

The essential skill of 'Followership':
Should a 4* Leader be a 5* Follower?

It would be very difficult to have dipped a paddle a few times and not come across the notion of 'leader' in our sport. However, we don't often talk about 'followership' and if we do, it is usually in a very benign way. Leadership and followership are two interdependent skills. Both essential to a happy day out. The purpose of my musings are to explore the role of followership and consider it to be not only an essential skill in group paddles but also the foundation to being a good leader.

What do we mean by 'Leader'?

There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept. And there are probably as many definitions as Leaders.

In his book *Leadership Theory and Practice*, Professor Peter Northouse takes the central components from 65 different classifications of leadership, and distils them into the following definition: 'Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (Northouse, 2016, p. 6)

That'll do for me!

We can consider style of leadership. And this is where it becomes very interesting. Consider the variables in sea kayaking. Environment, weather, kit, people... No one size fits all here! Examples could range from an autocratic, military style in extremis to laisier faire bumble on a sunny afternoon. Paddlers themselves will be equally wide in their style and approach. So, our sea kayak leader will need a quiver of leadership skills and the ability to choose which to draw. Quite a challenge and not easily taught on a couple of formal days training.

What do we mean by 'Followership'

Again, you don't have to look far to find multiple definitions! However, in our game this definition makes sense to me:-

'Followership is the process of attaining one's individual goals by being influenced by a leader into participating in individual or group efforts toward organisational goals in a given situation'. Followership thereby becomes seen as a function of the follower, the leader and situational variables (Wortman, quoted in Crossman and Crossman, 2011).

There are of course different types of followers. Robert Kelley (1988) points out that 'Followership is not a person but a role' and explains that 'effective followers and effective leaders are often the same people playing different parts at different hours of the day.'

In many respects, being a good follower follows the same characteristics as being a good leader with many of the skills and attributes required of an effective follower also seen in an effective leader.

Some examples applied to sea kayaking:-

- Communication - 'Let's keep the group together'
- Independent thinking - 'Where's Paul, did he go behind those rocks?'
- Judgemental - 'Wait until this set has gone through before we launch'
- Initiative - 'We can use this cable tie to fix the skeg'
- Collaboration - 'Steve, I'll kick your boat away to help you empty it'
- Diplomacy - 'Sue could you paddle with Nick, he could do with the company'
- Influencing - 'Hey, Ed try this paddle to get round the headland'
- Empathy - 'you ok?, tell me about your holiday'
- Self awareness and self management - 'I struggle in the heat. Must make sure I drink enough today and keep a hat on'. Or, 'I might find this hard. Take it steady'

Teaching such skills on a short training course is impossible. Logged journeys indicate we have been on trips and maybe participated as leader. But what has our approach been as a follower?

Kelley (1988) describes five groups:-

Sheep – passive and uncritical, lacking in initiative and a sense of responsibility. They perform the tasks given to them and stop.

Yes people – a livelier but equally unenterprising group. Dependent on a leader for inspiration, they can be aggressively deferential, even servile. In later work, Kelley refers to them as 'conformist followers'.

Alienated followers – critical and independent in their thinking but passive in carrying out their role. Often cynical, they tend to sink gradually into disgruntled acquiescence, seldom openly opposing a leader's efforts.

Survivors – perpetually sample the wind and live by the slogan 'better safe than sorry'. They are adept at surviving change.

Effective followers – think for themselves and carry out their duties and assignments with energy and assertiveness.

On the assumption that Canoe Clubs represent a cross section of people, I guess we will meet all types. As conscientious group paddlers, leaders and aspirant leaders we should all perhaps be pro-active in our efforts to be more 'effective followers'

I don't think a paddler has to be the strongest or most able to be an effective follower and I believe it is important for a novice to be aware of what constitutes good followership and works towards such skills. Training undoubtedly has a place both formal and perhaps less formal, alongside a

more experienced paddler on trips. (Thought - isn't that how it used to be done?)

Interestingly, some of the very best followers I have met, who happened to be very able paddlers themselves have absolutely no intention of ever being leaders. Partly through lack of interest in the role and some have simply been put off by perceived expectations.

In a comprehensive review of the existing followership literature, Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) conclude that in the emerging field of followership research, there are two key approaches:

1. *Followership as a position or role* – this approach considers how followers' identities and behaviours influence leader attitudes, behaviours and outcomes
2. *Followership as a social process* – this approach looks at followership and leadership as being co-constructed in social and relational interactions between people.

In both scenarios, followership and leadership relationships are closely linked, each influencing and interacting with the other to create the best possible outcomes.

It surely makes absolute sense that followership skills should be viewed as prerequisites for effective leadership. I have paddled with many groups of individuals over the years. I have met paddlers from each of the five groups identified by Kelley (1988) and in some cases, in rather disparate paddling groups. The same groups where there has been considerable discussion over leadership and a desire to gain formal leadership awards.

"Miss, Miss can I lead?" Any Teacher will have heard similar shouts from children, hands clawing for the ceiling in hopeful anticipation. What is it about the notion of 'leading' that seems so exciting to many of us? Is it a strange anticipation of personal glory or do we actually consider the goals, needs and wants of our group?

On the basis of the arguments above the role and skills of followership should carry a similar level of debate to leadership, both essential skills for a safe, happy day on the sea and apprenticeship for aspirant leaders. Thus, my somewhat banal point; 'should 4* Leaders be 5* Followers?'

Maybe it is simply down to the implied meaning of the terms 'leader' and 'follower'. Whatever the reasons it's always a good exercise for us all to reflect on our dynamic roles within paddling groups, whatever our skill level, experience and whatever we call ourselves!

References:

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Richard Janes' thoughts on Followership
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