

iCOOC Forum

Creating High Performance Teams by Enabling Effective Followership

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Character has, throughout history, been one of the most prominent factors in determining the attributes of a good leader. Yet modern leaders are often disconnected from this basic truth, and the seminal importance that leadership character attributes play in determining the efficacy of an individual in managing a team is frequently not recognised.

Leadership character is defined as an interlocking mix of virtuous character traits, with the central one being Judgement, and the remainder all intertwined with that concept. In order to be effective, a leader needs to maximise all of these character traits together. If one or two are prioritised at the expense of others, and an imbalance of character virtues occur, the result is poor leadership, and this can affect the output and morale of teams, the business culture and the attrition rate.

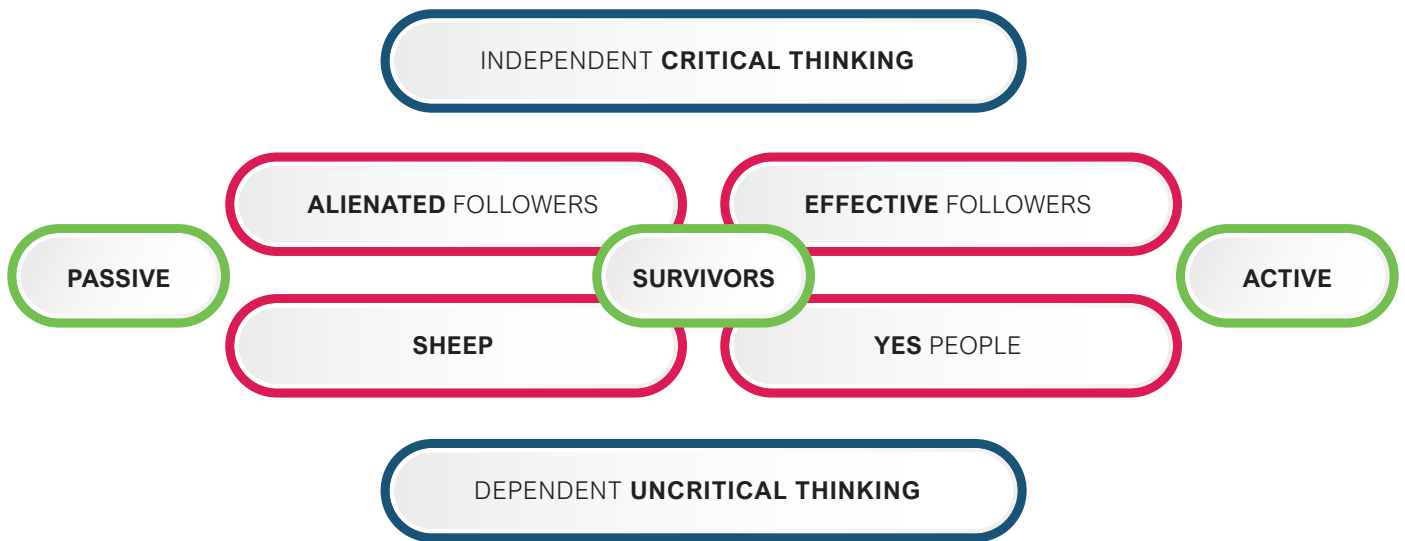
For example, a leader who pushes for drive and integrity, but has limited humility and humanity to match that, will be overbearing, arrogant and difficult to work with, and will find it difficult to motivate and retain their followers. Hence, ensuring the balance between these virtues allows leaders to develop their followers' attributes, to get them to follow more readily and more effectively.



Follower behaviour is categorised into 5 differing groups, which are defined along two axes. The one axis encompasses critical thinking, and the other activity (or passivity) in the workplace. These are behavioural categories, and they are not employee personality descriptions.

Hence, while an individual may fall frequently into one specific category, employees will display characteristics from all the different categories at various times in any given day, week, or month, and the categories must not be treated as set in stone. The categories are thus:

- » Sheep
- » Yes People
- » Survivors
- » Alienated Followers
- » Effective Followers



IN WHICH BOX DO YOU SPEND MOST OF YOUR TIME?



Sheep

Sheep are those employees who are considered uncritical thinkers and are generally very passive. They tend to do what they are told and not much more. This behaviour is more frequently exhibited in lower-level employees, but it can also be observed in higher-level employees, where it can lead to a lack of innovation and development within the organisation.

While sheep employees may not be critical thinkers, they are not necessarily inadequate or incompetent. In some roles, they can be helpful, where innovation is of limited importance and has limited scope, as they can be loyal employees. They can be happy and relaxed in their work, and own the process to ensure they meet their targets with the minimal amount of effort, but they do not seek to go beyond that, to increase productivity for the sake of progress.

Employees who feel as though they are denied agency within the company, or that their input is not valued or acted upon, tend to exhibit 'sheep' behavioural characteristics, and employees who might previously have been effective followers may revert to become sheep as a result, merely doing as they are told. It is therefore critical for leaders to identify where their more effective employees are exhibiting sheep-like tendencies, and act to prevent the slide from effective follower to sheep. It is also worth noting that, where a job role is well suited to a sheep personality, the leader needs to make a judgement call on whether or not to try to push the 'sheep' employee to think critically and be more active, if it pushes them beyond their comfort zone and capability, and is not strictly necessary, then in some cases it is arguably more effective to let the sheep be.

Yes people

A workplace environment where 'yes people' are prominent is regarded as one of the most dangerous with regard to the competency of a leader. 'Yes people' are not critical thinkers but they are active in supporting blindly what their leader suggests and requests. This behaviour is typical in environments where the leadership ethos lacks certain of the core virtues like humility and personability, and contributes to a 'command and control' style of leadership where the leader's word is law. The resulting team has a limited scope for innovation, and this environment suppresses diversity of thought, and consequently innovation.

This is particularly damaging for leaders, as they often develop a false sense of security in their own ability, fuelled by the acquiescence of their team to their every idea. It is therefore vital for leaders to spot this behaviour in their followers before it becomes too ingrained, and act to build a workplace culture where employees feel safe and supported enough to speak up with their own ideas, and challenge the leader when they feel it necessary. Merely telling followers that they are empowered to challenge the leader is not enough, if they do not feel comfortable enough to do so, they will not. Where this behaviour exists already, the leader needs to put time into drawing opinions and complaints out of their team, perhaps in one-on-one discussions. The key is to develop a strategy that works for each employee in the team, and to know your people to effectively push them to engage with you as a leader.

Survivors

The survivors sit in the middle of the field. They can be a mix of critical and uncritical thinkers, displaying tendencies to be both active and passive at times. The key characteristic they exhibit is 'playing it safe'. Their aim is to keep their head down and continue to do their job without challenging their leader or taking risks. To deal with these followers, it is key to understand their motivations. In some cases the survivor has a genuine and valid reason for not taking risks, and understanding that is key to understanding the degree to which it is safe and helpful to further engage them within the team.

While sheep employees may not be critical thinkers, they are not necessarily inadequate or incompetent.

Alienated Followers

This category ranks with yes people as the most dangerous element within a leader's team. They are characterised by being critical thinkers, but passive, and unwilling to deploy their skills and knowledge to the benefit of the business and the team. They are often dissatisfied with their lot, and hence are prone to complaints, but usually their critical thinking and skillset lends them credibility, and hence power, within the team.

They can pose a major threat to the authority of the leader. The key to addressing alienated followers is again to understand what motivates them, and why the leadership has alienated them. Alienation is often linked, as discussed earlier, to an excess of one of the leadership character virtues which is not compensated by higher levels of the others.

Effective Followers

These are the types of followers that leaders should be seeking to cultivate, and they are characterised by critical thinking, activity, and trustworthiness. They can be relied upon to handle tasks effectively without oversight, and this often will result in leaders shifting their focus away from these workers to try and utilise their time to deal with the flaws and problems stemming from employees belonging to the other categories.

This, however, is a critical mistake, for without feedback, guidance and appreciation, followers in this category will over time shift more and more into the other categories, usually the alienated follower group. Leadership requires a time commitment, and it is suggested that for each follower, 80% of their output is dependant on the leader putting in 20% of their time to guide and support the employee.

The goal of leaders, in the majority of cases, is to move employees sitting within the 'yes people', 'survivor' or 'alienated follower' categories into the 'effective follower' quadrant, and it is thus key to understand where individual employees tend to fall around the grid, and hence to diagnose where steps must be taken.

Where team members sit on the quadrant is most often defined by the character of the leader and concerns regarding character, therefore, must be central to any attempt to optimise the followership traits exhibited by a leader's team, which rely heavily on the character dimensions of Humility, Humanity, Integrity and Collaboration in the character trait wheel, when understanding self and others.

Developing character virtues such as these is particularly important where teams lack confidence in their abilities or are fearful of making mistakes, as they allow leaders to approach this challenge with an empathetic outlook, and devise strategies to address the needs of their team. Even where leaders mean well, if they are not sufficiently self-aware to perceive temporary or even permanent drops in these virtues in relation to their leadership style, they can inadvertently push employees into unproductive categories.

Conversely, close monitoring of and focus on one's engagement with the leadership character virtues can act as a tool kit to develop employees and progress them into the effective follower quadrant.

Leadership requires a time commitment.

List of Organisations:



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