

Which is it: Leadership or Followership?

By Dr. Stephen A. Laser

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Key Points:

- Maybe the problem is “lack of followership” instead of “ineffective leadership”
- Effective leaders require cooperative followers
- Important to align values and interests of employees with management
- Having the right followers in place is as important as selecting the correct leaders

With the Presidential Election less than three months away, this newsletter is not about supporting Democrats or Republicans. In fact, it is my hope that at the end of this newsletter, the reader will not be able to distinguish which candidate I support – largely because I am still very much undecided.

Nevertheless, with the most important national election in a generation soon to take place, the topic of leadership is all abuzz. Both candidates have compelling stories. One a survivor of a North Vietnamese prison camp, who was offered an early release when the enemy realized they were holding the son of a admiral and refused it. The other, the first African American candidate, comes with a life story of achievement that spans the globe from Indonesia to Hawaii to the East Coast and most recently, Chicago. Sure each has flaws, but by and large they are excellent candidates. And even more importantly, for the first time in many, many years, voters will not be going to the polls to select the “lesser of two evils.”

The interesting question, however, is not whether either of these two individuals can lead, but instead whether the American people will be willing to follow their leadership. Case in point. When Bill Clinton was President of the United States, a large number of Americans disliked him intensely. In fact, there was a push to impeach him for having a tryst with an intern not much older than his own daughter. People vilified him, causing his wife to speak of a “vast right wing conspiracy” that was dedicated to the demise of her husband’s presidency. On the other hand, our incumbent President, George W. Bush, is equally hated, and I do mean hated. Comments such as “stupid,” “a disgrace to the American people,” and worse are often authored to describe President Bush.

Now, the people who detest George Bush are not the same people who despised Bill Clinton; quite the contrary. In fact, it is the highly partisan nature of our country that many of President Bush’s supporters led the charge to throw Bill Clinton out of office, while many of the Clinton faithful hated George Bush from the day he was sworn into office. While it would be easy to claim that the Bush haters felt the 2000 Presidential Election was “stolen” from their candidate, Al Gore, there is probably more to the story.

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These issues about followership are not going to go away or evaporate into thin air. We predict that if John McCain wins the presidency, most of those who reviled his predecessor, George Bush, will continue directing their anger at the new incumbent. Conversely, if Barack Obama is elected as the next President, those who detested Bill Clinton will come out of the woodwork and harass this individual with harsh criticism and vitriol. All of this is unfortunate. More importantly, this state of affairs makes it hard for anyone to govern successfully. Even if Barack Obama wants to set a new tone in Washington and reach out to the other side, will it happen? My sense is that it won't. Those deeply entrenched in their negative views about Obama simply will not allow themselves to be open to the notion of a more bi-partisan presidency. Moreover, no matter how hard John McCain tries to play his role as a maverick, his opponents won't buy into his style, and they will see his presidency as business as usual in Washington, especially under a Republican administration.

So what are we saying? As much as I wish it was not so, the country to a large degree has become ungovernable. Moreover, no matter how good our leaders are in terms of their vision for the future, their ability to show courage in the face of opposition, and their ability to demonstrate leadership by the example of their own values of hard work, honesty, and commitment, there will exist in this country, a persistent and sizable portion of the population that staunchly opposes them. How sad.

For organizations, there are ways to address problems with followership. Management can identify and hire the kinds of people who will work well with the prevailing leadership style at the company. Obviously, the larger the organization, the more difficult it becomes to accomplish this; however, examples exist of enterprises that have done a successful job of picking people who mesh with the values and vision articulated by top leadership. This is not to imply that in following such a strategy, a company is creating clones or promoting a culture of acquiescence and slavish agreement to the will of corporate management. In fact, one of the tenets of making an organization effective is to align the values and interests of those who lead with those who follow.

In the case of our country, of course, the problem is much larger and less easily solved. Clearly, if the problems we are discussing were simple to solve, they would have been fixed long ago. While we all like simple answers to complex questions, there are no simple answers to this set of problems. Except in totalitarian states, fixing issues with followership is not easily addressed. Gulags and deportation are not the hallmarks of a free society. While enormous pressure (and ultimately blame) will be placed on either of the candidates who emerges as President of the

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Upcoming Topics:

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United States to fix the problems facing our nation, we fear the situation is beyond their control or their capacity in spite of their outstanding leadership abilities. Therefore, until we are ready to look at ourselves and see the role we as followers play in hindering the effective governance of our nation, no leader no matter how charismatic or courageous can solve the problems we face as a nation.

In sum, the crisis of leadership that the media and the public like to bemoan as a national malaise regarding the failure of leaders to lead is really a crisis of followership. Our country is not on the wrong track because of George Bush, and it was not on the wrong track because of Bill Clinton. Moreover, if Barack Obama is our next President, our continued problems will not be the fault of his failure to lead, anymore than it will be John McCain’s fault that the country continues to drift if he wins this November. While many of us are leaders in our private and public lives as mothers and fathers, coaches and teachers, managers and supervisors, in the end we are all followers behind our elected leaders. Until, we take the responsibility for what we do to make our country a better place to live, the blame game will continue and each new group of leaders will fail to meet our unrealistic and unreasonable demands and expectations. In short, the failure of leadership in America is a failure of followership.