TAKING LEADERSHIP (A LITTLE LESS) PERSONALLY

IT’S NOT ALL ABOUT THE LEADER!

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W
hat makes a leader effective? This simple question has been long considered by many leaders in terms of the leader, in that we end up ‘romanticising’ the notion of leadership. We put the leader on a pedestal, exalting and admiring them when things go well, and quickly knock them off their lofty perches when they stumble. Focusing on leaders alone only tells one half of the story.

While it is easy to point fingers at leaders, in reality, leaders operate in complex, dynamic systems that also involve non-leader individuals. Leaders grapple with systems that work against them, cultures that stifle their effectiveness, and conflicts with individuals who do not necessarily agree with them.

The last point is especially important. Leaders would not be able to accomplish as much, or fail as miserably, as they would in their endeavours if there were no followers. As much as leaders shape followers, in turn, followers shape leadership outcomes and their leader’s effectiveness. Leaders need followers. Leadership requires followership.

LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP

Effective leadership drives organisational success but, at the same time, leaders could also be blamed for failures and crises. From the successful turnaround of Apple’s fortunes by the mercurial Steve Jobs in 1997, to the scandal-plagued leadership of Dilma Rousseff that threatened to disrupt Brazil’s hosting of the Rio 2016 Olympics, we heavily attribute organisational successes and failures to leaders. We judge leaders first, and scrutinise the organisation’s policies and procedures, culture, and team processes later, if ever.

There is a problem, however, in seeing leadership solely in terms of the leader, in that we end up ‘romanticising’ the notion of leadership. We put the leader on a pedestal, exalting and admiring them when things go well, and quickly knock them off their lofty perches when they stumble. Focusing on leaders alone only tells one half of the story.

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Leaders lead direct. Followers follow and obey. But this is not always true. In reality, followers react, respond to, and even act against leaders and their influence.

Consider the many accounts where followers have acted to shape the history of nations – the socio-political upheaval brought upon by the French Revolution, democratic uprisings in the Middle East, the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong and our very own Bersih rallies, to name a few.

Clearly, individuals experiencing the effects of leadership do respond to what they perceive as ineffective leadership. Followers are the crucial other half of the leadership influence process. Followers are at the very heart of what makes leadership so challenging.

Systems, structures and policies are, by comparison, more easily changed than the reluctant and resistant hearts of men.

Granted, not every follower is an effective one. Some are indeed compliant and subservient.

But this is to have followers, in particular, who help amplify a leader’s effectiveness. Effective followers are those who complement the leader, collaborating with them in their leadership journey to achieve organisational goals. Put simply, the kind of followers implied by the term ‘follow, the individuals who are just there to be led – are not effective followers.

Effective leadership demands a level of dynamism in its followers not found in passive, subservient, yes people.

TYPES OF FOLLOWERS

One classic typology of followers suggested by Robert Kelley shows the following types of followers:

Sheep

Passive, dependent and uncritical of the leader. These followers comply with the leader’s directions to the letter, but often require external motivators in order to perform their duties.

Yes people

Active followers, who are dependent on the leader’s approval and orders. Unlike sheep, yes people don’t quite need as much external motivation to comply with their leaders – they are simply keen to please leaders.

Yes people are unlikely to challenge their leader, reluctant to disrupt the status quo and often try to avoid being seen as opposing the leader’s ideals.

Alienated

Passive followers who are noneonsense, independent, critical thinkers. Alienated followers are often cynical towards leaders and their influence attempts.

They are not usually motivated to contribute towards the leader’s endeavours.

EMPowered AND EFFECTive

Active followers feel empowered by their leaders. They are also independent, critical thinkers who are confident enough to challenge their leader’s decisions when necessary or appropriate.

Empowered followers do not oppose leaders for the sake of provoking disharmony, but rather do so in the interest of the collective good.

But wait! The article’s not finished here; the rest of Eugene’s thoughts and advice are waiting for you over at bit.ly/leadersandfollowers

LEADERonomics is growing! As we begin the next phase of our journey, we’re looking for awesome people who have the same hunger as we do.

At Leaderonomics, we make it our mission to grow each employee into leaders. Much more than just being an award-winning place to work and offering career growth opportunities for our people, we love sending our employees overseas to continue their development journey as well.

In the last few months, we’ve sent Leaderonomics to attend the European School of Management and Technology (ESMT) in Berlin, Germany; the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Switzerland and to visit the start-up bubble of Silicon Valley in the US.

We push our employees to learn to be leaders. Much more than just being an ‘office worker’ or ‘salesperson’, our organisational needs, kindly email at training@leaderonomics.com

Leaderonomics on Twitter and Instagram. We put leaders on a pedestal, and fuzzy place to work (although...)

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