

Evolution of Followership Theory
and
Implications for Correctional Workers

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Introduction

Leadership is a term that most individuals are familiar with. As we grow we hear the term in school, during our participation in sports, in our homes, and certainly once we enter the “real world”. From a young age, we are taught that there is value in being a leader, and we are encouraged by those responsible for helping to shape us that we should all strive for the opportunity to participate in leadership roles (Dawkins 1976). Because leadership plays such a significant role in our society there has been a considerable amount of scholarly investigation into the topic of leaders and leadership.

However, there has been less inquiry into the topic of followership. This is interesting given the relational nature of leadership and followership. After all, there can be no leader if there is no follower. Unfortunately, followers have been given little consideration. Shamir (2007) noted that followers have historically been seen as irrelevant, and only important to the extent that their position explained the action and intent of leaders. However, the concept of followership in more recent research is evolving. Theories are beginning to emerge regarding the complexity and motivations of those in follower roles. Followers are now being given credit for being an integral part of the leadership process (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001). In addition, followers are also being recognized for their contributions to the success of their organizations.

For the small amount of available research available regarding the topic of followership, there is no information available regarding the topic followership in corrections. However, there are clearly some implications in how correctional employees work in leader/follower relationships as well as with the offender population.

Leadership

To further investigate the topic of followership some discussion must first be had regarding leadership. Leadership is a universal feature of human societies and affects quality of life in important aspects (Hogan, R., Curphy, and Hogan, 1994). It has been defined in many ways (Stogsdill, 1974). Broadly, it can be determined as influencing individuals to contribute to group goals and then coordinating the pursuit of those goals (Bass, 1990; Hollander, 1992; Yuki, 2006). More pragmatically, leadership is thought of as building a team and guiding it to victory (Hogan, R. et al, 1994). Leadership is both a resource for groups and an attribute of individuals. However, its primary significance typically concerns group performance (Hogan, R. & Kaiser, 2005; Kaiser, Hogan & Craig, 2008).

To examine leadership in practice researchers have developed various leadership theories. Interestingly, those theories often discuss the role of the follower. Of course, researchers did not intend to comment on the role of the follower in these theories – only to discuss the actions and attitudes of the leader based on the follower relationship. However, for the purpose of this investigation it is interesting to note some leadership theories and the role of followership in those theories. Leadership styles such as transactional leadership and transformational leadership have been acknowledged (Burns, 1978 ; Bass, 1985). Transactional leaders view job performance as a series of transactions with subordinates wherein rewards are exchanged for services rendered or punishment for inadequate performance. This type of leader also is more likely to use power that comes from their organizational position and formal authority (Rosener, 1990).

Transformational leadership is described as getting subordinates to transform their self-interest into the interest of the group out of concern for a broader goal. Transformational leaders attribute their power to personal characteristics such as charisma, interpersonal skills, hard work, or personal contacts rather than organizational stature (Rosener, 1990).

Rosener (1990) further defined transformational leadership as “interactive leadership” because those leaders actively work to make their interactions with subordinates positive for everyone involved. Interactive leaders accomplish this by encouraging participation, sharing power and information, and enhancing the self-worth of others. These leaders believe that allowing employees to feel powerful and important is good for both the employee as well as the organization. While Rosener (1990) made a case for interactive leadership being the most effective leadership technique, it was noted the “best” leadership approach depends on the organization.

Hersey and Blanchard (1982) developed an alternative leadership model called situational leadership (1982). This model is characterized by four leadership styles: Telling, Selling, Participating, and Delegating. They indicated that the Telling style should be used in situations in which followers lack the training, confidence, or desire to complete a task. In these situations the theory recommends that task-oriented leadership should be used. Leaders need to direct followers down the right path by giving them detailed directions and monitoring their performance.

Selling is explained as the style to utilize with followers that are confident and willing, but unable to complete tasks. High levels of both task and relationship oriented

behaviors should be used in this situation. Leaders can guide followers by giving followers the chance to ask questions.

Hersey and Blanchard (1982) stated that the Participating style should be used to boost the motivation of followers who have the ability to achieve goals but lack confidence in themselves. Relationship-oriented leadership is appropriate in this case, and leaders should encourage followers to participate in decisions to support their efforts. The last relationship style identified is Delegating. This is recommended as the style to use when followers are able, confident, and motivated. Only low levels of task and relationship oriented behaviors are necessary in this case as these followers are so self-directed. The leader can turn over responsibility to the follower in terms of what to do and how to do it.

Leadership theory generally considers the needs of the follower in determining appropriate approaches to leadership. Leaders that adopt and use only one style of leadership are typically not successful. Therefore, in order to be an effective leader one must identify the type of follower you are serving, and the most useful method to maximize their productivity and achieve the goals of the organization. In addition, many leaders have realized that developing followers' skills is critical to high performance organizations (Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, & Morris, 2006).

Followership

Surprisingly, the topic of followership only began attracting interest within the last 25 years. In fact, when research on the subject began many people had a negative view of followership, and discounted that anything positive could come from the role (Kelley,

1992). This is likely due to the fact that the term “follower” is often linked to negative words such as weak, passive, and conforming (Bjugstad et al, 2006). It was difficult to understand why anyone would agree to subordinate themselves (Dawkins, 1976).

However, researchers have begun to understand the terms of leader and follower as relational rather than absolutes. A follower is defined as an individual with less power, authority and influence than their superiors (Kellerman, 2008). However, while a mid-level manager is a leader to someone outside the managerial ranks, they are also a follower when interacting with a CEO (Cunha, Rego, Clegg, and Neves, 2013). Most individuals are followers in some context. Given that there are substantially more followers than leaders, scholars have begun to argue that successful followers are a requirement for achieving successful group and organizational performance (Kelley, 1992, 2004; Rosenau, 2004; Seterfoff, 2003).

Robert E. Kelley (1992) was among the first researchers to investigate the topic of followership. He is generally recognized as developing four follower types: alienated followers, conformist followers, passive followers, and exemplary followers. Alienated followers are capable of thinking for themselves. However, they have a lot of negative energy. They are often negative about change within their organizations or moving forward. Conformist followers are the “yes people” of the organization. They are very active at doing the organizations work and will follow orders. Passive followers rely on leaders to do their thinking for them. In addition, they require constant direction. Exemplary followers are independent, innovative, and willing to question leadership. Exemplary followers think for themselves, are very active, and have positive energy.

They are further identified as “leaders in disguise”, “right-hand people”, or “go to people”.

In examining these follower styles, Kelley talked with various leaders and asked what the ideal mix of the four follower styles would be within their organizations. Many leaders advised that they would prefer all conformist followers because they are willing to get the job done with minimal fuss. They have limited aspirations and thus will not pressure the leader for promotions or quit for better opportunities, and they are loyal and dependable. Others preferred a mix of all the personality types as they all served various purposes within the organization such as exemplary followers leading the charge, alienated followers keeping the leader honest, and other types to actually accomplish the work. However, very few leaders preferred to have all exemplary followers. They feared that they could not keep the exemplary followers challenged or satisfied. They believed the exemplary followers would grow bored and move on leading to high turnover.

Cunha et al (2013) developed an alternative followership theory. They identified “transcendent followers” as a necessary component in successful organizations. Transcendent followers were defined as, “...those who excel at multiple levels in fruitful relations of self, others, and organization”. It was further explained that transcendent followers that are competent at the level of self are able to self-manage. Kelley (1988) further described the ability to self-manage as “...the ability to think for one-self – to exercise control an independence and to work without close supervision. Good followers are people to whom a leader can safely delegate responsibility, people who anticipate needs at their own level of competence and authority”.

Regarding the domain of others, transcendent followers have the capacity to build and sustain relationships with peers and leaders. Constructive relationships help organizations to create trust and positivity (Cunha, 2009) whereas low-trust relationships create defensiveness (Edmondson, 1999). Organizational environments that are rich in trust are crucially affected by the capacity of peers to manage each other in a positive way (Cunha et al, 2013). Positive and trusting relationships between peers and leaders are also necessary for effective teams (Kets de Vries, 2011).

Transcendent followership also manifests itself at the organizational level. Individuals contributing to the organization express a strong conviction that they are doing a job that needs to be done, may display emotional attachment, and feel strong personal responsibility for their work. Organizational citizens also feel responsible for the organization, go beyond task requirements, and express conscientious initiative in a consistent way (Borman, 2004).

While Cunha et al (2013) recognized that many followers are not capable of being competent in all three areas, transcendent followers manage themselves well, are committed to the organization and to a purpose, principle, or person outside themselves, and demonstrate honesty and credibility through their actions. Unlike some of the leaders involved in Kelley's research, Cunha et al believe that sustainable organizations *demand* transcendent followers.

Additional research has been conducted into conditions that must exist for followers to be highly motivated. Green (2000) discussed three conditions. First, he stated that followers must have confidence that they can do the job that is expected of them. They also need to have trust in their leader. In addition, followers need to feel

satisfaction with outcomes. Congruence of values between leaders and followers was also identified as a factor in increasing follower motivation. (Gardner W., Avolio, B, Luthans, F., May, D., Walumbwa, F., 2005).

Implications for Correctional Workers

As stated earlier, there does not appear to be research available regarding the implications of follower theory in corrections. However, the field of corrections has unique dynamics in terms of leader/follower relationships. There are of course superior/subordinate relationships that exist between employees in all organizations. But more interestingly there are also leader/follower relationships between staff and offenders where the relationship is further complicated by the disproportionate level of power held by the staff.

In the review of literature on followership, there seems to be some question regarding whether it is preferable for organizations to encourage staff to be exemplary or transcendent followers. In the field of corrections, a case can be made that transcendent followers should be preferred. Due to the nature of the work, it is not realistic for supervisors to monitor staff contact with each offender. Therefore, it is imperative that staff are able to manage themselves well, that they promote the agency risk reduction goals, and that they are being honest and ethical in their work.

Applying followership principles to staff and offender relationships is a new and innovative way to approach offender supervision. According to the leadership and followership research we have discussed, offender supervision should be approached based upon specific offender (follower) needs. Whether task-oriented or relationship-

oriented leadership should be utilized is dependent on their capabilities. Also, in order for offenders to feel highly motivated they must feel that they are able to accomplish the tasks in front of them, and trust their leaders.

Conclusion

It is well established that leadership and followership are dependent on one another. While there are various theories on different styles, there are some reoccurring themes. For a leader to be termed as successful, they must demonstrate the ability to motivate productive and effective followers. In addition, for followers to feel empowered, they must perceive that their individual needs are considered. They must also feel included as a valuable member of the leadership process.

Regarding corrections, we must recognize the unique follower role of offenders. Historically, the approach to offender containment and supervision has not been a model that consistently considers offender needs, shares power, or fosters trust. However, if the goal is to successfully transition offenders into the community, then perhaps it is time to re-examine the traditional approach to offender contact. Offenders must feel that their individual needs are relevant, be able to develop some level of trust with correctional staff, and feel that they have the ability to set and achieve goals for themselves. As the field of corrections continues to evolve, the topic of followership may offer interesting insight into best practices for offender management.

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