

## Leadership and Follower-ship

### Summary of message:

The role that each of us plays will continue to change but it is important that we strive to exemplify the initiative, self control, commitment, talent, honesty, creditability and courage that are required to make us and this company successful.

### Message:

Conventional wisdom teaches us that large corporations, military organizations and even the government succeed or fail, compete or crumble on the basis of how well they are led. So we study great leaders of the past and present and spend vast quantities of time and money recruiting leaders and trying to cultivate leadership in the ranks.

I have no argument with this practice. Leaders matter greatly. But, in searching so zealously for better leaders we tend to lose sight of the people these leaders will lead. Without armies, after all, Napoleon was just a man with grandiose ambitions. Organizations stand or fall partly also on the basis of how well their followers follow.

Bosses are not necessarily good leaders. Subordinates are not necessarily effective followers. Many bosses couldn't lead a horse to water. Many subordinates couldn't follow a parade. Some people avoid either role. Others accept the role thrust upon them and perform it badly.

At different points in our careers, even at different times of the working day, most of us play both roles, though seldom equally well. After all, the leadership role has the glamour and attention. We take courses to learn it and when we play it well, we get applause and recognition. But the reality is that most of us are more often followers than leaders. Even when we have subordinates, we still have bosses.

In today's flatter, leaner organization, we cannot succeed without the kind of people who take pride and satisfaction in the role of supporting player, doing the less glorious work without fanfare. Organizations that want the benefits of effective followers must find ways of rewarding them, ways of bringing them into full partnership. To encourage this kind of effective following, we need to understand the nature of the follower's role. To cultivate good followers, we need to understand the human qualities that allow effective follower-ship to occur.

Effective followers share a number of essential qualities:

- 1) they manage themselves well
- 2) they are committed to the organization and to a purpose, principle or person outside themselves
- 3) they build their competence and focus their efforts for maximum impact

4) they are courageous, honest and creditable.

You may have noticed that the qualities that make effective followers are, surprisingly enough, much the same as those found in effective leaders. However when a person has initiative, self control, commitment, talent, honesty, creditability and courage we say, "Here is a leader". By definition, a follower cannot exhibit the qualities of leadership. It violates the stereotype.

But our stereotype is wrong. Follower-ship is not a person but a role. What distinguishes followers from leaders is not intelligence or character but the role one plays. As I pointed out earlier, effective followers and effective leaders are often the same person playing different parts at different hours of the day. We need to always keep this in mind.

---

Authored December 16, 1989 by John R. Fischer, Vice President, Digital Equipment Corporation, NY Regional Field Service, one of the heritage HP companies.