relationship between a leader and a follower is dynamic. That is, leadership is not held exclusively by the person with the title. Rather, it resides in the quality of relationship between the leader and the follower. Leaders and followers can trade their functions - from leader to follower and from follower to leader - in different situations to develop their intrapersonal perspectives, foster interpersonal relationships, and maximise mutual effectiveness.⁵

To be mutually effective, it is critical that both people involved develop an understanding of what good leadership looks like (including the necessary skills), and an understanding of what it means to be an effective follower in that relationship.

Action: Encourage your leaders and teams to open up in conversations - create two-way dialogue. Have teams ask their leader what they need from them (the leader) to be successful; what expectations do they have of their leader? And vice versa, encourage your leaders to share what they need from the team, and their expectations. The dynamic will change instantly if these conversations are honest and open.



The second... *understand the difference between the in-group and the out-group.*

Leaders have different relationships with each of their followers. Generally, these relationships can be one of two types: in-group (those who receive more attention and responsibility), and out-group (those who receive less attention and are managed by formal rules and policies).⁷ It's useful to think about them being on opposite ends of a spectrum - relationship quality: low (out-group) to high (in-group).

Research suggests that leaders and followers who have in-group relationships (i.e. high quality) are typically more effective.⁵ They are also more likely to engage in "idiosyncratic deals" (the customisation of a follower's work arrangements to suit their specific needs that otherwise go unmet by the organisation's policies).⁸ Conversely, followers who fall into the out-group do not enjoy these benefits, and their work-life is impacted as a result. Feeling on the 'outside', not being included in conversations, and feeling disengaged are all common outcomes.⁸

The issue intensifies where there's clear differentiation between those who are in the in-group, and those who are in the out-group within a team.⁶ Such situations raise questions about a leader's intentions - deliberately picking favourites has widely talked about implications on team dynamics. Let's assume, for this article, that it's not intentional. The issue then becomes one of self-awareness. If the leader unconsciously creates in-groups and out-groups, they'll experience the negative impact of it without realising they're the architect behind it.

Action: Anyone leading a team can pause and reflect on the types of relationships they have with their followers. They should critically assess how opportunities are distributed in the team; how the people they lead are identified for promotion or recognised for their contributions? This information can even come from followers themselves (when it's practical to do so) by asking how exciting / not exciting the work they've been allocated is; whether they're being provided with the right opportunities to develop their capabilities. All are fruitful ways for leaders to assess who is in their in-group and out-group. The goal here is to actively blur the lines between the two groups - treat each follower with the same level of respect and provide equal opportunities.

Conclusion - it's time to put trust into the whitespace of leader / follower relationships

"Whitespace" describes the fuzzy areas of an organisation's day-to-day operations that fall outside the scope of formal planning and budgeting.⁹

In the leader / follower context, whitespace exists outside the formal role descriptions, workflows and level of authority that typically defines their relationship. It is those everyday, uncertain events that happen in our workplaces, and how they are 'handled' by those involved. This can be hazardous for leaders and followers who are accustomed to clear direction and results akin to the "blackspace" - where all interactions are prescriptive and clearly defined.

Successfully navigating the whitespace requires BOTH the leader and follower to work in tandem - $1 + 1 = 3$. They need to be comfortable sharing their functions, as leader and follower, with one another. The key to this is trust. Earned and given on both sides so that when the unexpected happens, leaders and followers work together to find a solution that's beneficial for them, and the organisation. The absence of trust, and indeed, self-awareness, erodes the quality of their relationship, creating a sense of loss and frustration when decisions leave one or both of them at a disadvantage, and the business no better off.

In the COVID-19 world, hierarchies have been challenged, followers empowered to make decisions remotely as they work from home and leaders investing more in the wellbeing of their teams. These dynamics are ideal for the exploration and nurturing of constructive and healthy leader / follower relationships. This will be critical as the market builds momentum. Your talent will be in demand and leaders will need to reset themselves for the next phase post disruption.

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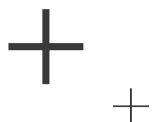
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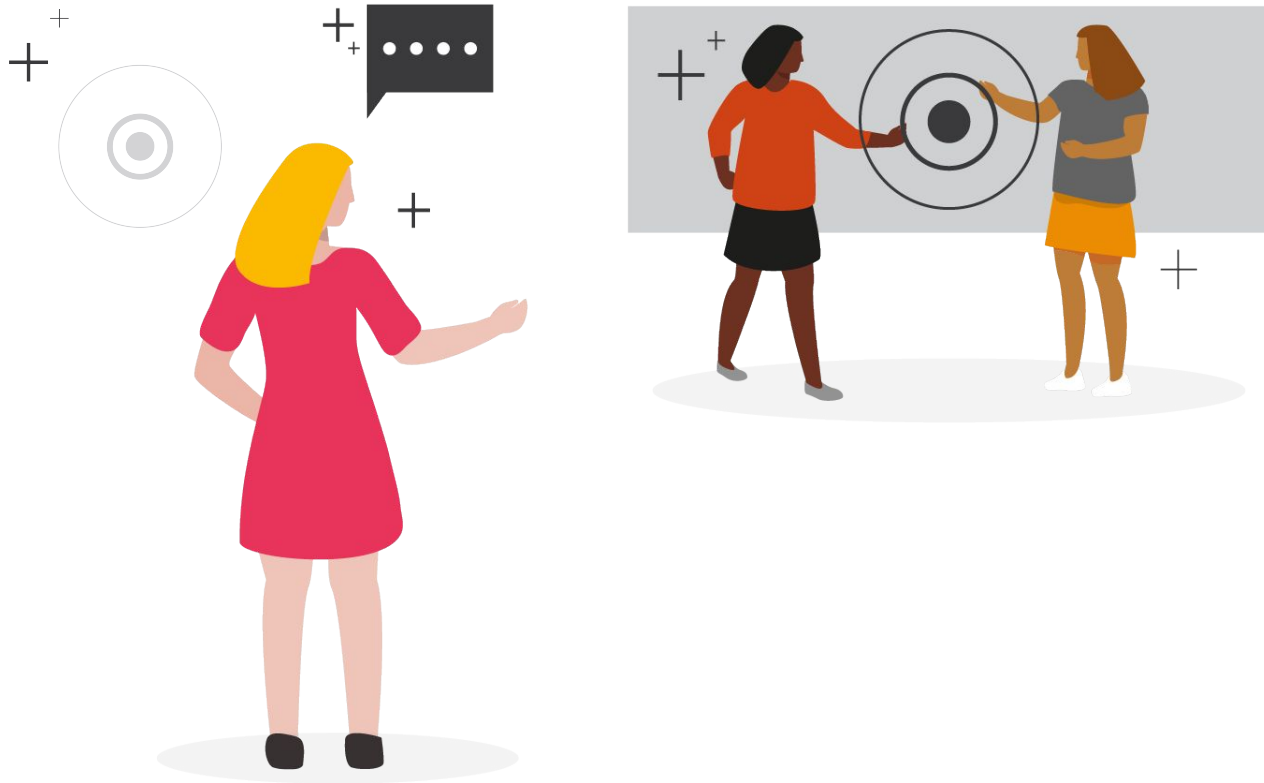
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