

Orchestrating Followership: A Comprehensive Analysis of Follower Typologies and Organizational Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This review examines the pivotal role of followership in organizational success, focusing on prominent typologies such as Kelley's follower types and Chaleff's concept of courageous followership. These models provide a foundational understanding of how followers influence leadership effectiveness and team dynamics. Kelley's framework categorizes followers based on their independent thinking and engagement levels, while Chaleff's model emphasizes the active role followers play in both supporting and challenging leaders. By analysing various follower behaviours, this review highlights the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers, where each contributes to the other's success. In addition to synthesizing key typologies, the review identifies gaps in the literature, particularly in understanding the fluid transitions between follower types and how organizational culture impacts follower behaviour. It also addresses the evolving role of followership in modern organizations, influenced by changes in workplace dynamics, technology, and leadership practices. The insights presented call for further research to explore these emerging complexities, expanding the understanding of followership beyond traditional frameworks.

Keywords: followership typologies, leadership effectiveness, follower behaviours, organizational dynamics, Kelley's follower types

INTRODUCTION

Followership can be perceived as the dual concept of leadership, comprising behaviours, attitudes, and actions of those who are involved with and work to assist leaders in accomplishing organizational goals successfully (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2020; Zawawi et al., 2012). While the concept of leadership has been the most discussed in organizational studies for quite a long time, scholarship has recently been giving more importance to followership in shaping effective leadership and fostering successful teams (Lin et al., 2023; Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2020). Followership really stresses the reciprocating nature of the leader-follower relationship: how good leadership can be influenced through effective followership by offering insights, giving support, and providing constructive feedback. This understanding of the dynamics would be important to an organization trying to achieve better collaboration, team dynamics, and overall better performance (Zawawi & Nasurdin, 2016).

Research has indicated that active followers are at the centre of the influences which shape leadership outcomes, and their activities are a core activity of organizational success (Odeh, 2021; Leung et al., 2018; Hollander, 1992). For example, Kelley's follower typologies model (1992) identifies one way in which followers can be differentiated based on their levels of engagement and independent thinking and points out the varying contributions different types of followers make within the creation of effective leadership. The courageous follower idea presented by Chaleff (2009) extends this notion of the active and sometimes challenging roles followers may adopt in support of leaders. By drawing on these and other models, this review aims to shed light on how followers' behaviour influence leadership outcomes and team performance with a view to addressing some critical gaps in the existing literature.

This article is organized as follows: first, an overview of key theories and models of followership; then, an examination of the different typologies and their implications for leadership. It concludes with a description of the directions of future research and practical applications toward the improvement of followership in modern organizational settings.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF FOLLOWERSHIP

For much of its history, the concept of followership has been overshadowed by leadership, particularly in early management theories such as the Great Man Theory and Trait Theory. The Great Man Theory, emerging in the 19th century, proposed that great leaders are born with inherent qualities and extraordinary capabilities that predispose them to leadership roles, implying that such traits are innate rather than developed. Similarly, Trait Theory emphasized that certain personality traits and characteristics, such as intelligence, confidence, and charisma, distinguish effective leaders from non-leaders. Both theories focused on the inherent qualities of leaders, neglecting the role and importance of followers in shaping leadership outcomes and driving organizational success (Riggio, 2016; Northouse, 2022). Followers, within these frameworks, were often perceived as passive, subordinate, and secondary to the leader, leading to their contributions being undervalued and overlooked (Leroy et al., 2012; Price & Vugt, 2014; Armstrong, 2021). However, in the late 20th century, this mindset started to change, largely due to Robert Kelley's influential work in 1988. Kelley's followership model shifted the focus, emphasizing that followers play an active role in the leadership process. He identified five types of followers; exemplary, alienated, passive, conformist, and pragmatist, based on how critically they think and how engaged they are (Einola & Alvesson, 2019; Baird & Benson, 2022; Shipl et al., 2022). Kelley's framework showed that effective followers are proactive, offering feedback and support to leaders, while less effective ones tend to be more passive and need constant guidance (Caamal, 2019; Crippen, 2012). The concept of "courageous followership" suggests that followers should not only provide support to leaders but also have the courage to challenge them when appropriate (Chaleff, 1995). This approach encourages a more balanced, dynamic relationship, where followers are empowered to contribute to organizational success through constructive feedback or even resisting harmful directions (Cunha et al., 2013; Fuller et al., 2015). This new perspective breaks away from the traditional view of followers as passive, instead positioning them as active participants in the leadership process (Velez & Neves, 2022; Cruickshank, 2017).

The study of leadership has historically dominated organizational discourse, overshadowing the concept of followership. Early management theories, such as the Great Man Theory and Trait Theory, posited that leaders were born with inherent qualities that distinguished them from others, thereby attributing organizational success solely to their characteristics and actions. This perspective marginalized the role of followers, portraying them as passive and subordinate, which limited the understanding of organizational dynamics (Skidmore, 2006; Blanchard et al., 2009). However, the late 20th century and early 21st century witnessed a shift in this narrative, as scholars began to recognize the interdependence between leaders and followers. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) emphasized that one cannot fully understand leadership without considering the active role of followers (Benson et al., 2015). This recognition has led to an integrative approach in research, where both leadership and followership are seen as mutually influential in the quest for organizational success. Current studies have expanded followership research to explore its implications for team dynamics, decision-making, and organizational culture, reinforcing the idea that effective leadership is contingent upon how followers engage with and influence the leadership process (Honan et al., 2023; Baird & Benson, 2022).

Moreover, the evolving understanding of followership has positioned it as a critical component of leadership studies. It is increasingly acknowledged that the effectiveness of leadership is not solely determined by the traits or actions of leaders but also by the engagement and contributions of followers. This evolution continues to shape both academic and practical landscapes, highlighting the importance of fostering environments that encourage proactive followership and recognizing the value of followers as essential partners in leadership (Adams & Gibson, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of followership has gained significant traction in recent decades, particularly as scholars recognize its integral role in the leadership process. Historically, the focus on leadership has overshadowed followership, with early management theories such as the Great Man Theory and Trait Theory attributing organizational success solely to leaders, thereby marginalizing the contributions of followers (Dinh et al., 2014). However, contemporary research emphasizes that understanding leadership requires acknowledging the active role of followers, as highlighted by Dulebohn et al. (2011), who argue for a more integrated approach to organizational dynamics where both leaders and followers influence each other (Baird & Benson, 2022). This shift in perspective reflects a growing recognition that effective leadership is not solely about the traits or actions of leaders but also about how followers engage with and influence the leadership process (Hsieh & Wang, 2015). Recent studies have extended followership research into various organizational settings, examining its implications for team dynamics, decision-making, and organizational culture (Guo et al., 2021; Odeh, 2021; Honan et al., 2023). This evolution underscores the importance of recognizing followers as active participants in achieving organizational goals (Grijalva et al., 2014). For instance, effective followership is crucial for reducing team conflict and facilitating positive interpersonal dynamics, further emphasizing the need to view followers as integral to the leadership process (Baird & Benson, 2022). Understanding the diversity of follower motivations and behaviour allows leaders to adopt tailored approaches that meet the distinct needs of different follower groups, enhancing communication, building trust, and fostering cooperation, ultimately leading to improved organizational performance (Bakar & Omillion-Hodges, 2019).

Positioning followers as active agents in the leadership process is essential for achieving high levels of organizational performance. Followership encompasses behaviours and processes through which individuals engage with leaders to accomplish organizational goals, highlighting its potential significance in enhancing organizational effectiveness (Hinrichs et al., 2012). The quality of follower involvement directly impacts team performance, innovation, and overall organizational culture (Yuan & Wang, 2017). Chaleff's assertion that effective followers think critically about leadership and contribute input to enhance decision-making supports the view that followership is a vital component of a continuous improvement culture (Almeida et al., 2021). Recognizing this diversity allows leaders to adapt strategies that leverage followers' strengths, maximizing productivity and fostering an enabling organizational environment (Shi, 2023). Ultimately, followership typologies are crucial for building resilient and adaptable teams capable of achieving organizational goals, reinforcing the need for leaders to embrace the complexity of followership to enhance overall performance (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010).

Follower typologies are useful for enhancing both team dynamics and effectiveness within organizations. By understanding these typologies, leaders can employ various forms of leadership styles and initiatives to meet the diverse needs and motivations of their followers, thereby encouraging collaboration, creativity, and productivity among them (Emirza & Katrinli, 2022). For instance, active followers tend to be highly participatory and enthusiastic, contributing significantly to innovation and problem-solving within team parameters (Giessner et al., 2015). Conversely, disengaged followers, such as bystanders or isolates, can impede team progress and morale. This understanding enables leaders to strategically align tasks, responsibilities, and modes of communication to maximize each team member's strengths while minimizing weaknesses (Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Such nuanced comprehension not only facilitates an inclusive and participatory team culture but also shapes overall team performance, where members feel valued and understood in their roles.

The concept of leadership as a dyadic relationship posits that leadership effectiveness is not solely dependent on the leader's power but also on the reciprocal influence between leaders and followers (Ansong et al., 2022). This interplay is central to the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which underscores the significance of cultivating high-quality interactions between leaders and their followers (Hong et al., 2013). According to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991) and Hoedemakers et al. (2023), in-group members are those who enjoy a close relationship with the leader. They experience greater job satisfaction and are more likely to exhibit enhanced levels of performance. This reciprocal influence creates a dynamic where followers not only respond to leaders but also contribute to shaping leadership effectiveness through their engagement, feedback, and support. This shift from a leader-centric perspective to one that recognizes the active role of followers allows for a more nuanced understanding of organizational dynamics, highlighting that effective leadership is fundamentally a collaborative endeavor (Kandade et al., 2021).

Follower Typologies and Their Impact on Organizational Success

Kelley's follower typology, first introduced in 1992, categorizes followers based on their levels of critical thinking and active engagement. This model offers insights into how different follower behaviours impact organizational effectiveness, highlighting that followers with high engagement and critical thinking skills contribute significantly to positive workplace outcomes (Leung et al., 2018; Ligon et al., 2019; Ribbat et al., 2023). Exemplary followers, characterized by their independence, proactivity, and high engagement, are particularly desirable within organizations. They contribute significantly to team success and often emerge as informal leaders, driving innovation and performance (Ribbat, 2023). In contrast, passive or conformist followers can hinder organizational progress due to their lack of initiative and critical thinking, leading to stagnation and reduced innovation (Notgrass, 2014). This distinction highlights the importance of understanding follower typologies for optimizing team dynamics and achieving strategic goals.

Chaleff's classification of followers further emphasizes the degree of support provided to leaders, identifying four types: implementers, individualists, resourceful followers, and partners. Among these, partners are particularly effective as they engage in constructive dialogue and provide intelligent challenges that promote critical thought and innovation (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Conversely, implementers and resourceful followers may exhibit excessive compliance, potentially stifling creativity and independent thinking within the team (Armstrong, 2021). Recognizing these diverse behaviours allows leaders to adapt their styles to foster environments that enhance both individual and team potential, ultimately leading to improved organizational outcomes (Bolden, 2011).

The positioning of followers on a continuum based on personality traits and levels of engagement provides a nuanced understanding of their roles within organizations (Zawawi et al., 2012). At one end of the spectrum are alienated followers, who are self-centred and often disengaged from team activities, making them unlikely to contribute positively to team success. Moving along the continuum, passive followers, while active in their roles, lack independent thinking and tend to follow orders without question. On the opposite end are pragmatic and exemplary followers, who are proactive, engaged, and significantly contribute to team performance (Alanazi et al., 2023). This integrated framework allows leaders to tailor their strategies to different follower types, enhancing team dynamics and overall organizational performance (Tanoff & Barlow, 2002).

The dynamics of followership are shaped by the intricate interactions between leaders and followers, significantly influencing organizational outcomes. These interactions are characterized by a reciprocal relationship where followers' behaviours and attitudes can affect leaders' effectiveness (Tooms, 2007). Context plays a crucial role in shaping these followership behaviours; factors such as organizational structure, team composition, and situational demands dictate how followers engage with leaders and each other (Caamal, 2019). Furthermore, organizational culture profoundly impacts followership dynamics, as norms and values within an organization can either empower or constrain followers' roles (Witkowski & Ikegami, 2016). For instance, a culture that promotes innovation and autonomy may encourage proactive followership, while a more hierarchical culture may yield compliance and passivity among followers (Ribbat, 2023). Over time, the roles of followers have evolved from being viewed as passive subordinates to being recognized as active

contributors to organizational success (Notgrass, 2014). This shift reflects a broader understanding that effective followership is integral to leadership, emphasizing the importance of collaborative relationships in achieving shared goals (Ho et al., 2022). Consequently, a comprehensive analysis of these dynamics is essential for organizations seeking to enhance their leadership strategies and overall effectiveness (Learmonth & Morrell, 2016).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF FOLLOWERSHIP

The theoretical frameworks surrounding followership have made significant strides over the years, offering profound insights into the behaviours and roles that followers play within organizations. A foundational model in this area is Robert Kelley's Followership Model (1988). This model classifies followers into five distinct types: exemplary, alienated, passive, conformist, and pragmatist. It's built on two pivotal dimensions: independent critical thinking and active engagement. This framework highlights a spectrum of follower behaviour, ranging from passive and dependent individuals to highly engaged and proactive contributors (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). Exemplary followers, who demonstrate high levels of both critical thinking and engagement, are particularly crucial for organizational success. They meaningfully contribute by challenging leaders when necessary and offering innovative ideas (Almeida et al., 2023). In contrast, passive followers often follow directives without question, which can stifle innovation and hinder organizational progress (Blanchard et al., 2009). This typology underscores the need to cultivate a balanced workforce that encourages both follower engagement and independent thought (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

Building on Kelley's foundational work, Ira Chaleff introduced the Courageous Followership Model in 1995, redefining followers as active partners in the leadership process. Chaleff emphasizes that effective followers should not only support their leaders but also possess the courage to challenge them when necessary (Almeida et al., 2023). This model advocates for ethical responsibilities among followers, promoting a reciprocal relationship where followers actively engage in decision-making and provide constructive feedback. By positioning followers as equal contributors to leadership success, Chaleff encourages a partnership mentality, rather than a strictly hierarchical view (Gruda et al., 2022). Courageous followers recognize the importance of speaking up when leadership actions may negatively affect the organization, thereby ensuring accountability and fostering ethical decision-making processes (Bjugstad et al., 2006).

Ricketts' Follower Typology (2009) refines the classification of followers by focusing on their attitudes and contributions. Unlike Kelley's and Chaleff's models, which center on behaviour and responsibility, Ricketts places greater emphasis on how followers perceive their leaders and the organization (Deale et al., 2016). This typology suggests that understanding these attitudes is essential for maximizing organizational effectiveness, as followers' perceptions significantly influence their contributions to the team. Engaged and optimistic followers tend to foster positive team dynamics and drive innovation, whereas disengaged followers may impede progress (Armstrong, 2021). By classifying followers based on their attitudes, Ricketts' model allows leaders to better identify and leverage the strengths of diverse follower types, ultimately enhancing team dynamics and organizational performance (Chung & Chung, 2021).

While these frameworks provide valuable insights into the complexities of followership, each has its limitations. Kelley's model, though influential, offers a broad categorization of follower types but lacks depth regarding how individuals transition between these categories over time or in different contexts (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). This limitation is particularly relevant in dynamic organizational environments, where follower behaviours can shift based on situational factors, such as leadership style or organizational culture. Chaleff's model, while promoting a more active and ethical role for followers, may not fully account for the constraints they face in highly hierarchical or rigid structures, where challenging leadership can carry significant risks (Caamal, 2019). Similarly, Ricketts' model, while useful for understanding attitudes, may oversimplify followership by focusing primarily on static traits rather than the adaptability of followers across various organizational settings (Crippen, 2012).

Integrating these models suggests a more holistic approach, the one that considers the interplay between organizational culture, situational factors, and individual follower traits which could provide a deeper

understanding of followership (Yeo, 2023). Leaders who grasp these various follower typologies can better harness their teams' strengths by fostering environments that promote critical thinking, engagement, and adaptability. Recognizing followers as active participants, rather than passive actors, allows leadership strategies to evolve toward more collaborative and adaptive approaches (Kusumowardhani, 2023). By embracing the complexity of followership, leaders can enhance organizational effectiveness, stimulate innovation, and cultivate sustainable leadership practices that are responsive to the dynamics of both leaders and followers (Javaid et al., 2023).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of followership has come a long way, shifting from a narrow focus on subordinates to recognizing the vital role that followers play in shaping organizational dynamics. Historically, leadership studies overshadowed the concept of followership, concentrating mainly on the traits and behaviours of leaders. However, recent research highlights the crucial nature of effective followership in achieving organizational success. This shift emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers, where the actions of followers can significantly influence leaders' effectiveness and vice versa (Bjugstad et al., 2006). Despite this progress, there are still gaps in our understanding of the complexities of followership across different contexts. Future studies should delve into how cultural, technological, and situational factors impact follower behaviour. For example, exploring how digital communication technologies change leader-follower interactions, especially in remote and hybrid work environments, is essential.

The rising interest in followership also calls for an examination of its role in diverse cultural settings, where varying norms and values can influence follower behaviours and perceptions of leadership (Caza et al., 2021). Furthermore, the intersection of emotional intelligence, resilience, and employee well-being with followership offers additional insights into how followers contribute to organizational success. To advance the study of followership, adopting interdisciplinary approaches is vital. By merging insights from psychology, sociology, and organizational behaviour, we can deepen our understanding of how followers engage with leaders and teams. Applying psychological theories of motivation and group dynamics can enhance theoretical frameworks around followership while also informing practical strategies for nurturing effective leadership-followership relationships.

Organizations looking to boost followership should implement training and development programs aimed at empowering followers to take initiative, think critically, and contribute meaningfully. Acknowledging and fostering effective followership can cultivate a collaborative environment that encourages innovation and adaptability, ultimately driving organizational success. Leaders who value followership create inclusive atmospheres that promote proactive engagement, allowing followers to play a meaningful role in achieving organizational goals. Training programs focused on critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills can equip followers to navigate challenges effectively, fostering a culture of accountability and shared leadership. By investing in a strong training and knowledge culture, organizations can lay the groundwork for long-term success.

CONCLUSION

The complex interplay between leaders and followers is essential for organizational success. Leaders do not operate in isolation; their effectiveness is significantly influenced by the characteristics and behaviours of their followers. Understanding the diverse types of followers and their effects on leadership dynamics is critical for developing effective leadership strategies. By recognizing and cultivating the strengths of various follower types, leaders can create a more dynamic and successful organizational environment where each individual's unique contributions are valued and leveraged for collective success. As our understanding of followership evolves, it becomes increasingly clear that effective followership is crucial for achieving strategic goals, enhancing overall team performance, and fostering a culture of accountability and innovation. Future research should focus on interdisciplinary approaches that explore followership in various contexts, including the impact of technology on follower behaviour in diverse work environments. Researchers should develop

practical frameworks for integrating followership training into leadership programs and explore strategies for enhancing follower engagement and adaptability to improve overall organizational effectiveness.

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