

A Proud Follower's Ambition

Introduction

I can easily imagine that for some readers, the title of this article is riddled with contradictions. Myths and false beliefs abound. It is wrongly thought that only leadership is honorable, and that following is for second class citizens. Or that each of us must be a leader in order to proudly express our ambition. These lines of wrongful thinking could be multiplied.

In my line of work as The Consiglieri, I serve companies by way of the top leader in charge. I have made a proud career of being not only without formal power of any sort, but also as the true follower of each leader who hires me – whom I happily embrace as my ‘Don,’ the traditional Italian title for the head of a family. And family is without question, the greatest inspiration for business excellence.

As a seasoned and well scarred veteran follower, I know what it is to embrace my leader's vision and give my all to aiding its realization. In addition to leaders, I have coached countless followers over the decades, and every idea here has been forged in the real world of teams where leaders lead, followers follow, and all must join forces together to create fulfilling outcomes or suffer defeat.

There are five primary aspects of great followership we will consider: **Dedication, Support, Mission Performance, Friendship and Reward**. We then wrap up with a bit of general guidance and a link to your **Followership Self-Assessment**. By way of sequence, please feel free to take the assessment right now, or later, at your pleasure.

Dedication

There is no test that can measure or predict this virtue in an employee during the hiring process. Yet, his follower's dedication is the single most important trait a leader must seek. By the way, if during a job interview you have the chance to highlight this virtue about yourself, be bold

and aggressive in doing so. What elicits and builds your dedication to your leaders? What stories of dedication can you share? Be sure to include accounts of both the sacrifices you made and the victories that resulted.

Part of the phenomenal magic of this virtue is that it converts weakness into strength, while making strength productive and at higher levels than would be possible otherwise. Facing a weakness, if dedication to learning from failure is present, the weakness will soon become a strength. Facing a capability, when dedication is too weak there will be no value derived.

The absence of dedication – unless corrected – is a guaranteed harbinger of failure. Conversely, while its presence cannot guarantee success, it comes about as close as anything can.

Support

As a dedicated follower, your highest objectives are to support the team effort, the mission outcomes established by leadership, the needs of leadership itself, and perhaps most important...YOURSELF! A follower competent at supporting himself and his own performance individually, is an irreplaceable treasure. One also competent at procuring support of the organization or other members of the team, is even more so.

Yes, wise leadership views its opportunity to support followers as the highest calling possible. And, requesting the support you need from your leaders is an urgently critical strength to build. But, when leadership observes a follower competent at defining and procuring support without dependency upon the leader, well, such a follower is assured real recognition in the leader's beating heart of gratitude.

When we think of support, though, it is predominantly focused on serving other team members, and serving leadership's needs. Let's look at those two, in that order.

The most valuable support requires that you intelligently observe and judge others' strengths, weaknesses, needs and desires. You cannot best serve someone whose motivation you do not understand. One of the great places of service, amongst team members, is by way of information. What information does another team member need, but not have? Sure, there are databases and

all sorts of other resources – even training modules, etc. – designed to address this need. But, be assured, giving team members the information they require for performance is a high value contribution, virtually certain to build your reputation and ensure the team’s highest possible performance.

The famous term “managing up” speaks to the great need to serve and support leadership itself. The power of anticipation cannot be overstated. What does leadership need? When does it need it? If you know the answers, and deliver, you will be living up to the high mandate of followership excellence.

Personally, some of my favorite moments are when I’ve intuited my Don’s need and write up a mini-guide to getting it fulfilled in the form of an unexpected email. If I get the timing right, the value quotient my Don takes from our work together absolutely explodes. This is never a bad thing!

Mission Performance

Don’t be too surprised that this comes third, although I admit I did not anticipate its rank before I completed my analysis. The reason is that no one follower’s performance can ever dictate the totality of mission outcomes or address the opportunity and obligation that leadership faces. It is always the case that a follower’s dedication and support mean more than his performance, no matter how great that performance may be, or how important.

Perhaps the best way to understand this is by the nature of the mission itself, whatever it may be. There is no such thing as a mission-free situation. No, most of us don’t do the work to clearly define our missions. We don’t note, at least not nearly often enough, their beginning, middle, end, value and relationship to the health – the ‘constitution’ if you will and to use an old word – of the organization.

A powerful, simple definition of a mission, is that outcome which, compared to all other current outcomes, tops the list of those which must succeed. What will you sacrifice for the mission, and why? When you have a properly defined mission, it tops the list of that which **MUST NOT** and **WILL**

NOT be sacrificed. There is no such thing as a second, highest-possible priority.

This is another way of arriving at the principle of focus. Until you know what the most important thing is, you do NOT know where to invest your scarcest resource, which is always your intelligent, competent focus.

Interestingly, an intelligent, competent follower is the one person most capable of judging and differentiating between good and bad leadership. A bad leader fails to establish mission performance as the highest value and fails to live up to the demands that mission performance imposes. A good leader often simply disappears inside the mission itself, with no thought to any other value. A great leader inspires precisely the same in the team and in each follower.

Tales of missions, won and lost, should be the mainstay of shop talk in a well led organization, where competent followers equal or surpass leadership in mission performance, passion, and dedication.

Friendship

At its worst, friendship is cronyism, or nepotism, and is the poisonous feeding grounds of organizational corruption, be it called that or not. The soft term for this sort of behavior is ‘fraternization,’ and that is never a good thing.

At its best, friendship is the very pillar of strength the organization requires if it hopes to earn its way in a challenging world. We may readily establish that the best followers seek to be the very best friends to their teammates and leaders possible. Yes, the larger the organization and the more formal the hierarchy, the more distant, sometimes even aloof such friendships are likely to be. But humans are just humans, and we all gravitate toward our friends. Also, the wiser the organization, the greater its support of positive friendship must be. Friends can call upon friends to achieve what mere colleagues may not.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that being a leader’s friend, as his follower, disallows competition. Many of the strongest friendships in the

world are forged in the fire of fierce competition. It may be that the wise leader's fondest hope is that you will rise and fill his role as his replacement.

The best competition among friends is over dedication to mission performance. Most leaders, at least once upon a time – if not still now – held active positions on the performance team. The best leaders have often set records that are historic, mythical and are written into the unit's core identity and operating system. The best follower sees such milestones as targets to reach for and where possible obliterate.

It may be that the ultimate value of friendship is trust. Will the leader look out for his follower's best interest? If not, and if trust cannot be placed therein, then followers must always split their attention and effort, fearing for their own needless sacrifice at leadership's hands. Can the leader truly count on his followers for more than just that minimum of effort that clocks out instantly at the day's closing bell? Without trust, how does the leader have faith that the mission's dictates will be noted and executed by diligent performers?

Here, the simplest definition of friendship itself is best effort looking out for the other person's needs. Who is looking out for you? Who do you look out for?

True friendship between follower and leader is built upon shared ambition and virtuous pride. Looked at from the follower's career trajectory, what better qualification for his ambitions might there be than to have been the greatest follower his leaders ever led?

Reward

Perhaps there is no greater area we've missed, than to lionize the rewards of followership excellence. In a capitalistic enterprise, best performing followers often earn the largest paychecks the organization strokes. In any strong organization where talent is grown from within, at all, promotion and career security rightly go to the best followers. These may be termed 'extrinsic' values, those you get outside of the endeavor, but as the result of its success.

The greatest rewards, however, are most likely intrinsic. I can tell you, no matter how challenging I may be – and I am a very challenging person! – I thrill to the smile I see on my leader’s face when we have hit our objective in the moment. My service often hinges on my leader’s freshly won clarity and confidence in coming actions. Strategy must always be chosen well, and tactics rightly derived therefrom. When they both come together, there is a magical moment when my leader’s confidence in his coming steps explodes.

Try to hear it. There is a weak form of the words “I got it,” that ends more in a question mark than a period. Then, there is a deep, fully embodied proclamation, “I got it,” that may or may not end in an exclamation point, but that clearly leaves no room for doubt or question. I live for the second form. Can you hear it?

It is a little-known fact that, as socialism extended its reach into the so-stratified ranks of British aristocracy at the turn of the 20th Century, the servants and maids of the great houses were considered to be part of the power structure. The proletariat did NOT work in the big house, but in factories and mines. If you’re a fan of British TV comedy, you might already know, or want to check out the extraordinary show Jeeves and Wooster. It is a wonderful tale of friendship, brilliantly portrayed. Jeeves, the Gentleman’s Gentleman is, however, the true leader and his “master,” Wooster, the true follower. Both are wonderful. And the rewards won by both cannot be measured.

This is a far truer picture of leader and follower than we tend to find in common articulation.

I never understood the old question, “is the juice worth the squeeze?”, until I lived for a time in Mexico, and discovered dry limes, where no matter how hard you squeeze, you get no juice. Extremely irritating! Following a poor leader can be just like that. No matter what you do, you never win that sense of fulfilling reward from your contributions or sacrifices.

Yet, even then, the pride that best serves your own ambition is still to be the greatest follower you can be. Others looking in will see your dedication and there will be a path to your own best rewards sooner or later.

Besides, bad leadership is often a momentary hiccup, and is sometimes the result of a follower’s lack of vision or simply inaccurate judgment. No one is great at all times, under all circumstances. The best leaders always learn from their failures, exactly as the best followers do. If you do your best to

always do your best, the rewards will be beyond your wildest imagining during the tough times. And, when you join together with great, or even merely good leadership, the greatest rewards possible will result.

Last, we can triple your rewards instantly, like so. First, set your sights on the rewards you seek for yourself. Second, see the rewards your efforts generate for others on the team and the team itself. Third, see those rewards you make possible for your leader. Each has its own values, and all three together ensure true happiness and fulfillment from your working life.

Summary

The most dedicated wins. And good guys do NOT always finish last. The more supportive of others and leaders you are, the more competent at procuring the support you require for your own performance, the more you will accomplish. This dedication to full support for others and self is best magnified and understood when gazing clearly at mission performance. In fact, all other dedications fade into the background when the mission's needs rise. Those most dedicated to the mission itself almost invariably build true friendship, a bond of mutual trust, shared values, and productive interdependency. And in the end, mission-based friendships are among the greatest rewards a working life has to offer. More though, it is such a bond of filial love – as brothers and sisters love each other – that comes closest to ensuring all the other rewards we all seek.

What is a great team? It is the bond of friendship tying leaders and followers together in service to the mission. And when that's truly there, the other rewards, while coming almost on their own, also fade. Ambition is always best served in service to the mission, the team, fellow followers and honorable leaders. That is the correct way to dedicate yourself.