

**A View of Leadership:  
The Following-Leader Philosophy of Leadership**

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to develop a philosophy of leadership from a biblical worldview. Established thinking on leadership is examined by comparing and contrasting some of the major historical theories of leadership. Insight into current theories of leadership is gained by addressing some of the factors and values of leadership. Addressing these theories and studies from a biblical worldview introduces a “following-leader” philosophy of leadership. The “following-leader” philosophy posits a theory of leadership that accepts some current leadership theories and rejects others while being consistent with a biblical worldview. The “following-leader” theory adds depth to the spiritual formation of the practitioner, and, when implemented, changes the environment to the glory of God.

### A View of Leadership: The Following-leader Philosophy of Leadership

From a Christian worldview, biblical accuracy determines the validity of humanly developed philosophies and constructs (Schaeffer, 1968). These fundamentals become the norms by which each person governs his or her life (Brummer, 1982). Although scholars differ on a precise definition of leadership, one such construct presents leadership as “a process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization” (Yukl, 2002, p. 2). For Christians, this capacity to influence should be guided by the truths of the Bible (Brummer, 1982).

This paper is divided into four divisions. The first division compares and contrasts several of the major groups of leadership theory. These theories include: (a) trait, (b) great-man, (c) economic-man, (d) social-man, (e) relational, (f) behavioral, and (g) contingency theories. The second division analyzes a variety of factors that affect the practice of effective leadership. The third division identifies and analyzes the role of values and beliefs in the practice of effective leadership. The fourth division presents the “following-leader” philosophy of leadership, and compares and contrasts this philosophy with current leadership theories.

#### Major Leadership Theories

From the turn of the century until the 1940’s the “trait” theory of leadership was popular. These trait approaches “involved studying the traits or characteristics of leaders to explain their success as leaders” (Mello, 1999. p. 163). These characteristics included personality, social abilities, personal abilities, and skills (House & Podsakoff, 1994). These trait theories did give rise to “great-man” theories of leadership which were actually studies of individual leaders (Mello, 1999). It was proposed that these leaders had some inherent quality that made them leaders (Sorenson, 2004). However, the trait theories and great-man theories were dispelled

when researchers failed to produce a set of traits that every leader must have to be effective (Melcher, A. J., 1977).

Another early theory of leadership was “economic-man”. Within this theory are the concepts of exchange, barter, and division of labor within the workforce (Pearson, 2000). The thrust of this theory is that human beings are motivated by an economic self-interest. The pursuit of this self-interest benefits economic progress (Klein, 2002). This concentration on humans as only an economic benefit resulted in the introduction of the social-man theory. Elton Mayo (1933) and the Hawthorne Studies are often credited with the “discovery of ‘social-man’ and the need to allow for this in the work place (Dingley, 1997). The social-man theory asserts that “man is not just the utilitarian economic animal of classical economics and scientific management but that he has other social needs and that this has led to a concern with the social relationships at work as an influence on man’s productive activity” (Dingley, p. 1119).

Understanding man as a social being introduced the “relational” theories of leadership. Imbedded in these theories are the ideas of mutual trust, confidence, and interaction among co-workers and employers (McCauley & Kuhnert, 1992). As a result, “behavioral” theorists began in the 1950’s to look closely at the activities of the managers (Yukl, 2002). The “behavioral” theories developed from their research propose that “leadership effectiveness depends in part on how well a manager resolves role conflicts, copes with demands, recognizes opportunities, and overcomes constraints” (Yukl, p. 12). Halpin and Winer (1957) conducted studies focused on the dimension of consideration and initiating structure. Although the outcome did not show a best leadership style, they did succeed in showing that leadership effectiveness is influenced by a given context or setting (Mello, 1999).

“Contingency” theories were developed in an effort to explain how aspects of a situation enhance or nullify leadership effectiveness (Yukl, 2002). Fiedler’s (1967) leadership model contends that “leaders are either task or relations-oriented by nature and that three situational factors (leader/member relations, task structure and leader position power) determined whether task or relations-oriented leadership was more appropriate” (Mello, 1999, p. 167). The “path-goal” theory (House, 1971) argued that effective leaders motivate followers by trying to make the paths to payoffs easier for subordinates. Leaders may accomplish this by adjusting to situations by shifting from one leadership style to another (Mello, 1999). This situational approach has been studied by numerous researchers (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977; Vroom, 1964). Even today new theories of leadership, charismatic leadership (Conger & Kanungo, 1987) and transformational and transactional leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) are being advanced in an attempt to understand effective leadership.

#### Factors That Affect Leader Effectiveness

Max DePree (1987) defines leader effectiveness as “enabling others to reach their potential – both their personal potential and their corporate or institutional potential” (as cited in Hickman, 1998, p. 130). The limitations of this paper only allow discussion of a few of these factors. One factor is the leader’s ability to manage conflict (Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990; Porter-O’Grady, 2004). Researchers have developed a Conflict-Resolution Grid involving accommodating, problem solving, avoiding, and dominating (Ivancevich & Matteson, 2002) to help leaders resolve these conflicts. Another factor concerns “creating an environment wherein employee motivation is channeled in the right direction at an appropriate level of intensity and continues over time” (Ivancevich & Matteson, 2002, p. 148). Motivational processes are divided into two approaches: content and process. The content approaches to motivation include

Maslow's need hierarchy (Maslow & Kaplan, 1998), Alderfer's ERG theory (Alderfer, 1972), and Herzberg's Two-Factor theory (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). The process approaches include Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), Equity theory (Adams, 1963), and Goal Setting (Locke, 1968). Other factors the leader may need to consider are: (a) the use of teams versus groups (Stewart, Manz, & Sims, 1999), (b) identifying group climate and culture (Burton & Obel, 2004), and (c) sensitivity to gender issues (Applebaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003).

### The Role of Values and Beliefs in Effective Leadership

The values and beliefs of the leader are an important aspect of leadership (Woodward, 1994). Values are a person's core beliefs (Rokeach, 1973). Values are the "enduring standards that collectively form the value systems of our lives" (Russell, 2001, p. 76). Because the leader is a moral being, the personal values of the leader affect the decisions he or she makes (Kouzes & Posner, 1993). Malphurs (1996) concurs with these findings. These moral decisions affect whether the leader will act in an ethical or unethical manner (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1993).

Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996) propose that values develop in the context of one's social environment. Values may also be a function of one's education (Bass, 1990). Lloyd (1998) and Osteer (1991) argue that spirituality is one of the cultures directing a leader's values and morals. For the Christian leader, the Bible serves as the prescriptive basis for his or her moral decision making (Feinberg & Feinberg, 1993). The teachings of scripture become the personal values system (Rokeach, 1973) of the believer. The most highly prized values that researchers contend are essential to good leaders (Russell, 2001) are clearly taught in the Scriptures. Some of these values are: (a) honesty (Kouzes & Posner, 1993); "Use honest scales and honest weights" (Leviticus 19:36 NIV), (b) integrity (Clawson, 1999); "The integrity of the upright guides them but the unfaithful are destroyed" (Proverbs: 11:3), (c) justice (De Pree, 1992); "Do not pervert

justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly” (Leviticus 19:15) and (d) humility (Snyder, Dowd, & Houghton, 1994), “Humble yourself in the eyes of the Lord, and He will lift you up” (James 4:10). Leaders need to examine their personal beliefs and values to determine the basis for their decision making (Russell, 2001).

### The Following-leader Philosophy of Leadership

Jesus Christ is the One who gives the believer “everlasting life” (John 3:16). This life is defined by Jesus as knowing God and Himself (John 17:3). Jesus promises to “disclose Himself” (John 14:21) to the disciple who obeys His commands. Jesus’ words, “follow Me” (Mark 1: 17) become more than just a mandate. They are the invitation of the divine Leader to experience abundant life (John 10:10).

Leaders and leading are mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 15:22). Churches had their leaders (Hebrews 13:7). Yet, the paucity of didactic information regarding actual activities and characteristics of leaders and leadership has led some in the church to look to the behavioral sciences for answers.

The very nature of behavioral science is the observation of human beings (Slife & Williams, 1995). Much of the presumptions within the science seem to be steeped in a humanistic worldview which places human beings at the center of all things (Slife & Williams, 1995). Such a view conflicts with a biblical, theistic, worldview which places God above all things (Thiessen, 1949). From a biblical perspective “man is no longer as he was when first created” (Schaeffer, 1971, p. 14). The Bible states that man has sinned and been separated from the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Therefore, observations of human interaction can never lead to a perfect system of leadership because the very subjects being observed are imperfect. This is not to say that some truth cannot be gleaned from these observations (Holmes, 1977). However, to

conduct behavioral studies without understanding the spiritual makeup of the subjects studied appears to have a high likelihood of reaching errant conclusions.

This observation raises the question of whether or not a philosophy of leadership can be developed that does not have human beings at the center. This leadership style should be consistent with the Scriptures and implemented within the sphere of human interaction. This inquiry gives rise to the concept of the “following-leader” philosophy of leadership.

The “following-leader” philosophy takes seriously the command of Jesus Christ to “Follow Me” (Mark.1:17). The focus of the “following-leader” is not the people over whom he or she has been given responsibility. The primary focus of the following-leader is the source of his or her life, the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father. This focus allows the following-leader to lead others without being influenced by a “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

Comparing and contrasting the following-leader philosophy with current theories reveals some areas of agreement and disagreement. The following-leader philosophy is similar to stewardship theory (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997) in that the leader understands his or her responsibility as a steward. However, the following-leader differs from this theory in that the focus of his obedience is not a set of ideals but a person. That person is Jesus Christ. The following-leader also has similarities to servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977). The difference, once again, lies in the fact that the following-leader’s primary objective is not to serve people. The following-leader’s objective is to serve Christ. Serving people is an activity of the following-leader because by doing so the leader actually serves Christ. Jesus stated, “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:26).

Whereas the following-leader may be similar to some situational theories (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977), the basis for applying these theories to certain situations is not so that the leader's plans will be fulfilled. Rather, the purpose behind changing a leadership style to fit the situation is so that the will of the Lord Jesus is fulfilled in the life of the leader and those who follow. Again, the following-leader's will seeks to be the same as that of the Lord Jesus when He said, "I have come... not to do my will, but to do the will of Him who sent me." (John 6:38). This is the hallmark of the following-leader. However, as in the life of Jesus, this desire to follow the will of the Lord and lead others to follow the Lord's will may result in misunderstanding. The actions of the "following-leader" may appear, at first glance, to be contrary to the best interest of the follower. The life of Jesus gives many examples of this particular aspect of this leadership style. A sampling of these leadership moments are: (a) Jesus requiring His disciples to find enough food to feed the multitude (Matthew 14:17), (b) Jesus tarrying for three days after learning of a close friend's sickness (John 11:1), and (c) The death of Jesus on the cross (Luke 16: 21-28). In each instance, the initial human response is to reject the leadership of the Lord. However, Jesus' commitment to following God's will trumps the discord that His leadership creates and ultimately results in a God-glorifying and redemptive moment for the followers.

The following-leader may take on the characteristics of a transformational leader as he or she seeks to inspire his or her followers to achieve even greater things to the glory of God. Still, the following-leader always understands that it is the role and responsibility of the Holy Spirit to inspire (John 6:44; John 15:5). The last thing the following-leader desires is followers who attribute (Green & Mitchell, 1979) characteristics of greatness to him or her. The following-leader lives the "not I but Christ"(Galatians 2:20) principle of the scriptures.

The following-leader rejects exchange theories of leadership (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1979; Graen & Cashman, 1975). These theories would require the following-leader to assume that he or she had anything to exchange. Such practices would also demean the role of the following-leader to one of bartering for the allegiance of the people by appealing to their sinful, self-centered natures. The primary concern of the following-leader is following Christ. The focus of the following-leader is to illicit the obedience of the followers by presenting the benefits of what Christ has to offer, not any benefit the following-leader may have. However, the following-leader also cares for those who follow Christ through him or her (John 17:12). At times the following-leader may be following Christ more closely than the followers want to follow (Mark 14:50). The following-leader may be leading through difficult teaching such as, “deny [self] and take up [your] cross daily” (Luke 9:23). Regardless, the success of the following-leader is not in the numbers of people following at the end of the day. Success for the following-leader is found in the words of Jesus, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21) and that those who follow have the same desire and passion to follow Christ.

#### Summary Comments

Researchers continue to investigate what constitutes effective leadership. Historically, major leadership theories and many current theories omit a spiritual component when describing leaders and leadership activity. The following-leader philosophy seeks to blend behavioral theory with spiritual obedience. Jesus is the prime example of a following-leader (John 5:30). Such a philosophy may explain the actions of Moses (Exodus 13:21), Paul (Philippians 4:7-14), and Stephen (Acts 6:8-7:60). There are many questions that need asking and answering regarding the following-leader philosophy. Further study of the following-leader may reveal a biblical,

applicable, and effective philosophy of leadership that fulfills the commands of Jesus and benefits humanity.

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