

FollowerShip: The Neglected Half of the Leadership Equation (A Conceptual Review of Followership Theory and its Application to Voice, Silence, and Initiative in Corporate Hierarchies)

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ABSTRACT

Leadership research, throughout the vast majority of the last century, has been narrowly concerned with the leaders themselves, neglecting the other half of the equation, the art of following, which is under-examined [1,5]. However, an extensive body of research initiated by the groundbreaking research of Robert Kelley has established that good followers think critically and participate actively, while passive followers are doomed to be complicit in groupthink and organisational failure [1,2]. The current paper reviews the main theoretical concepts of followership theory, namely the followership styles by Kelley, the courageous follower concept by Chaleff, the followership theory by Kellerman based on engagement, and the followership theory by Uhl-Bien et al., and applies them to the problem of traditional corporate hierarchies where lower-level employees seldom dare to challenge their superior managers. Applying knowledge from the literature on organisational silence and employee voice, and taking into account the documented organisational climate of fear that characterised the corporate culture preceding the Volkswagen emissions scandal, this paper demonstrates that many so-called failures of leadership are actually the lack of followership infrastructure, namely psychological safety, training, and reward systems necessary for productive dissent. In the paper's concluding section, there is a set of recommendations to HR as to how to train and reward proactive followers to change the perception of preventing silence in the workplace from being the failure of leaders only to be a shared responsibility of leaders and followers alike. The present literature review as a conceptual paper does not include any original data.

Keywords: Followership, Employee Voice, Organizational Silence, Psychological Safety, Courageous Followership, Leadership Studies, Corporate Hierarchy, HR Training.

Introduction

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the management literature is the fact that the very nature of a process which involves two people has, for decades now, been researched by focusing on only one of the two. Leadership has become an extensive, generously funded and continually growing area of academic inquiry whereas, until recent years, the study of followership or how people follow, and why it can be either good or bad, was largely a neglected afterthought of the entire twentieth century [1,5]. The seminal work of Robert Kelley "In Praise of Followers" published in Harvard Business Review in 1988 is often seen as a first attempt to break this dominance of leadership in organisational management and to argue that success of organisations depends equally on the quality of leaders and followers, and that the skills required for being an effective follower, such as critical thinking, initiative, commitment and courage, are just as important and are not a passive but an acquired quality [1]. This idea later led to the entire body of work called "The Power of Followership", published by the same author in 1992 [2,5].

The current paper will explore the implications of this foundational challenge as they apply to contemporary hierarchical organizations. An extensive body of research highlights the fact that true followers differ from conformists in the sense that they have the ability to think independently and act actively; these are the traits that Kelley differentiated between followers [1,2]. However, in many

corporate settings, particularly in those characterized by a high level of hierarchy and seniority, these traits are systematically discouraged because young employees realize that raising these issues could lead to negative repercussions for themselves [6,9]. This leads to a waste of resources as well as organizational collapse in well-studied cases. What the paper will explore is how this phenomenon can be addressed in a different way by looking at organizational failures as infrastructure failures in the area of followership and not just leadership. This would provide a new angle of approach for HR managers in their work.

Kelley's Followership Styles: Independent Thinking and Active Engagement

The initial structure by Kelley uses two independent variables along which followers could be positioned; the extent to which a follower thinks critically and independently or not and the extent to which he or she is actively engaged in organizational activities or not [1,15]. The combination of these two variables will form five distinct follower types, as shown in Figure 1. Star or exemplary followers think independently and critically as well as actively engage in organizational processes, criticizing and initiating activities simultaneously. Alienated followers, like exemplary followers, think critically and independently but have disengaged themselves, usually due to being ignored or sidelined, and thus criticize from the sidelines without initiating. Conformist followers actively engage in organizational activities, but they do so without thinking critically or independently, as they obey orders without any questions. Sheep, or passive followers, neither think critically nor independently nor are actively engaged in organizational activities, usually due to a developed habit of micromanagement or blame culture. Pragmatist survivors occupy the middle of both variables and adjust their critical thinking and active engagement levels according to what appears safer at the moment [1,15].

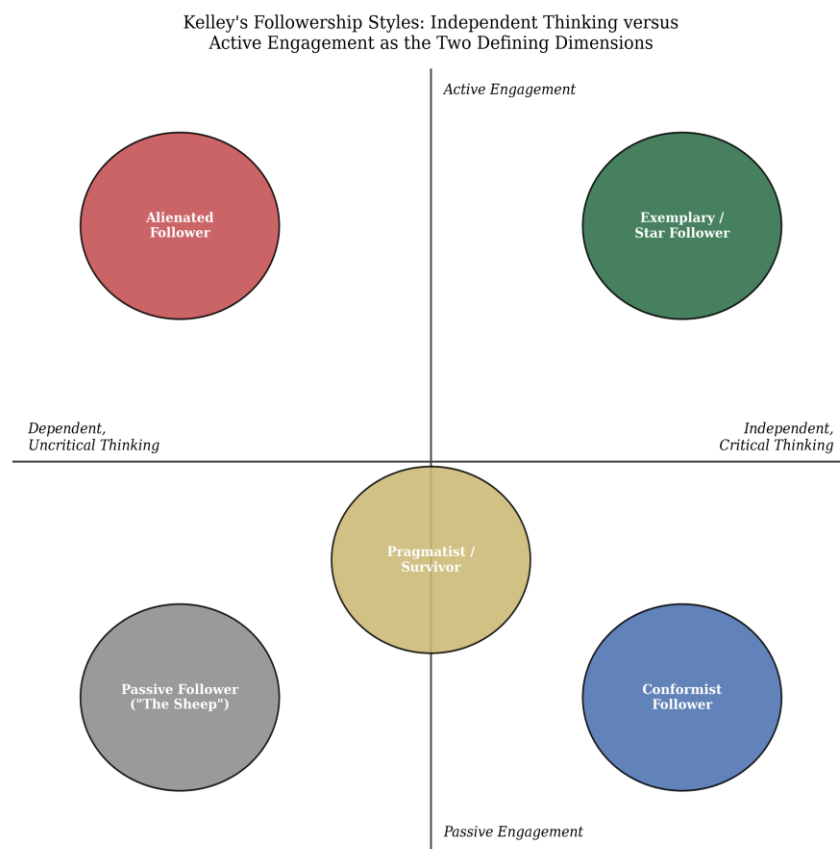


Figure 1: Kelley's followership styles, positioned along the dimensions of independent thinking and active engagement [1,15].

Source: Author's own visualisation, adapted from Kelley (1988, 1992) [1,2].

Practical importance of this typology comes not so much from labeling people as from the analysis of organizational situations. Kelley warned us not to treat followership behavior as a personal characteristic, because one person could be an excellent follower for one leader but an inactive one for another; if the environment encourages or discourages critical thinking of employees [2, 17]. This consideration transforms the challenge for HR managers into the task of creating such organizational conditions, feedback mechanisms, psychological safety, and incentives that allow a much greater number of employees to work within the excellent followers area.

Chaleff's Courageous Follower: Courage as a Followership Competency

While Kelley highlights cognitive style and engagement in his theory, Ira Chaleff's book "The Courageous Follower" highlights the concept of courage itself. This idea suggests that committed followers of an organization, who truly believe in the common goal, have to use their courage to act within the limits of this goal, despite any possible clashes with the leader [3,16]. There are five specific types of courage described by Chaleff and shown on the diagram in Figure 2. They include courage to take responsibility for the behavior and the success of the organization personally and not just wait for someone else's decision; courage to work hard and serve the organization and the leader with quality effort; the courage to challenge leader behaviour or organisational policy that is harmful to the organisation's purpose; courage to take part in changing the organization after the problem has been discovered; and, finally, the courage to take moral action, of which resignation is only one possible expression, alongside options such as principled refusal or whistleblowing, when other avenues have been exhausted [3,16].

Chaleff's Five Dimensions of Courageous Followership,
Radiating from a Shared Commitment to the Common Purpose

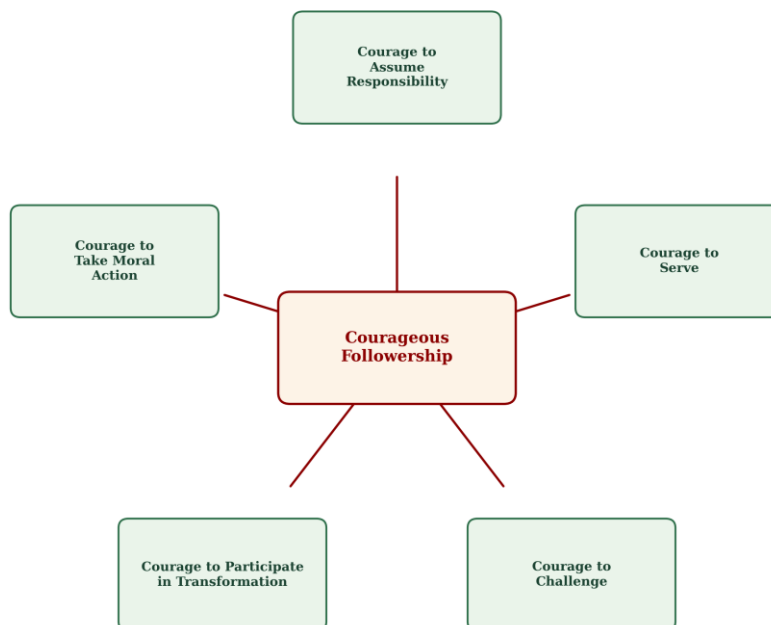


Figure 2: Chaleff's five dimensions of courageous followership, radiating from a shared commitment to organisational purpose [3,16].

Source: Author's own visualisation, adapted from Chaleff (2009) [3].

However, Chaleff's approach becomes especially pertinent when applied to the issue of the traditional corporate hierarchy discussed in this paper, since this approach explicitly takes into account the fact that the act of speaking up needs courage precisely because it is risky; the approach does not presume psychological safety as a pre-existing condition and takes its absence as the exact situation when courageous followership becomes possible and important [3]. It is thus an approach which sees courageous followership as something teachable.

growth [7]. Moreover, in connection with research on employees' voice, the literature suggests that there is research done by Van Dyne and LePine differentiates between voice and helping as proactive behaviour (voice) which aims at challenging the status quo to improve outcomes and cooperative behaviour (helping) which helps to maintain harmony [8]. The study by Detert and Burris of more than two thousand employees and managers of a restaurant chain found that managerial openness was positively correlated with employee voice only via its impact on employee perception of their psychological safety, thus establishing a connection between the concept of team psychological safety developed by Edmondson as a mutual belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risks to be taken [9,10].

The Self-Reinforcing Organizational Silence Loop
(adapted from Morrison & Milliken's model of organizational silence)

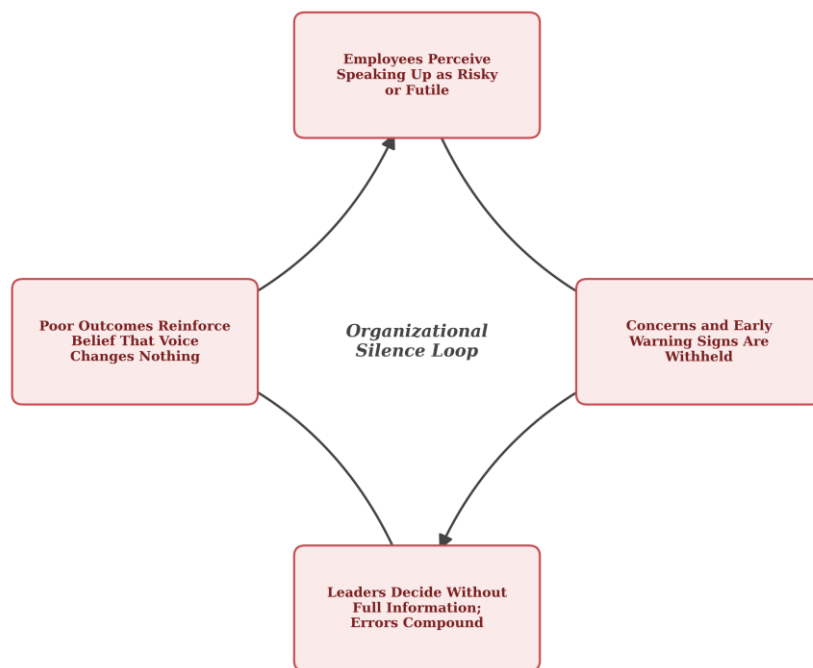


Figure 4: The self-reinforcing organisational silence loop, adapted from Morrison and Milliken's model of organisational silence [6,7].

Source: Author's own visualisation, adapted from Morrison & Milliken (2000) [6].

Figure 4 helps explain why organisational silence, having started, is typically self-reinforcing rather than self-correcting. People who see voicing their concerns as dangerous hold back their warning signs; those in positions of authority who don't receive that input base their decision-making on incomplete data, mistakes are made and bad results follow; yet far from learning that they should have spoken up earlier, employees interpret the negative consequences as proof positive that speaking up wouldn't have mattered anyway – which is precisely what they had believed before they saw for themselves that nothing would come of their voices [6,7]. Interrupting this vicious circle, the organisational silence literature holds, demands a multi-pronged approach, because its persistence is owed to the fact that each phase of the loop feeds into the next [6].

Case Illustration: Silence and the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal

The example of the 2015 Volkswagen scandal, wherein the firm confessed that it had programmed its cars' software to trick diesel emissions tests, is well-known; this case provides a perfect illustration of how an insufficient followership and voice environment can result in a huge corporate crisis for the automotive industry, costing the company over 32 billion euros in fines and vehicle fixes [11,13].

Reports about the scandal have invariably described an excessively centralised, autocratic approach to decision-making, combined with long-lasting leadership and subordinates being scared to voice out their concerns, as described by one industry expert [11]. In his testimony during the 2021 criminal proceedings, a former Volkswagen manager who oversaw the development of the cheating software said that he had reported it to his bosses years prior to the scandal breaking out and was pressured to remain silent on it; part of the reason for the silence on the issue was attributed to a problem-solving corporate culture [12]. Conclusions about the ethics of business in the incident have now become consistent in the same conclusion made throughout the paper, that the problem at Volkswagen was not merely an individual ethical lapse but a systemic absence of followership infrastructure, the psychological safety, training, and channels a courageous and committed follower would have needed to surface a known issue [13].

An HR Framework for Training and Rewarding Proactive Followers

This review leads to the following specific and actionable reframing for HR specialists. Instead of focusing on workplace silences and poor choices as mere problems in leadership which need to be addressed via additional training in leadership skills, companies can view proactive and constructive followership as an equal skill set to be developed, evaluated and rewarded [1,3]. The following four actions can be taken immediately in accordance with the above frameworks. First, followership skills such as constructive challenge, not disengagement, framing issues in the context of organisational purpose, not personal complaint, and timing and channel choice can be actively taught alongside leadership in training programs and budgets dedicated solely to leadership training, thus balancing out the inequity pointed out by Kelley as early as 1988 [1,2]. Second, evaluation criteria can be changed to explicitly recognise constructive voice and interpersonal risk-taking, rather than implicitly rewarding only harmony and compliance, thus correcting the inequity in recognition of helping versus voice behavior pointed out by Van Dyne and LePine [8]. Thirdly, management needs training in the particular openness behaviours identified by Detert and Burris as predictors of voice from subordinates, such as clearly signalling the acceptance of disagreement and reacting to objections without recourse, because psychological safety is created largely through manager reaction, rather than just statements of policy [9,10]. Fourthly, organisations can develop upward communication processes that are formalised and low risk, such as ombudsman roles, rotation of skip-level conversations, or early warning systems that do not rely simply on one individual employee's personal courage [6,7].

Limitations of a Conceptual Approach

The nature of this particular conceptual paper lies in the synthesis of previously researched followership, voice, and organizational silence literature combined with a single case that is widely documented but does not involve any newly collected primary data regarding the performance of followership training programs after their implementation [5]. Most of the previously mentioned followership literature was created before the time when remote work became commonplace, and current literature only began researching followership issues that arise with interactions between subordinates and superiors being conducted not face to face but via video calls and messages [18]. Future empirical research, especially the one that involves comparison of organizations which officially engage in followership training to those who do not in terms of their rate of organizational silence or decision mistakes, would add a lot to this conceptual discussion.

Conclusion

The research on leadership has been focusing on leaders so intensely in its history that the other half of the equation – how individuals follow – has been overlooked for the most part [1,5]. The frameworks discussed in this paper, namely, Kelley's independent thinking style and engagement style, Chaleff's five dimensions of courage, Kellerman's engagement continuum and Uhl-Bien et al.'s more encompassing model of followership all reach the same understanding: effective followership is not only possible but also something that one can learn, practice and make organizationally consequential [1,3,4,5]. Traditional structures in corporations where lower management members are made to feel uncomfortable when raising concerns to higher levels of the hierarchy not only deprive them of a nice-to-have open atmosphere but also create exact preconditions under which certain issues will remain unsaid until they emerge as organizational scandals [6,7,11,13]. For HR professionals, the new approach to the issue discussed in the paper has a very specific implication. Instead of addressing bad workplace decisions as failures in leadership and trying to fix them from above, organizations can teach their employees how to practice proactive followership and thus develop a structural feature that would prevent organizational silence.

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