Chapter 9

Why and How Should Subordinates Follow Their Managers?

Laurent M. Lapierre

Abstract

This chapter serves two related objectives. It first explains why subordinates’ display of followership is fundamental to their manager’s leadership, and thus to their organization’s success. Second, to the extent that subordinates wish to support their managers’ leadership, guidelines are provided that subordinates can use to determine which style of followership would best support their manager’s leadership decision-making. These practical guidelines involve the careful consideration of four situational factors that would indicate whether a more passive followership style (i.e., accepting the manager's leadership decision-making without question) or a more proactive style (i.e., getting involved in the manager’s leadership decision-making) would be of greatest value. The situational factors explained include (1) the subordinate’s expertise, (2) the manager’s display of trust in the subordinate, (3) the urgency with which the leadership decision must be made, and (4) whether the leadership decision, once made, can realistically be changed. This chapter not only provides conceptual bases to researchers wishing to empirically examine the relative value of passive versus proactive followership styles, but also gives practitioners notions to share with anyone in a subordinate role wishing to support their manager’s leadership efforts.

Keywords: Follower; followership; passive; proactive; leadership; decision-making; subordinate; manager; contingency

The propositions made in this chapter are fundamentally prescriptive in nature. I begin with an explanation of the reasons why I believe that subordinates who engage in followership with their managers are critical to organizational...
effectiveness. A description is then provided of specific situational factors that subordinates should consider when deciding which style of followership to use with their manager. Specifically, I offer criteria that subordinates could use when determining whether proactive or passive followership would be of greatest value to the manager’s leadership decision-making, both before and after a leadership decision has been made. The arguments articulated in this chapter are largely grounded in the emerging research on followership as well as scholarship on leadership and decision-making within organizations.

9.1. Why Should Subordinates Follow Their Managers?

9.1.1. Leadership Requires Followership

To be most effective in their role, managers need to lead. I share the view that a manager who truly leads his or her subordinates is one who influences them such that they are more motivated than otherwise to contribute their personal resources (e.g., time, effort, skills, knowledge, abilities) in ways that support the group’s goals (J. P. Howell & Costley, 2006). However, a manager cannot be a leader in a social vacuum. To be a leader, the manager needs at least one subordinate who is willing to be led — to take on the symbiotic role of follower (DeRue & Ashforth, 2010). In fact, some define being a leader simply as whether or not one has followers (Drucker, 1993). A manager’s leadership is therefore contingent upon at least one subordinate’s display of followership.

At its core, followership implies “deferring to the directives, decisions, or desires of another, thereby giving another higher status and legitimacy in determining the course of events” (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007, p. 196). Hence, some degree of deference to the manager is implied by subordinates’ acts of followership. With those acts, subordinates show that they approve of their manager as their leader, that they are willing to be influenced by him/her in that capacity, and that they are prepared to support his/her leadership by providing at least some of their personal resources (Hernandez & Sitkin, 2011; Hollander & Julian, 1969; Hollander & Webb, 1955; J. M. Howell & Shamir, 2005). Defined as such, followership may not necessarily be displayed by any subordinate. There are several examples of discretionary subordinate behavior that would thwart a manager’s leadership efforts, such as refusing to carry out the manager’s decision or request, and engaging in deviant (counterproductive) behavior with the manager (Arnold, Dupre, Horschovis, & Turner, 2011; Dupre & Barling, 2006; Tepper et al., 2006). Thus, while being a subordinate provides the opportunity to follow, being a follower is not implied by one’s subordinate status in the organizational hierarchy.

Although subordinates’ followership can simply be viewed as evidence of a manager’s leadership (Drucker, 1993), it is also likely to contribute to a manager’s capacity and motivation to lead. For example, because followership involves recognizing and supporting the manager as a leader, it is likely to boost the
manager’s self-confidence and sense of empowerment, thus enhancing the manager’s courage and motivation to make difficult decisions or to set bold and inspiring goals, such as those championed by charismatic leaders (J. M. Howell & Shamir, 2005; Lapierre, Bremer, & McMullan, 2012). In addition, by choosing to provide their manager with needed information or expertise, substantial research on decision-making implies that subordinates’ display of followership can potentially help their manager make the best possible leadership decisions (or at least help to avoid very costly ones) (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006). It is also quite plausible that subordinates’ acts of followership beget managers’ provision of individualized consideration, a supportive type of behavior associated with transformational leaders. Indeed, the norm of reciprocity inherent to social exchange (Blau, 1964) implies that receiving followership would bolster a manager’s motivation to provide subordinates with special consideration that would help them overcome personal difficulties and/or would enable them to grow in their career (cf. Lapierre, Bonaccio, & Allen, 2009; Lapierre, Naidoo, & Bonaccio, 2012). Finally, without having subordinates highly committed to supporting and implementing his/her decisions, a manager would be hard pressed to see his/her decisions carried out in the best possible manner.

Barring situations where managers lack the basic knowledge, interpersonal skills, and moral compass to be leaders, subordinates have a critical role to play in relation to their managers to ensure the success of their organization — they need to offer them followership. Not doing so may prevent the organization (or at least part of it) from having the leadership it needs to be successful. Therefore, the role of follower should not be associated with pejorative terms or imagery (e.g., “easily influenced,” “rude,” “uneducated,” “slow”; Sy, 2010). It should be considered a fundamental necessity for effective organizational functioning. That being said, the emerging scholarship on followership shows that subordinates can enact this role in very different ways. Some may choose to support their manager’s leadership by displaying a very passive style of followership, while others may do so by using a much more proactive style (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010). It is important to know when each style would be of greatest value to the manager’s leadership.

9.1.2. **How Passive and Proactive Followership Support Leadership Decision-Making**

Passive followership, in its purest form, involves strict obedience and high deference to the leader. Passive followers refrain from questioning their leader’s ideas or decisions (even if they may disagree with them or doubt their soundness) and focus on carrying out leadership decisions to the best of their ability. Such followership, which emphasizes the manager’s superiority and power over the subordinate, is consistent with the traditional view of subordinates as being less gifted (e.g., less knowledgeable or capable) than their managers and displaying loyalty by showing unquestionable support for their managers’ ideas or decisions (Hecksher, 1994;

Alternatively, proactive followership involves significantly less deference to the leader and less concern with strictly obeying the leader’s decisions. Such followers aim to partner with the leader in leading the group by displaying independent thinking and contributing to decisions that affect the group’s success. As such, one could expect proactive followership to be manifested in the “partnership” type of relationship that sometimes develops between a manager and subordinate, as described by leader-member exchange scholars (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Proactive followers display at least some of the qualities of those whom Kelley (1988) labels as “effective” followers.

One of the fundamental differences between proactive and passive followers lies in their respective degree of involvement in leadership decision-making. Leadership decisions are those that the manager is typically (formally) accountable for and that impact the group’s success. Being a leader invariably involves making decisions salient to the group’s success. Common examples include deciding upon the specific goals that the group should strive to accomplish and what method (or strategy) should be used to accomplish them, choosing how the work should be distributed among group members, deciding what new resources (e.g., human, financial, physical) should be provided to the group and/or which resources are no longer needed, determining how subordinate efforts should be recognized, and choosing which behavioral norms within the group should be developed and/or eliminated. Such decisions are often difficult to make, and can bolster or undermine a manager’s leadership. Subordinates’ followership can help to ensure that leadership decisions are as successful as possible. What is important to realize is that passive and proactive followership can support leadership decision-making in markedly different ways.

Where passive followers let their leader make decisions for the group and focus their efforts on successfully carrying them out, proactive followers strive to contribute to (and thus influence) the leadership decision-making process. According to Carsten et al.’s (2010) observations, proactive followers would contribute to the decision-making process by voicing their ideas and concerns to their leader without waiting to be asked and with little concern about whether they will potentially contradict their leader’s opinion. They would also constructively challenge their leader’s assumptions or decisions if they threaten the group’s interests (e.g., mission, obligations, etc.). However, there are limits to the amount of disagreement and challenging that should be displayed, assuming subordinates truly want to be followers. A subordinate who regularly disagrees with and challenges the manager’s decisions, and who is generally unable to find common ground with him/her would be failing to show any deference at all to the manager’s opinion or desired direction. Such a subordinate would not be displaying followership of any kind (Lapierre, Bremner, et al., 2012), and the manager would likely feel unsupported. To the extent that one wishes to support leadership decision-making, it is important to know when it makes most sense to follow proactively and when it may be wiser to display passive followership. Arguments presented in the next section of this chapter aim to provide guidance in this respect.
While it may be argued that diversity in followership extends beyond the passive and proactive styles, the purpose of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive explanation of each possible permutation of followership. My goal is to provide well-reasoned advice on salient situational information that subordinates could use when deciding which style of followership would be of most value to their manager’s leadership decision-making. I chose to focus on the passive and proactive styles for reasons of parsimony, and because they largely encapsulate follower types that have been suggested to exist (e.g., Carsten et al., 2010; Kelley, 1988).

An important assumption I make in proposing criteria for choosing which style of followership to display is that subordinates view their manager as having the basic knowledge, interpersonal skills, and ethical character to lead. If they firmly believe that their manager is unable or unwilling to make decisions that serve common interests (e.g., the manager clearly shows abysmal moral judgment), then non-followership (such as collectively resisting the manager’s requests or appealing to higher levels of authority within the organization) may be a better course of action than would followership. While it would take significant courage to thwart a manager’s leadership, such a decision may very well be in the best interests of the collective (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007).

9.2. How Should Subordinates Follow Their Managers?

The basic premise for the arguments I will present is that, depending on particular situational factors, proactive followership may be more or less effective than passive followership in supporting the manager’s leadership decision-making. This principle is, to some degree at least, analogous to situational leadership theories, particularly Vroom and colleagues’ contingency model, which essentially argue that more effective leadership styles are those that best fit the needs or particularities of the situation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, 1974, 1996, 2008; Vroom & Yago, 1988; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). However, while such leadership theories present criteria that managers should consider when determining the style of leadership to use with their subordinates, I present criteria that subordinates could consider when choosing which style of followership to use with their manager. I argue that a subordinate should consider at least four situational factors when deciding which style of followership to display. These include: (1) the subordinate’s degree of salient expertise, (2) the manager’s displayed trust in the subordinate, (3) the urgency of the leadership decision to be made, and (4) whether the leadership decision, once its implementation has begun, can realistically be changed.

9.2.1. Consideration of the Subordinate’s Degree of Salient Expertise

A critical question to ask oneself (as a subordinate) when deciding whether or not to display proactive followership behaviors by voicing (unsolicited) suggestions and/or constructively challenging the manager’s ideas, assumptions, or decisions, is
whether or not one’s degree of expertise (knowledge or insights gained through formal education, work experience, or otherwise) is sufficiently strong to offer value-added information to the leadership decision-making process. The goal of a proactive follower is to present information that the manager may not have considered, which has the potential to improve leadership decisions. Decision-making research shows that managers who heed their subordinates’ advice can make substantially better decisions (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006; Humphrey, Hollenbeck, Meyer, & Ilgen, 2002). However, managers sometimes follow subordinate advice that is unsound. It is quite conceivable that certain subordinates, because of a particularly strong need to be involved in leadership decision-making (cf. strong need for power; McClelland, 1985), will display proactive followership despite having little or no expertise salient to a particular leadership decision. If such subordinates voice their opinions in a particularly confident manner, they may succeed in influencing their manager’s decision. Indeed, decision-making research shows that managers are prone to following the advice of subordinates whom they perceive as being more self-confident, despite the fact that perceived self-confidence is a poor proxy for the quality of the advice given (for a review, see Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006). Thus, the resulting leadership decision may be of poorer quality than had the subordinate refrained from (confidently) voicing weakly grounded ideas. Subordinates should carefully consider the potential added value of an idea or opinion that they wish to voice as proactive followers. It may make more sense to refrain from engaging in such proactive followership (and thus being more passive) if one has reason to seriously doubt the expertise he or she could contribute to the decision-making process. Doing so could prevent hindering the quality of the leadership decision. To more effectively decide when and when not to be a more proactive follower, I suggest that subordinates practice being devil’s advocates with themselves. Asking themselves questions such as “Is the information I want to share really that salient to my manager’s decision?” “Is the opinion I want to share based on solid evidence or facts?” and “How could my opinion alter the final decision, and will this change be in our collective interest?” These questions could help subordinates determine whether they have the degree of salient expertise needed to help improve the leadership decision-making process.

I recognize that what I propose is easier said than done. Some subordinates may lack the self-confidence or self-awareness to recognize the value their knowledge or opinion may bring to the leadership decision-making process. They may thus refrain from engaging in proactive followership despite the value that such action could offer. Conversely, some subordinates may fail to recognize how little they actually know and still share their opinions, perhaps even with great confidence, as would be the case of those exemplifying the Dunning–Kruger Effect (a cognitive bias where unskilled individuals display illusory superiority; Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Despite the potential difficulty in doing so, I still urge subordinates to at least try to be mindful of their expertise, and to temper their proactive followership on the basis of how much salient expertise they can offer their manager as he or she deliberates upon which decision to make. At the very least, subordinates with a great will to contribute to leadership decision-making (i.e., who have a strong desire to be
proactive followers) should explain the grounds upon which they are formulating opinions or suggestions, thus giving the manager the opportunity to appraise the potential quality of the ideas expressed. Finally, it should be noted that choosing to be a more passive follower because of insufficient expertise does not imply that the leadership decision will be poor. Indeed, choosing to be more passive may give other subordinates with more salient expertise an opportunity to display proactive followership and thus improve the quality of the leadership decision to be made. Thanks to the proactive followership of other subordinates, one may even acquire new expertise and thus be in a better position to offer proactive followership when a similar leadership decision has to be made in the future.

In sum, I propose that a basic question subordinates should ask themselves when deciding whether to engage in more proactive or more passive followership is whether they have valuable expertise to contribute to leadership decision-making. That being said, even if subordinates judge that they have valuable expertise to offer and that proactive followership could add value to leadership decision-making, other factors may still imply that more passive followership would be of relatively greater value to the leadership decision-making process. I explain these factors next.

9.2.2. Consideration of the Manager’s Trust in the Subordinate

Trust has been recognized as a critical component of high quality leader-follower relationships (Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Interestingly, most of the research attention given to trust in such relationships has focused on subordinates’ trust in their managers (for a review, see Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). It is rather puzzling that such little focus has been given to a manager’s trust in subordinates. Perhaps this state of affairs is consistent with the overwhelmingly dominant view of leadership occurring as a result of leaders influencing and followers being influenced. Being influenced often implies some degree of trust in the influencing party. Had more attention been given to the influence that followers can have on their leaders, perhaps greater attention would have been given to the degree of trust superiors have in their subordinates.

Scholarship on the leader-member exchange (LMX) and relational models of leadership has revealed how important it is for a manager to trust a subordinate (Graen, 2003; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, Graen, & Scandura, 2000). Trusting a subordinate implies that the manager believes that the subordinate will act in the manager’s best interests (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Decision-making research shows that decision-makers are less likely to use the advice of people they have little trust in (Sniezek & Van Swol, 2001). Thus, proactive followers’ attempts to provide advice may fall on deaf ears if their manager does not trust them. Moreover, without trust, it may be difficult for a manager to interpret proactive followership as the subordinate’s efforts to support his or her leadership. For a manager who has little trust in a subordinate, attempts by that subordinate to get involved in the manager’s leadership decision-making efforts may be interpreted as threatening, as attempts to usurp the manager’s authority. There is empirical
evidence that constructively challenging one’s manager is less likely to be well received when the manager perceives the quality of his/her relationship with the subordinate as being poor (i.e., where little trust exists) (Tepper et al., 2006). In sum, the decision to engage in proactive followership should be based on evidence of whether or not the manager trusts the subordinate. With little evidence of the manager’s trust (such as when the subordinate has just joined the group), it may be wiser to engage in more passive followership. Over time, as the subordinate’s display of passive followership bolsters his or her trustworthiness (by demonstrating salient abilities, a strong desire to aid the manager, as well as strong integrity; Mayer et al., 1995), the manager may show more trusting behaviors. Such behaviors could include delegating more important projects or responsibilities to the subordinate, asking for his or her opinion or advice, granting more decision-making authority, and less monitoring or surveillance (Bauer & Green, 1996; Brower et al., 2000; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). A manager may even explicitly encourage the subordinate to disagree with the manager when other ideas or decisions could be better (see Chapter 8 in this book). The more the subordinate sees evidence of having earned the manager’s trust, the more likely proactive followership will be well received and used by the manager when making leadership decisions. Otherwise, the manager’s leadership decision-making may best be served by passive followership, where the subordinate’s focus would be on carrying out the decision in the best possible manner.

9.2.3. Consideration of the Urgency of the Leadership Decision to Be Made

Even when the subordinate has valuable expertise to share and has earned the manager’s trust, there may be insufficient time for the manager to carefully consider the subordinate’s input when making a leadership decision. The display of proactive followership, such as challenging the manager’s assumptions or decision-making logic, lengthens the decision-making process and the time within which a decision can be implemented. Decision-making delays resulting from proactive followership may actually be costlier than passively accepting the manager’s decision. In some circumstances, delaying a leadership decision, such as a military commander’s decision about whether or not to engage an enemy, or an airline captain’s decision about how to correct mid-air engine failure, can be catastrophic.

Knowing when there is or is not sufficient time to be a proactive follower has merit even in situations that are not life threatening. Because of competing priorities and/or high workload, managers often have limited time to make leadership decisions. While delayed leadership decisions typically do not lead to tragic outcomes, pressure to deliver results (e.g., to clients, whether internal or external) in a timely manner can easily make delays in leadership decisions particularly stressful for managers (Svenson & Maule, 1993). It is therefore important for subordinates to carefully consider the time that their manager has at his or her disposal to make a particular leadership decision. Displaying proactive followership when the manager is under severe time pressure should only be done when the opinion voiced or
challenge made will clearly and significantly improve the decision’s quality. Otherwise, proactive followership is more likely to be met with contempt than with appreciation. Time is a precious resource, making it important for the follower to carefully gauge the potential gain of lengthening the time taken to make a leadership decision (cf. Field, 1979). If there were little to be gained by engaging in proactive followership, then passive followership would be a more suitable manner of supporting the manager’s leadership decision. In other words, to be effective followers, it is important for subordinates to know when to “shut up” such that a balance is struck between leadership decision quality and timeliness.

9.2.4. Consideration of Whether the Leadership Decision Can Realistically Be Changed

Compared to the three preceding factors, this fourth one is unique in that it speaks to situations where a leadership decision has already been made and its implementation has begun. In such a circumstance, a subordinate may realize, based on preliminary evidence, that the decision made was a mistake and that a different course of action should be taken. Voicing such an observation, particularly when accompanied by a reasonable alternative to the original decision, could help avoid significant costs to the group. However, before sharing this type of information in an attempt to be a proactive follower, it is important for the subordinate to determine whether the potential benefits of changing the decision once its implementation has begun would truly outweigh the costs of doing so. Challenging the validity of the initial decision when it would be near impossible to change it because of severe costs that would be incurred (financial, time, political, reputational, etc.) would do little to actually support the manager’s leadership. Such action may do no more than cause significant stress for the manager, and weaken his/her self-confidence as a leader. The manager’s trust in the subordinate’s judgment could also be severely compromised (“Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?!?!?!”), thus hindering that subordinate’s future success in supporting the manager’s leadership in a proactive way. Considering the costs and benefits of changing a leadership decision after its implementation has begun could inform a subordinate of which style of followership to display. If the costs clearly outweigh the benefits of changing the original leadership decision, then passive followership would probably be much more supportive of the manager’s decision than proactive followership would. However, when there is good reason to believe that more would be gained than lost by changing the course of action that was originally decided upon, proactive followership may be the best way of supporting the manager’s leadership decision-making. When proactive followership seems to be the wisest choice, the subordinate should never ignore how delicate such a situation would be. Even if the subordinate may be convinced of the net gain of being a proactive follower in such a circumstance, the manager (and others) may still perceive a poor initial decision and/or desire to change the initial decision as evidence of poor leadership. Thus, it would be wise for the proactive follower to help the manager determine how to articulate the change in direction such that the manager’s
leadership potential is not compromised. This may help prevent an escalation of the manager’s commitment to the original (although failing) course of action (Staw, 1976).

9.3. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to explain why a subordinate should consider different situational factors when deciding whether to use one type of followership or the other in support of the manager’s leadership decision-making. The factors presented could help a subordinate determine when it would be of significant added value to engage in proactive instead of passive followership. In short, a proactive style would likely be of greater benefit to a manager’s leadership decision-making when (1) the subordinate has expertise to share that is salient to a leadership decision, (2) there is evidence that the manager already trusts the subordinate and would therefore appreciate his or her efforts to improve leadership decisions, (3) there is sufficient time to contribute to the decision-making process, and (4) it is not too costly to try to change a decision that has already been implemented. If one or more of these circumstances do not exist, a subordinate’s passive followership may be of greater value to the manager’s leadership.

While some research shows that subordinates can adapt their style of followership to the needs or constraints of a particular situation (Carsten et al., 2010), some subordinates may have considerable difficulty doing so. People are likely to vary in their preferences to engage in proactive versus passive followership. It is quite conceivable that certain personal traits (e.g., proactive personality, generalized self-efficacy, power distance; Bateman & Crant, 1993; Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001; Earley & Erez, 1997) would make some subordinates naturally prefer one type of followership to the other. Feeling forced to display a style of followership that is counter to one’s preference could be difficult, particularly for people who prefer proactive followership and who realize that they must be more passive (Carsten et al., 2010). I encourage those who find it too difficult to adapt or adjust their style of followership to consider whether or not they truly want to support their manager’s leadership. Chronic failure to display appropriate followership may not only threaten the manager’s leadership, but may severely limit one’s career growth opportunities. Indeed, a manager would have relatively little reason or desire to provide discretionary career-enhancing opportunities to a subordinate who does not clearly support his or her leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2000).

As noted several times in this book, very little attention has been given to the critical contributions that followers make to leadership. As subordinates, individuals have the opportunity to support their managers’ leadership by following them. Management experts have often argued that managers must consider various situational factors when deciding how best to lead. Hopefully, the ideas expressed in this chapter will help subordinates decide how best to follow.
References


