Leadership Should Be a Team Sport

By Graham Ward, INSEAD

Actions speak louder than titles and every voice holds the power to lead.

Just as there is no yin without yang, there is no leadership without followership. The two interdependent and complementary roles cannot exist without each other.

Followership is the symbiotic interchange between a leader and those they seek to influence. However, the word has long carried connotations of subservience, implying that followers are subordinates – a term derived from the Latin word for “lower order”. This notion is deeply misguided.

Although the concept of followership is often associated with hierarchy, in organisations, the reality is that important things are accomplished through meaningful discussions between groups of people, horizontally. And while it is true that individuals “hold” symbolic positions of authority, for organisations to flourish, the distance between authority figures and those executing important work needs to be greatly reduced.
Indeed, in the best social systems and organisations, where difficult, adaptive work really gets done, leadership is not a fixed or rigid position but rather a fluid and distributed set of activities. This blurring of roles allows for the most suitable individuals or groups to take on leadership responsibilities, especially when they are better equipped to deliver.

**The importance of playing out of position**

The world of business is becoming increasingly complex, driven by geopolitical pressures, technological advances and a generation of knowledge workers with looser ties to organisations. The speed at which decisions are required, and the need to work with incomplete information, piles on more pressure. Leaders and followers are therefore required to collaborate ever more closely to solve these challenges.

The mere fact that we are talking about leaders and followers implies a duality. But in truth, there is none. We have moved to a paradigm where these positions are interchangeable. Leadership and followership are fluid, and those roles should be allocated according to the situation and demands.

Whatever is written on your business card neither defines who you are, nor how you act, or when you lead. Leadership is a team sport and all of us are called upon to do it at different times irrespective of our formal roles.

Take, for example, the case of Margot, a partner at a communications consulting firm overseeing the fossil fuels practice. On an almost daily basis, she meets with industry leaders who are often under fire as the world accelerates towards net zero. She has four junior partners and three directors “under” her, who are tasked to research the sector, attend conferences, develop intellectual property, make pitch presentations and communicate with the media.

Although Margot bears responsibility for the practice, everyone on the team holds a significant role in the delivery. Weekly team meetings are free-form, informal and unchaired. These sessions have minimal structure, and all are invited to contribute. While each person “plays” in their position, Margot
sees herself more as a team captain. The playing field is level, and she describes the meetings as a “democracy of ideas” sourced from those with the clearest insights at any given moment. There are no barriers preventing any team members from temporarily “playing out of position”, such as visiting a client.

While other teams within the firm have more traditional and hierarchical structures, Margot’s team is idiosyncratic, yet is the highest performing. This success can be attributed to the presence of strong yet humble egos. Margot has moved along the leadership developmental spectrum to a point where she finds this style of leadership non-threatening. Moreover, her “followers” feel no hesitation in assuming leadership, given the space that is afforded to them. This in turn nurtures their own growth and development.

Helping followers become leaders

Like Margot, leaders should give their direct reports the opportunity to express themselves, experiment, innovate and feel that they will be supported should things go wrong. It is vital to build psychological safety so that team members feel confident to speak up.

At the same time, team members need to explore avenues to express their thoughts and ideas. They need full support to take risks, build confidence and develop their leadership potential. However, many feel blocked from doing so. Early life experiences and ingrained expectations of authority can foster a high degree of dependency on leaders for instruction and guidance.

Harvard developmental psychologist Robert Kegan explains this phenomenon through “orders of consciousness”. According to his model, around 58 percent of the population resides in the third order, the socialised order, where they are dependent on and seeking or bound to authority. This mindset tends to stifle their voices and drain their energy. They may become aware of the dichotomy between what they believe is right and what they are instructed to do.

Moreover, this construct hampers true innovation and experimentation, often negatively impacting results. These individuals need to find and use their
voice and be courageous in the face of authority. In Kegan's words, they must move to the fourth order – the self-authoring mind – and metaphorically pick up the pen to become the author of their own destiny.

This means listening to the inner voice of integrity, self-dependency and “groundedness”. This is not an easy task and requires an uncomfortable interchange between leader and follower. It can involve asking for forgiveness rather than permission.

The three C’s of stepping into leadership

As John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States, said: “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader”. It is entirely within a follower’s capacity to inspire new thinking, motivate groups to action, coach and develop others and be a source of intellectual stimulation.

Anyone exercising these behaviours will be seen as a leader, irrespective of their hierarchical position. Followers therefore need to act their way into leadership positions, not wait to be appointed. They need to find ways to include themselves, not wait to be included.

1. **Courage**: Gently challenge leaders when you disagree rather than keeping quiet. This does not need to be done publicly; an email or casual conversation over coffee will suffice. Biting your tongue makes you part of the problem and creates internal dissonance, as you are not being true to yourself.

2. **Context**: Suggest ways for the team to do things differently. Try to change the context of how and where team meetings take place. Demote the boardroom table and see if simply sitting in a circle without a physical barrier changes the energy and engagement. One top team that I have interacted extensively with does this religiously. The team is productive, connected and harmonious.
3. **Communication:** Learn the art of skilled communication: challenge with care, solicit other views and use the expression “I am wondering if...” as a preface rather than “I think...”. It is a neat way to introduce an idea without triggering the immediate response of “Well, I think (the opposite)”. 

Every individual should heed this lesson: Never delay taking the lead or resigning yourself to a subordinate role. Engage your system with every fibre, be intentional about what you want to learn and achieve. Stay true to your integrity and speak up when your inner voice demands it. Time is more fleeting than you dare to imagine.

Find article at
https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/leadership-should-be-team-sport

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