

**The Intrinsic Leadership of Courageous Followers:**

**Battling the Leadership Bias**

A Position Paper

R. S. Ricketson, Sr., D. Min.

Regent University

Abstract

This paper takes the position that a subtle bias exists against recognizing followers as individuals with intrinsic qualities that are identical to many current leadership theories. Current research and a roundtable discussion with Organizational Leadership Ph.D. students indicates that courageous followers (Chaleff, 1995) may be identified as leaders within a different place in the organizational dyad. Courageous followership is also presented as an appropriate leadership style for the New Testament church.

### The Intrinsic Leadership of Courageous Followers: Battling the Leadership Bias

In the field of leadership, most researchers conduct studies from the leader perspective (Chaleff, 1995). Such a concentration on the leader has prompted some to assert that leadership literature has a tendency to be paternalistic in its attitude toward followers (Blake, Mouton, Sloma, & Loftin, 1968). In these studies, the leader is presented as the individual who helps the needy follower complete his or her responsibilities. Thus, the follower finds fulfillment as a result of the direct intervention of the leader. Such an understanding of the role of the leader is also prevalent in the leadership literature directed toward the church (Maxwell, 1993, 1995, 1998). Such a concentration on the leader may lead one to picture organizations as “bodies” with large, cerebral leadership brains attached to small atrophying follower limbs. This paper proposes that a subtle bias inhibits researchers from recognizing courageous followers as more than responders to a leader’s stimulus and by not being recognized as leaders in a different place in the organizational dyad; the construct of courageous followership is not considered as a more accurate view of how church leaders should operate.

Theory X (McGregor, 1960) and the “great man” theories of the early 1940’s (Weber, 1947) present followers as people incapable of initiative and drive and dependent upon the skill of the leader. However, today, most counter arguments to the idea of followers being leaders in a different place in the organizational dyad are more subtle. The bias against followers is more implied than stated. Oakley and Krug (1991), in an attempt to show the importance of leaders, posit that good leaders do three things, “They provide permission... they provide protection... [and they] provide processes to help [followers] tackle and solve problems” (p. 12). From this comment, a reader might conclude that followers are totally helpless without the leader. Warren Bennis (1989) is another writer who presents leaders as those who innovate, inspire trust, and do

the right things. Without comment to the contrary, the reader of such statements is left to assume that followers are those who do not have such character but need the “permission” of the leader to succeed.

Robert Kelley, (1992) adjunct professor of business at the Graduate School of Industrial Management at Carnegie Mellon University, posits a different view of followers. Kelley asserts that 80 percent of what takes place in organizations is the direct result of follower initiative, and only 20 percent accounts for leader initiative. Ira Chaleff (1995) presents a picture of followers as courageous initiators willing to follow another’s leadership in a way which allows the follower to use all of his or her own giftedness.

To discover this subtle follower prejudice, a roundtable discussion was held with a group of organizational leadership Ph.D. students. The students were asked to respond to a series of five statements. The statements followed the principles of Chaleff’s (1995) five attributes of courageous followers: the courage to take responsibility, the courage to serve, the courage to challenge, the courage to participate in change, and the courage to take moral action. The statements were phrased, however, to disguise the fact that they referenced the qualities of followers. Each participant in the roundtable was asked to write down the leadership style that he or she thought was being evidenced as a result of the statement. After each participant had the opportunity to share what he or she thought would be the best answers, it was disclosed that the statements to which they were responding were not leadership statements but those of courageous followers. The overall response from the participants of the roundtable was amazement. It appeared that few had considered that followers had any attributes at all. From the research and the roundtable discussions three assertions can be made.

*Courageous followers: More than responders*

Courageous followers have intrinsic qualities which allow them to initiate activities in the best interest of the leader and the organization. In response to the statement, “I take responsibility for what takes place in my organization,” most of the participants indicated that this was a transformational or transactional leadership quality (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders are those who are able to raise the level of morals and values within the follower so that the follower becomes more productive. If followers already have “transformational leadership” qualities, it may be that the courageous followers’ morals and values are not so much raised by the leader as previously thought. Perhaps courageous followers are not responding to the transformational leader as much as they are simply acting according to who they are regardless of the leadership style. Using a concept from Bandura (1986), one respondent referred to this characteristic as “self-efficacious followership”.

*Courageous followers: Leaders in a different place in the organizational dyad*

Courageous followers act as leaders in different places in the organizational dyad. Few organizations, if any, have a relatively flat organizational structure. As a result, those within the organizational dyad have opportunities to act both as followers and leaders simultaneously given a specific context. This concept was reinforced by the responses of the participants in the roundtable. When challenged to find a leadership style for “challenging others when they need it,” and “my role is to participate in change,” an assortment of leadership styles was indicated. Some of these styles included servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), leader member exchange (Graen & Cashman, 1975), and contingency theory (Fiedler, 1964). The courageous follower characteristic allowed the participants to succumb to leadership bias by unknowingly attributing leadership qualities to the follower. Some of the participants even commented on the

simultaneous role of leader/follower, stating that such interplay between the two roles may have a contextual relationship.

*Courageous followers: Biblical examples of New Testament church leadership.*

Courageous followers serve as the best examples of New Testament biblical leadership because of the emphasis on following. As previously mentioned, leadership books have been written and theories proposed based upon biblical exegesis and the application of business practices within the church. However, if one were to take an objective look at the wording of the New Testament, an overwhelming amount of evidence would point to the construct of following as the preeminent command from Jesus Christ to the church. Jesus stated, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19, NASB). He also gave the price of this concept of following when he said, "If anyone is willing to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Jesus is presented as the "head of the body, the church," (Colossians 1:18) and as such, the parts of the body of Christ operate not from the style or ability of a human leader but rather from the direct influence of Christ, Himself, through the person of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that there are no human representatives in the church who serve in positions of leadership. The New Testament church is to be governed by elders (1 Timothy 5:17). This being said, those who govern the church are not to see themselves as leaders as much as fellow followers. Jesus manifests Himself as the preeminent follower for He said, "I have come to do the will of Him Who sent Me" (John 6:38). Jesus came to earth to follow the will of the Heavenly Father. In this position, Jesus takes the position of a servant to both God and man. Jesus further stated that "where I am, there will my servant also be" (John 12:26). Therefore, the followers of Jesus Christ find themselves in the role of followers first. Then, in the providence of God, if they are ever in a position within the organizational dyad of having

responsibility over others, though subordinates may call them “leaders,” the courageous followers understand that they are followers of Christ first. Such a following/leader style has the potential of revolutionizing the church and setting her apart from the other organizational structures on the planet.

### Conclusion

It is clear from the wording of research studies and the responses of the Ph.D. roundtable that a subtle bias against followers exists. Courageous followership (Chaleff, 1995) provides a construct which appears to manifest many current leadership theories. This allows the courageous follower to be more than just a responder to the leader. The courageous follower can also be recognized as a leader in different places in the organizational dyad. Finally, the courageous follower construct provides an example of what New Testament church leaders might consider as an appropriate leadership style to use in the church. By concentrating on followership styles, organizations, especially the church, have an opportunity to impact decision making processes and evidence the divine self-efficacy which is the treasure of every Christian.

## References

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought & action: A social cognitive theory*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bass, B. M. (1985). "Leadership and performance beyond expectations." New York: Free Press.
- Bennis, W. (1989). *On becoming a leader*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Blake, R. R.; Mouton, J. S.; Sloma, R. L., & Loftin, B. P. (1968). *California Management Review*, 11(2). ABI/INFORM Global Database.
- Chaleff, I. (1995). "The Courageous Follower: Standing Up To and For Our Leaders." San Francisco, CA: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Fiedler, F. E. (1964). "A Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness." In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. New York: Academic Press.
- Graen, G. B., & Cashman, J. F. (1975). A role making model of leadership in formal organizations: A developmental approach. In J. G. Hunt & L. L. Larson (Eds.), *Leadership frontiers*. Kent, OH: Kents State University Press.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Kelley, R. E. (1992). *The power of followership: How to create leaders people want to follow and followers who lead themselves*. New York: Doubleday Currency.
- Maxwell, J. C. (1993). *Developing the leader within you*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Maxwell, J. C. (1995). *Developing the leaders around you*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Maxwell, J. C. (1998). *The 21 irrefutable laws of leadership*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- McGregor, D. (1960). *The human side of enterprise*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Oakley, E., & Krug, D. (1994). *Enlightened leadership*. New York: Fireside.

Weber, M. (1947). *The theory of social and economic organizations* (T. Parsons, Transd.). New York: Free Press.