

# Followership

## It's Personal, Too

by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones

**T**HE ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE bear lucid testimony to the fact that leadership has endured as *the* burning issue for all kinds of organizations—and for executives themselves as they grapple to define their personal successes (or lack thereof) in business. But to be adequately understood, leadership must be seen for what it is: part of a duality or a relationship. There can be no leaders without followers.

So let's end this compendium by looking at this incendiary topic through the follower's eyes. We're lucky; the sociological and psychological literature on the follower's experience is rich indeed. It tells us that people seek, admire, and respect—that is, they follow—leaders who produce within them three emotional responses.

The first is a feeling of significance. Followers will give their hearts and souls to authority figures who say, "You really matter," no matter how small the followers' contributions may be. This dynamic, of course, comes from the human drive to be valued. We yearn to not live and die in vain. When leaders, then, herald the significance of an individual's work, they are rewarded with loyalty, even obedience. They have given mean-

ing to a follower's life, and as a basis for a relationship, that is not just sturdy; it is as solid as cement.

The second emotional response followers want from their leaders is a feeling of community. Now there's a messy concept—community. The library is filled




with books trying to define it. But for our purposes, let's say community occurs when people feel a unity of purpose around work and, simultaneously, a willingness to relate to one another as human beings. It is the rare business executive who can create such an environment. But you can be sure that when a feeling of community is successfully engineered, it is so deeply gratifying that followers will call the person who created it their leader.

Finally, followers will tell you that a leader is nearby when they get a buzzing feeling. People want excitement, challenge, and edge in their lives. It makes them feel engaged in the world. And so, despite all the literature that tells you a leader needn't be charismatic, followers will sooner feel leadership from someone who is extroverted and energetic than from someone who isn't. Right or wrong, that's how followers feel.

Some traditional theories of leadership portray the follower as an empty vessel waiting to be led, or even transformed, by the leader. Other theories suggest that followers require nurturing and need to be persuaded to give of themselves. But these theories would have us believe that followers are

passive. Yes, followership implies commitment, but never without conditions. The follower wants the leader to create feelings of significance, community, and excitement—or the deal is off.

After all, to the follower, as much as it is to the person who stands above him in the organizational hierarchy, leadership is entirely personal. 

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