

<https://dev.to/dwd/how-to-be-a-follower>

If you look at the vast majority of the business world, including the tech section of it, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the most important thing you can do is be a leader.

Tutorials on how to become a leader are everywhere. You can't move for hitting a blog post containing crucial leadership tips on leading. It's really LEAD OR DIE out there. And that's insane.

There are always at least as many followers as leaders in a team. Indeed, in a team of only two, there's little leadership needed. And any given leader, unless they're the CEO, CTO, and chairman of the board all rolled into one, is going to be a follower too in many respects. It seems obvious that if your organisation has more leaders than followers it is critically broken.

So it follows that the skills of being a good follower are much more generally useful than leadership skills.

NASA observed this back during the Apollo missions, or perhaps even earlier - all their astronauts were accomplished people, and often had very strong leadership skills, but they required them to be followers more than leaders much of the time.

During the late 1970's, the ideas they developed were presented to the aviation industry. Several air crashes had occurred - and continued to occur - where despite a crew of three in the cockpit, the captain had apparently overridden or ignored information from his crew - and just as bad, his crew had let him.

Consider UA-173, a flight from JFK to PDX in late 1978. The flight engineer, Forrest Mendenhall, with 11 years of experience, continually tried to warn the Captain, Malburn McBroom, that they were running out of fuel - but

McBroom never took notice, instead worrying over such items as whether or not to wear coats.

The NTSB flagged the team behaviour as a core problem, and United became one of the first in the industry to implement Crew Resource Management training.

This is, more or less, ensuring that the leader in a team doesn't treat his followers as simple automata, and crucially, the team does not treat their leader as an all-knowing oracle. Instead the team needs to seek out and share information, and each team member need to gain assurance that their information has been properly acknowledged.

This isn't about undermining the leader - the leader still has the final say in a decision - but each follower has a responsibility to ensure that the team as a whole, and the leader in particular, has all the information to properly make that decision. Good leadership fosters a healthy team, sure, but it's also dependent on one.

If a decision seems to be ignoring a vital fact, the follower needs to ensure that this is not in error. It therefore has to be acceptable to question decisions, and also acceptable to revisit them if something was indeed missed.

The classic pattern is like this:

- Get the attention of the leader

I'd recommend, in this day and age, a video call. You want something intrusive - in an office, you want to pull the leader away from their desk.

- State your concern

This being the undesirable outcome, and that you think its bad. "I'm worried that the deadline is unachievable."

- State the problem

Only at this point do you try to be objective. Rather surprisingly, being objective earlier will fail to make the issue identifiable as being a real problem. "Sally's work has a long edit/run cycle, and is dependent on Bob's work completing."

- Ideally, provide a solution

There's usually something to suggest. It might be as simple as "We should push that deadline back", or maybe it's more constructive such as "If Bob can stub his interface this will unblock Sally."

- Obtain feedback

What you're looking for here is a clear signal that the leader has incorporated the information. You need to ask a specific question, like "Do you agree?" or "Do you think that'll work?" or some such.

In the spirit of CRM, then, having got your attention, stated my concerns, and described the problem objectively, I've now proposed a solution...

What do you think of it?