

The importance of followership for leaders



Followership is an extremely important topic for leaders; I don't mean the need for leaders to have followers but the need for leaders to have a followership capacity.

Leaders are not experts and they need sometimes to follow the ideas and suggestions of their "subject experts".

I started my career as a kind of "course leader" running outdoor based personal development programmes for apprentices, graduates, supervisors and managers. Most programmes were a week long and I had a team of three or four colleagues working with me, I was "designated" course leader and it was up to me to make sure that we made the best decisions in terms of ensuring that all the participants got the most out of the programme.

I had a background in the outdoors; I could get myself down a river, through a cave or up a rock face and I could instruct groups involved in the said activities, but I wasn't a subject expert in each activity – I was a bit of a "Jack of all trades". However, in the team there were subject experts; a senior caver, a senior canoeist, a senior climber, etc. who were far more experienced and far more expert than me in their subjects.

We had a "backbone" programme for the week but much of what we decided to do on a day-to-day basis was based on a mix of the dynamics within the group, the physical capacities of the

participants, the weather, our physical condition (days were long and tiring), equipment availability, etc.

Even though we weren't climbing the Eiger or canoeing down the Zambezi, safety was paramount in all of our choices; we were not "teaching" people to canoe or climb but providing opportunities for them to discover and develop themselves and what we were proposing needed to be demanding but with their physical reach – even if the participants perceived the activity as their personal Eiger or personal Zambezi.

On many occasions when we had to decide "what to do next", it was the "subject experts" who had the best ideas, my job was to compare the ideas and get a decision, ideally collectively, on which road (or river) to go down.

Once the decision had been made the subject expert took over the leadership and I went into follower mode, I was still the "leader" but was quite happy to take a backseat role and be an active follower using the technical skills that I had with regards to the activity; belaying, dragging people out of rivers, etc. – there were even occasions where I was "told" where "to go" and what "to do".

Those early years (some of the best years of my life) were a great leadership development experience for me and clearly showed that being a leader isn't all about having all the answers and making unilateral decisions.

I'm not unique in believing that being a leader is about "ensuring that decisions are made" and not solely "making decision"; but there seem to be a lot of leaders out there who just don't seem to want to listen to the subject experts that they have engaged – and have engaged specifically because they are subject experts.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not suggesting that being a leader is about making "wishy washy" collective compromises or not arguing one's own point of view, far from it; it's about

harnessing the collective leadership with the team and being comfortable in the “leader-follower” role.

“If I’m more intelligent than the team I have selected; I have selected the wrong people”