



Forget leadership: it's followership that's important now

2 March 2020: followership is often described as the other half of leadership. Without followers, there would be no leaders. Yet up until relatively recently, it's been rather neglected as a business concept, writes Annie Makoff-Clark.

As Shaz Nawaz, Director at aa accountants explains, business leaders need to create a cohesive "tribe" or following to ensure the company is giving the best possible service to clients.

"Alienated or disengaged followers won't perform at their best which can affect morale and lead to high staff turnover," he says. "Clients can tell if an employee is unhappy at work and once they suss that out, they may not want to do business with that company anymore. So it affects client retention and profitability.

"Accountants are generally OK at signing up new business but they're not so good at selling more to existing clients and therefore keeping them. If they can't retain clients due to their attitude or behaviour, leaders will have a problem on their hands."

So how can business leaders and managers identify a disengaged follower before it affects the rest of the team? According to social scientist Robert Kelley, there are four main followership traits which he first termed in the 1980s:

- alienated - negative and cynical;
- passive - requires micro-managing, has few ideas;
- conformist - failure to question;
- and effective/exemplary - independent, critical thinkers.

In any group, Nawaz says, there is likely to be one person or a group of people who display alienated, passive or conformist traits. They might be negatively disruptive, cynical, or only see problems rather than solutions.

“If you don’t curb this behaviour, it won’t just affect the so-called passive or conformist followers, it will affect 80% or 90% of your entire tribe,” he warns. A good leader, Nawaz insists, is one who ensures every team member is part of the process, regardless of their traits and personalities.

But the acid test, says Jo Owen, award-winning author and keynote speaker on leadership and global teams, is how team members behave when something goes wrong.

“Good” followers flag up problems, they’re open and honest and can provide potential solutions, maybe even admit to mistakes they’ve made. But the other types of followers - who Owen describes as “negative disruptors” - are the ones who will either try to deny there is a problem or apportion blame elsewhere. “A crisis can become a moment of truth for leaders when they really find out what their followers are like,” he says.

Ultimately though, it’s about working with every follower type and attempting to turn those with alienated or passive traits into exemplary ones. It’s not always possible but, says Owen, change should come from the top. “The

leader needs to be the one to model the behaviours they want from their team. So if they have a negative or negatively disruptive team, they should start by looking in the mirror.”

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