Lesson 9: Followership

Introduction

This lesson consists of:

1. Followership

2. Partnering

3. Case Study

4. Student Journal entry for Followership

5. Bonus Section: Leading Up

Assignment

1. **Read Course Guide for Followership and Partnering**

2. When you solve the case study or act as a leader in your organization:

I*.* ***Identify*** the **Areas of Interest**.

II. ***Analyze*** the situation using the theories of Effective Followership and Partnering.

A. ***Classify*** the follower(s) in terms of:

1. Quality of Thinking

2. Active/Passive

B. ***Classify*** the follower(s) in terms of:

1. Performance Initiative

2. Relationship Initiative

III***. Explain*** howfollowers can become leaders by Leading Up and how leaders develop followers to become leaders.

3. **Complete a Student Journal Entry** for Effective Followership.

Think of a time when you have been a follower. Classify your behavior and that of someone who was a different type of follower. How did the two follower styles affect the leader’s efforts to influence others to achieve the organization’s goals? What style(s) would have been more effective in helping your leader(s)?

FOLLOWERSHIP

Introduction

Perhaps no single researcher has studied followers and followership more than Robert Kelley. According to Kelley’s own account, this has not been without considerable misunderstanding, if not ridicule, from others. To that end, ask yourself, “How do I view followership?” Leaders cannot exist without followers. The two are inseparable. Many traits of great leaders are also found in effective followers. In fact, we spend most of our organizational lives as followers, even when we also take on leadership roles.

Leaders often serve as followers in some capacity. Managers report to directors, directors to vice presidents, and vice presidents to presidents. Even in the military, colonels report to generals. Leadership and followership go hand in hand.

Interestingly, there isn’t always a clear connection between good followership and good leadership. Not all effective leaders were strong followers, and not all strong followers become effective leaders. This may be due to a lack of reflection on their followership experiences and the lessons they offer for personal growth.

Since leadership is a two-way process and most people act as both leaders and followers, this chapter explores leadership by focusing on followers. It examines several aspects, including the relationship between leaders and followers, how follower traits impact leadership, follower styles, and effective partnerships.

Followership is defined as the role of followers in a leadership process; it means committing and working cooperatively with other followers and leaders to achieve shared goals by harmonizing individual roles and goals with the larger vision of the group (or the larger vision of an organization community, or society), and may include acting like a leader when the situation requires.

This means that followers are just as responsible for accomplishing the mission as leaders. Followers are part of the process and should be just as invested in the success as the leader.

The characteristics of good followership are:

* Initiative
* Accountability
* Dependability
* Learning from others
* Responsibility
* Effective communication
* Commitment

Followership Styles

Kelley has studied followership not as the antithesis of leadership but rather with the view that followers are *collaborators* with leaders in the work of organizations.

Followership behaviors can be classified using a two-dimensional taxonomy.

One of these dimensions ranges from **independent**, **critical thinking** at one end to **dependent**, **uncritical thinking** at the other end.

The best followers are those who think independently, provide constructive feedback, stay true to themselves, and are creative and innovative. On the other end of the spectrum, the worst followers need constant direction, lack initiative, and fail to think for themselves. Most followers fall somewhere in between—they follow instructions and avoid challenging leaders or the group. However, independent critical thinking alone doesn’t fully capture what makes highly effective followers.

The second dimension refers to a follower’s degree of active engagement in work. This dimension ranges from **active** to **passive**. According to Kelley, the best followers take initiative, take ownership of their work, actively participate, are self-starters, and consistently go above and beyond. On the other hand, the worst followers are passive, lazy, need constant prompting, require close supervision, and avoid responsibility. In between are the average followers, who complete tasks without supervision once directed, focus on covering themselves, and adapt their behavior to fit the situation.

Kelley argued that behavior tends to remain consistent over time, making it possible to classify people into five follower styles using his two-dimensional model. We’ll explore each style individually and finish with the ideal: the exemplary follower.

Alienated Followers

Alienated followers act like a constant source of frustration within their organizations, often focusing on the negatives of goals, policies, and procedures while ignoring the positives. According to Kelley, this style is seen in 15–25% of followers. These individuals are capable but cynical, often holding back their best efforts or displaying grudging compliance. Interestingly, their self-perception often clashes with how leaders see them. Alienated followers may view themselves as independent thinkers with healthy skepticism or as the organization’s moral compass. In contrast, leaders often see them as troublesome, negative, headstrong, and lacking teamwork or judgment—sometimes even hostile. Kelley suggests that alienated followers are often former exemplary followers who became disillusioned by setbacks or challenges. To return to being exemplary, they must reflect on their behavior and shift their negativity toward constructive problem-solving.

Conformist Followers

Conformist followers are the “yes people” of organizations. They actively carry out orders but fail to critically evaluate them, which can be risky if those orders conflict with ethical standards or organizational policies. While they work hard and are committed, their unquestioning obedience can lead to serious consequences. Historical examples include the followers of Lt. William Calley during the My Lai massacre in Vietnam and Nazi functionaries in World War II concentration camps. More recently, Oliver North demonstrated this style during the Iran-Contra hearings, stating he didn’t question his superiors.This behavior is often influenced by an authoritarian leader or a rigid organizational structure. Around 20–30% of followers exhibit this style, which may also stem from a personality tendency toward submissiveness, conflict avoidance, or self-deprecation. Despite their challenges, conformists already possess one key trait of exemplary followers: active participation. To grow, they must learn to critically evaluate ideas, including those of their leaders, and develop confidence in their own perspectives. Organizations benefit most when conformists add critical thinking to their commitment and hard work.

Pragmatist Followers

Pragmatist followers, often called “survivors,” rarely commit to work-group goals but have learned to avoid making waves. They prefer to blend in rather than stand out, making them mediocre performers who can slow down organizations. According to Kelley, pragmatists make up 25–35% of the workforce, staying in the middle of the road and presenting an ambiguous image—neither strongly positive nor negative. On the positive side, pragmatists help maintain balance by keeping things in perspective, understanding how to navigate the system, and preventing extreme organizational swings. However, these same traits can also be seen negatively—as political maneuvering, self-interest bargaining, risk aversion, or excessive adherence to bureaucratic rules. Like other follower types, pragmatists may adopt this style due to personal preference, organizational conditions, or both. Some use it as a survival strategy during turbulent times but remain in that mindset even when stability returns. Others simply avoid risk, prioritizing self-preservation over potential success. They often become skilled at mastering bureaucratic rules, ensuring they are protected before making any moves—such as waiting for multiple approvals before taking action. Pragmatists exist in a constant state of organizational survival. During crises, this approach may be necessary, but in more stable times, it can limit growth. If a pragmatist wants more than just survival, they must be willing to step out of their comfort zone and embrace a more engaged and effective followership style.

Passive Followers

According to Kelley, only 5–10% of followers fall into the **passive follower** category. These individuals lack the traits of exemplary followers, relying entirely on their leaders for direction. They show little enthusiasm, take no initiative, and require constant supervision. Their work is limited to assigned tasks, and they never go beyond expectations. Leaders often assume passive followers are simply lazy, incompetent, or unmotivated. While some may fit this description, many adopt this behavior as a response to leadership that discourages independent thinking. Research on teams suggests that followers often adjust their behavior based on their leader’s expectations and organizational conditions, rather than being inherently passive. To become more effective, passive followers must undergo significant change—just as pragmatists do. In some cases, they may find greater success by leaving an environment that reinforces their passivity.

Exemplary Followers

Unlike other follower styles, exemplary followers present a consistent image to everyone they interact with—leaders, co-workers, and peers alike. They are seen as independent, innovative, creative, and unafraid to challenge authority when necessary. Exemplary followers use their talents to benefit the organization, even when facing bureaucratic obstacles or dealing with less effective colleagues, such as passive or pragmatist followers.

Effective leaders recognize the value of exemplary followers. Exemplary followers excel in both critical dimensions of followership—independent thinking and active engagement—and are essential to organizational success. Leaders should prioritize selecting individuals with these qualities and, more importantly, foster conditions that encourage such behavior. Kelley noted one other critical benefit to be gained from exemplary followers. They know how to get along with their co-workers and leaders in ways that benefit the organization.

According to Kelley, exemplary followers possess and use skills that other types of followers do not. These skills include:

* Self-leadership
* Focus, commitment, and motivation for incentives beyond personal gain
* Competence and credibility
* Honest courageous conscience
* Ego control

Exemplary followers try to support their superiors. They make their superior’s job easier by being proactive. Exemplary followers are committed to a cause greater than themselves, and they anticipate and fulfill organizational needs. These types of followers can be delegated responsibility and do not require close supervision. Exemplary followers hold themselves to a higher standard than the organization does, and they continually seek out learning and new experiences that contribute to achieving their greater goals. Adherence to a personal ethical framework is also a hallmark of the exemplary follower. This is in part a result of their independent critical thinking, which stimulates ethical analysis of their personal and professional actions.

While they try to support their superiors, they do not blindly accept their superior’s, or even the organization’s, definition of ethical behavior. These followers practice moral courage in pursuing the greater good that they are committed to achieving. Furthermore, they will disagree with their superiors but will do so in a manner that is not threatening and with the organization’s benefit in mind.



Partnering

In addition to studying followership, it's essential to consider the concept of partnering, which focuses on the quality of relationships between leaders and followers rather than their individual traits. Interviews with successful leaders and followers reveal that the most effective relationships feel like true partnerships. In a strong partnership, both sides understand that long-term success depends on shared achievements. They remain flexible, willingly switching between the roles of leader and follower as needed to best support the goals of the group or organization.

Rosenbach, Pittman, and Potter began their research with two key assumptions:

1. Followers do not intend to fail—they give at least the minimum effort needed to keep their jobs.
2. Leaders do not purposely alienate the people they rely on for success.

However, most followers have not been taught that taking the initiative to strengthen their relationship with a leader can lead to greater effectiveness. Efforts to build these relationships are often misunderstood by both parties as self-serving or manipulative rather than as a genuine attempt to form an effective partnership. To address this, the research team has developed a tool to help leaders and followers create stronger, more productive partnerships.

Like Kelley’s work, the work of Rosenbach, Pittman, and Potter has developed around these two dimensions: a commitment to high performance and a commitment to develop effective relationships with their partners. Taken together, these two dimensions, **performance initiative** and **relationship initiative**, define four types of followers who are familiar to students of the workplace: the **subordinate**, the **valued contributor**, the **politician**, and the **partner**.

**Types of Followers and Their Characteristics**

1. **The Subordinate**  
   The subordinate represents the “traditional” follower who simply follows instructions. They focus on keeping their job and may advance in organizations where seniority matters, but they show little sensitivity to relationships or commitment to high performance. Their behavior is similar to Kelley’s “passive follower.”
2. **The Valued Contributor**  
   The valued contributor is an exemplary worker known for their hard work and high-quality results. They are thorough, creative, and resourceful, ensuring they have the skills, information, and tools to succeed. However, they do not prioritize workplace relationships, focusing instead on their tasks.
3. **The Politician**  
   Politicians prioritize managing relationships over delivering strong performance. They are highly attuned to interpersonal dynamics and can offer valuable insights into group relationships. These skills are particularly helpful when dealing with conflicts or navigating tricky team dynamics. However, they often neglect their job responsibilities in favor of focusing on relationships, which can become problematic when others rely on them to deliver results.
4. **The Partner**  
   The partner balances a commitment to both high performance and effective relationships. They invest energy into building relationships to gain insights that lead to better plans, actions, and contributions. This combination allows them to anticipate new opportunities and address unmet goals effectively.

The Performance and Relationship Questionnaire (PRQ), developed by Rosenbach, Pittman, and Potter in 1996, is still in use today. This tool is designed to assess effective followership behaviors by evaluating individuals' performance and relationship dynamics within organizations. Recent studies have utilized the PRQ to measure followership behaviors, indicating its continued relevance in leadership and organizational research. The two key dimensions are **performance initiative** and **relationship initiative**.

### **Performance Initiative:**

### This dimension measures how effectively a follower contributes to completing their tasks and adapting to change. It includes four components:

1. **Doing the Job** – How well the follower focuses on completing assigned tasks.
2. **Self as Resource** – How much the follower values and utilizes their own skills and abilities.
3. **Working with Others** – How effectively the follower collaborates with co-workers.
4. **Embracing Change** – The follower’s attitude toward organizational and environmental changes.

### **Relationship Initiative**

### This dimension focuses on how the follower builds and maintains relationships with the leader. It includes four components:

1. **Identifying with the Leader** – How well the follower understands and supports the leader’s vision.
2. **Building Trust** – How actively the follower fosters mutual trust with the leader.
3. **Courageous Communication** – The follower’s willingness to communicate openly and honestly with the leader.
4. **Negotiating Differences** – How effectively the follower works through disagreements with the leader.



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Case Study

You are Captain Brock Coulson, a geographic sector commander. After attending a meeting with your chief and his staff at the Police Department Headquarters downtown, you scheduled a meeting for your watch commanders and staff to discuss some changes in the geographic area of responsibility that comprises your sector. You have been given several additional blocks that take you to the edge of a high crime area with a history of violent crimes and other social ills. You tried to convince the chief not to make this reorganization of geographic boundaries, but you were unsuccessful. Now you are stuck with a plan you don’t like.

As you finish the routine items of information, you begin to describe the planned changes to your leadership team. The first reaction comes from Lt. Joe Smith who says, “Captain, you know you can count on me. My guys and I are with you no matter what, and we’ll make this thing work. Don’t worry about us.”

Lt. Frank Thompson chimes in by asking “Are you sure we should be taking on this added territory now? We are already short several patrol officers, and our guys are pulling too much overtime right now. The budget is stretched really thin, and morale is going down. If we have to move into a high crime area, that means more patrol officers will be needed at night and on weekends. I just don’t know whether this is a good idea or not.”

Lt. Alice Toklas, who usually listens to others before she speaks and has to be pushed to follow through on things, especially when she seems unsure or disagrees, then states, “This is the last straw. I can’t get any more out of my people, and if we have to add to our area, then I just don’t know how any one can expect us to be effective. Those people at Headquarters are just out of touch, not to mention they’re sucking up way too much lately to the politicians who run this town. What’s the chief trying to do, become the next city manager?”

You can see this is going to be a tough sell when Lt. Thompson asks, “How much overtime money is there going to be for this until the department can hire some more people and get them trained? That will take months, maybe even a year or two.”

Smith snaps, “I just don’t understand you guys. We’re supposed to be leaders, so whatever the Captain says, we’re going to do, like it or not.”

Lt. Willy Webb then joins in the discussion. “I don’t like it, and I think you ought to go back to the chief and tell him how we feel and how hard this is going to be on all of us. But if we have to do it, let us figure it out and we’ll find a way to make it work.”

You want to be sure you hear the views of everyone, so you ask Lt. Abner Strong, who hasn’t said anything yet, what he thinks. Abner says, “It doesn’t matter to me. Whatever most people think is fine with me. I don’t much care one way or another. We just get dumped on all the time anyway, so what difference does it make what I think.”

Thompson then suggests that all of the lieutenants get together after the meeting and spend some time brainstorming how to juggle people and cover all the bases. You thank everyone for their input and declare the meeting over, wondering whether there is enough support to make this change or not. You are also beginning to wonder how you could get the chief to consider some ways to cover the city other than this one, which seems to be putting a band-aid on an arterial bleed.

After you have left and walked out of earshot, Alice says to Frank Thompson, “I have never seen such blatant brown nosing! You are already number one on the new captain’s list--lighten up. The same goes for you, Joe, everyone knows you are the perpetual brown noser. This idea sucks! You guys can kiss a-- all you want, but I’m not doing any more than I have to do to stay off the captain’s s--- list.”

Willy Webb joins in saying, “Alice, you need to start earning your pay. All you do is gripe and complain. You must be one heckuva test-taker!”

Then Thompson says, “We’ve either got to find a way to make this work or help Brock put together a plan to convince the chief to rethink his decision and put it off until we have the manpower to do it right. Now let’s see what we can come up with so we don’t get this jammed up our butts.”

Abner mumbles, “Whatever,” as the others begin to put ideas on the white board while Alice looks on silently.

Complete all steps in the Leader Thought Process.

I. (Step I) ***Identify*** the **Areas of Interest**.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

(If necessary, continue listing **Areas of Interest** on another page.)

II. (Step II) ***Analyze*** the situation using the theories of Effective Followership and Partnering.

What is the relationship among the Areas of Interest listed above? More specifically, is there a chronological order or **logical chain of events** that helps you make sense of the facts you have? If so, outline the time sequence of events.

Classify each of the lieutenants in terms of the follower style they used during the meeting.

Joe Smith

Frank Thompson

Alice Toklas

Willy Webb

Abner Strong

Brock Coulson\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Classify each of the followers in terms of their partnering style.

Joe Smith

Frank Thompson

Alice Toklas

Willy Webb

Abner Strong

Brock Coulson\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

III. (Step II) ***Explain*** the effects of the various follower styles on the motivation, performance, and satisfaction of Captain Coulson’s leadership team.

Who is leading up or has anticipated the need for leading up?

How can any of the followers in this situation lead those above them in the organization? What would you do in a similar situation? What conditions must be present in order for followers to lead up?

Describe how leaders can develop followers to act like leaders when necessary, and to become the formal leaders of the organization in the future.

Do the facts of the case and your explanation form a pattern that allows you to identify a fundamental or **root cause** (i.e., is there something in the case information that suggests it is the underlying cause of all or most of the Areas of Interest)?

Name:

**Complete a Student Journal entry** for Effective Followership.

Think of a time when you have been a follower in your department. Classify your behavior and that of someone who was a different type of follower. Were you and the other person active or passive followers? Did you exercise critical, independent thinking or uncritical, dependent thinking? What kind of thinking did the other person use? Which of the four follower styles were you using? Which style did the other person use? How did the two follower styles affect the leader’s efforts to influence others to achieve the organization’s goals?

Bonus Section: Leading Up

Throughout the many years “Developing Leaders for Texas Law Enforcement” has been taught, a consistent question arises – *how do I get organizational support to implement the concepts we are learning?* In some cases, the leaders who go through this course receive ample support. In other cases, leaders are sent by their organization as a “check-the-box” activity. To be clear, the Texas Police Chiefs Association and the instructors for Developing Leaders for Texas Law Enforcement *do not* approach this course with a “check-the-box” mindset. We wholeheartedly believe in the program.

That being said, the question above about organizational support is quite common. How do you influence the leaders you report to, and possibly the whole organization, to believe these leadership approaches are valuable and to support you in your efforts to apply the concepts?

There are two broad points to consider in any discussion about “leading up” – which is any time you are trying to influence your superiors:

1. the way you approach these types of conversations is very important
2. there is a possibility you may be unsuccessful

Here are several things to keep in mind:

* Successfully leading up will require emotional intelligence on your part, as well as on the part of your leader. You cannot control their level of emotional intelligence, but you can enhance your own.
* The quality of your relationship with your leader is a significant factor. If you have a strong relationship characterized by trust, you will probably be more likely to influence them.
* Plan your communication in advance and craft your message so that your impact is aligned with your intent. Try to identify where they might challenge you. What questions might they have? Do your best to imagine yourself in their seat. What concerns are they already dealing with, and what will this new approach require from them?
* Understand that new ideas and the possibility of new ways of doing things can come across as a threat. People’s natural response to threats is to stop or escape the threat. When it comes to leading up, this will often take the form of “no” followed by something along the lines of “because that’s the way we’ve always done it.”
* If you are seen as too much of a threat, history has repeatedly shown that the organization will (typically) do what it needs to do to protect itself. Be very intentional about which battles you choose to fight.

The topic of leading up could be an entire course in and of itself. To help you in your efforts, we are including this bonus section, which is a collection of articles in their original form that were included in the first version of the course guide.

DYNAMIC SUBORDINANCY

William J. Crockett

**From *Training and Development Journal***, May, 1981, American Society for Training and Development. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

*We can teach people to become dynamic subordinates, and it’s time that we started!*

Our organizations are filled with subordinates, but few of us get much basic survival training for that role, not to mention training on how we might make those roles dynamic, synergistic and satisfying. But we spend a lot of time helping people to learn how to be effective leaders and in learning how to fulfill their leadership roles. I believe that it’s important for our organizations to start giving some attention to the development of the concept and role of followership, because leadership is but one strand in the complex web of human relationships that holds our organizations together.

Traditionally we have accepted the assumption that it’s primarily the boss’s job and responsibility to cause the work group to function well—and to take care of the people needs of subordinates so that the group is turned on and productive. Bosses have borne the chief responsibility in the past for the vitality of their relationships with the subordinates, and for the quantity and quality of their work.

But the successful and effective boss/subordinate relationship not only demands some things of bosses, it also demands some things of followers as well. Therefore, subordinates can and should be more than passive robots to be manipulated and used by bosses. They have the responsibility—as well as the opportunity—for making the situation a good one, win/win for themselves as well as for the boss.

Another very pragmatic reason for our wishing to achieve excellence in followership is that we often get rewarded or punished as a result of our “followership” effectiveness. Our success in effectively filling our subordinancy roles is the key to our here-and-now security as well as to our future promotion and success. People get fired because they are ineffective subordinates. From this standpoint alone, the vitality and worth of the relationship is more important to the subordinate than it is to the boss—because it is the subordinate who has the most at stake!

There are three overlapping areas or ways for looking at our followership role and for mapping strategies for making that role more fulfilling to us, as well as more effective.

The first of these areas is the job itself. This includes how well we understand its mission and its accountabilities as well as its opportunities and the skills and attitudes this requires of us.

The second way of looking at our jobs is in terms of our relationships and, most especially, our relationship with our bosses.

The third area for review is our own feelings about our jobs, our bosses, and ourselves. Just what is our trust level and what can we do to improve it?

This article deals with each of these three areas and helps us to think through where we stand in each. It helps us to find the means of taking charge of our work lives rather than passively accepting what comes our way.

Finally, it also helps us to formulate an action plan for doing something about each of these three areas, for it is only by taking action that we can start to become more dynamic in our followership.

The Job Itself

Being a subordinate is very much like being a steward, i.e. assuming the responsibility for the well-being of something that belongs to another. Like the Biblical story of the good and bad stewards (Matthew 25: 14-30), the stewardship role is not fulfilled when it is just passively done. The good steward is dynamic and risk-taking in attending to the work that he has been given to do.

However, in order for us to be dynamic and risk-taking in our jobs, we must work through some things for ourselves and then with our bosses. To risk blindly is the action of a foolish person, and it courts ruin as well as success. The dynamism I am talking about is that which has a high chance of ending with success for the subordinate as well as for the boss—a win/win situation for both.

In order for us to be genuinely dynamo, we must have a strong launch pad of basic understanding about the job and our boss on which to base our actions. There are three ingredients that make up this basic launch pad. These are:

1. Know What the Job Is

In a survey, a group of top-level businesspeople failed to agree upon the exact acts of subordinancy that would insure the success of their subordinates. But they did agree upon the point that the subordinate must know precisely what it is that his/her boss expects! Doing a number of things well will not suffice if the boss doesn’t care about those things. Therefore, no amount of effort in these areas will make the subordinate succeed if he/she fails to perform well in the one or two things that the boss holds dear.

Another area of potential misunderstanding around the job comes from ambiguity about the job itself. The more ambiguity there is in a job, the greater the danger in terms of the subordinate’s not delivering what the boss really expects. The initiation of discussions with the boss about expectations for the tasks and responsibilities of the job is one of the first and most important responsibilities (and opportunities) of a subordinate.

It is absolutely essential that the critical success factors of the task, i.e. the boss’s expectations, be known and understood by the subordinate. It is far too easy to overlook them in the first place, or to push them out of focus due to the multiplicity of non-essential tasks and loadings that the job (the subordinate) has acquired. The subordinates have the best opportunity to know these loadings because they have the first-hand data. Therefore, it is the subordinate’s responsibility to initiate discussions with the boss to surface expectations about the job: its accountabilities, its goals, its content, its priorities, its methodology, its standards, etc. Boss/subordinate discussions around the context and meanings of the subordinate’s job, when they are initiated by the subordinate’s genuine concern for the boss and his/her best interest rather than from the subordinate’s dissatisfaction, can be a dynamic and exhilarating experience for a subordinate. If subordinates will take the pains to be objective in documenting their case, and if they will present it in a genuine concern for the boss, then the subsequent discussion can be free from emotion, tension and acrimony.

One important piece of self-research we can do is to develop data about the job:

a. The accountabilities…what end results am I accountable for?

b. The critical accountabilities…the ones that have the most leverage if accomplished and those that have the most risk if not accomplished.

c. The ways I now spend my time and how that relates to No. 1 and No. 2 above.

2. Know How to Do the Job

The value that the boss places upon a subordinate is in relationship to how well the subordinate enhances the effectiveness of the boss’s domain—how well the job is done. The short-sighted subordinate will conceive it to be the boss’s responsibility to discover deficiencies, for training, to promote, to look after his/her career, and to help in the subordinate’s success. And of course bosses do have some of these responsibilities.

One unyielding requirement for us if we are to be successful subordinates is that we can objectively look at ourselves and our skills in relation to the skills that the job requires. If we can do this, and can see our own deficiencies, then we can, through training and development, acquire the needed skills. This aggressive self-examination of our needs and our taking charge of our own self-improvement is another way dynamic subordinates distinguish themselves from their more passive colleagues.

Dynamic subordinates don’t wait. They soon take on that responsibility for their own professional development. They don’t own their territory, for their boss can fire them at will. But the one thing that all subordinates do own, and which no one can take away, is their expertise—their professionalism. This is the most personal, most valuable, and most absolute territory a person can have. No one can hold capable people back. Their professionalism and talents will become known, will be needed, and will be requested—if not by their boss, then by others.

The wise subordinate is the learning, developing, experience-seeking person who becomes independent because he/she is a professional! The wise subordinate never uses the maddening excuse—”That isn’t my job,” but will seize upon every opportunity for learning something new and having a new experience.

3. Do the Job

The end product that a boss expects from a subordinate is a job well done—whatever it is that well done means to the boss. A subordinate succeeds, gets rewarded, and receives accolades and promotions based mostly upon successful fulfillment of his/her here-and-now duties.

Do the job! That’s what the boss expects and that’s what we are receiving our pay as subordinates to do. That’s what will lead us to success in the future.

It is said that there are three requirements for successful followership, i.e. for getting the job done. These are:

* knowing *what* the job is
* knowing *how* to do the job
* *doing* the job.

Knowing what the job is and having the required skills to do it with will not get the job done if the person is not motivated to do it with zest. One of the most powerful, drags to productivity in America is lack of motivation.

To become de-motivated is the emotional result of all that we see happening to us in the work place. When we are de-motivated we don’t care whether or not we do the job or whether we do it well or badly. Or maybe we are so turned off and angry that our hidden objective is to really punish the organization and our boss! If we are in this frame of mind, then we have but two logical choices:

a. to pull ourselves out of this pit and rekindle our positive drive, or

b. to leave.

For the inevitable consequence of our staying in this negative frame of mind is sooner or later to be fired.

One plan of dynamic action that I can suggest for us if we are in this state is to make an objective (it’s hard to be objective now) analysis of our entire situation:

a. search for and identify all of the negative emotional producers;

b. search for and identify the positive emotional producers (there will surely be some of these);

c. carefully analyze and examine the impact of each of these negatives and positives upon us;

d. think through ways that we can unhook ourselves from our participation in the negative producers;

e. think of ways that we can create other positive producers and enhance those that now exist; and

f. make a plan of action.

This whole analysis ideally should be shared with a trusted friend who will tell us honestly what his/her reactions are and not just what we would like to hear.

Another potential reason for our demotivation may be our feeling that we have been given little or no freedom by our boss to get our job done. Freedom of action in getting our job done has these components:

* free to determine the substance (the what)
* free to determine the timing of when things will be done (the when)
* free to determine how the job will be done (the how)
* free to determine who will be responsible for doing the job (the who)
* free to determine the cost of doing it (the cost).

Sometimes bosses just don’t give their subordinates enough freedom to enable them to feel worthwhile, trusted, and turned on.

We can analyze each of our major accountabilities on the preceding five dimensions to get an objective evaluation of our freedom. If our analysis demonstrates to us that we aren’t being given enough freedom around an accountability, or on one or more of the above dimensions, we then have objective data to take to our boss for discussion. If this is the case, we need to carefully devise an action plan of how we will confront the boss as well as what we plan to confront him/her with.

The possibility exists that we subordinates can badly misread the realities about us and thereby we may have actively created our own demotivation out of nothing more than our own misperceptions. If this is the case, we’ll need a *personal* action plan. On the other hand, of course, the possibility also exists that our analysis and our subsequent discussions with our boss only serve to confirm our worst fears and suspicions…the situation is a lost cause! If this is the case, then it will require a different kind of an action plan from us—a plan to leave!

One of the key dimensions to dynamic subordinancy is the psychological willingness and the professional capability of the subordinate to be independent of the boss and the job whenever I, the subordinate, want the end to come. When I find myself depressed and demotivated and I have done all that I could to change the conditions causing this, then it’s time to think about leaving. When it becomes apparent to me that I can’t respect my boss, don’t approve of my boss, can’t trust my boss, again, it’s time to think about leaving. When I find myself wanting to punish my boss, feeling that I must compete with my boss, and am moved to badmouth and belittle my boss, then it’s far past time for me to move on. To stay under such conditions is to prostitute myself for money with little sense of commitment and loyalty. To stay is to lose my self-respect as a human being. To stay is to eventually fail.

Perhaps our willingness to leave a situation whenever it no longer meets our needs, fulfills our values, turns us on, or challenges our expertise, is the most important single measure for insuring that we remain dynamic as a subordinate. This is the key to our own freedom and to our self-esteem.

Boss-Subordinate Relationships

Everyone knows that there is a lot more involved in a job than just getting the job done, no matter how well we do it from a substantive point of view. One critical factor for success in any job is the quality of the relationship we have been able to create with our boss.

This relationship, like all relationships, is a mutual responsibility to develop and to nourish. But since it has so much significance for the future growth and success of the subordinate, we must go to extra lengths to try to cause the relationship to become a good one. Some of the things we can do are:

1. Challenge

We must obey the legal demands of our bosses, but in doing so we do not have to lose our self-esteem nor take on the hangdog pose of the servant. We can become the trusted adviser to whom the boss comes to get the straight dope. No one, not even our boss, can be completely infallible. Humans at all levels will make mistakes occasionally. Most managers are thinly spread over wide stretches of important and diverse activities. As a result, they can be caught in trivial errors that take on more importance than they have in real substance. Wise subordinates will be alert to ways that they can rescue their boss from mistakes of commission and omission.

Most good bosses don’t like subservience and don’t trust “yes” people. Most bosses want subordinates who will challenge their ideas, differ with their decisions, give them data, put forward new ideas for doing things, and who will care to be uniquely themselves. But to get away with this kind of behavior requires that the subordinate come from a base of absolute trust and not from competitive counter dependency. To gain this preferred role, a subordinate must have:

* Demonstrated absolute personal respect and loyalty to the boss in other situations.
* Gained the boss’s admiration and respect for his/her professionalism, for the accuracy of his/her data, for the timeliness of his/her reports, and for his/her emotional maturity.
* Never publicly played win/lose games at the boss’s expense.
* Gotten the boss’s job done to the boss’s expectations when the decision was finally made.

The role of loyal opposition or devil’s advocate is an important one for all subordinates to learn—if they can also learn to use it from a solid base of trust. They must learn, when practicing it, to come across as caring rather than punishing, collaborative rather than competitive, probing rather than judging.

The way this is done—how it is done—is often far more important than what the substance is.

2. Inform

Closely associated with the concept of subordinancy is the irksome chore of accounting for our activities. Like obedience, most of us stopped accounting to anyone when we left home. And now that we are at work, we must once more account to someone—our hierarchic superiors.

The reason for this accountability to the boss is that no subordinate, no matter if his/her title is dishwasher or president, has final accountability. We are not the full owner of the territory that we occupy. We may feel like an entrepreneur, act like a king, and be a saint. But in the final analysis, we are but a steward in the “master’s vineyard.”

Through the process of delegation, each subordinate is given a job to do by the boss. Some bosses tell their subordinates little, and others tell them much—how, when, who, where, why, how much, how often, how deep, how wide, etc. But in the end, every subordinate must account to the leader for his/her stewardship of what was done with the thing the boss assigned. It is the subordinate’s duty to give and the boss’s right to request this accounting.

It is the boss’s territory. It is the boss’s right to know. The boss must be told because he/she is also a subordinate to another boss who is also looking for that same accountability. And so it works, forever upward! The effective subordinate will fully and cheerfully perform this function of accountability. This, in reality, gives the subordinate a chance to put the boss at ease and create the first stirrings of trust.

A subordinate who, for whatever reason, elects *not* to account to the boss fully and honestly, can’t win. Such actions on the part of the subordinate as withholding information, diverting data, giving half-truths, forgetting, falsely telling, etc., whatever the excuse or rationale, are examples of no-win non-professional subordinancy. The system doesn’t condone such subordinate behavior—no matter what kind of a boss a subordinate may have or what the private rationale may be.

The dynamic subordinate will not only fully and cheerfully perform this function of accountability, but will initiate it! The subordinate’s challenge is to be able to account to the boss about the job honestly and factually and still retain the feeling of personal freedom and dignity.

3. Invite Him/Her In

All of us have a feeling of personal territory. My desk, my car, my coat, my home, my job, etc., are mine and are important to me. They are my territory and no one had better encroach uninvited into my domain! All of us seem to possess and exercise this “territorial imperative,” this personal ownership of the things that are ours, including our job.

There is one area, however, where a person cannot exercise such dominion with impunity—the job that the boss has delegated. It is still the boss’s territory because the boss still has accountability upward for the success of the job. The subordinate has been given only a temporary lease. The subordinate is the steward for the boss and is working to fulfill the job in the best way possible on behalf of the boss.

Some bosses, of course, for whatever reasons, will sometimes elect to respect the subordinate’s area and not intrude unasked into this domain. Other bosses make no bones about their right to tell the subordinate exactly how the boss wants the job to be done. Leaving out the psychological, motivational and productive consequences of such dominant boss behavior, there seems to be little question of the boss’s *right* to do just that. The reason for this rests upon the rule of accountability—the person who is accountable has the right! And since the subordinate’s boss is accountable upward, it is his/her right to have full access to the subordinate’s area of responsibility.

So the dynamic subordinates will open wide the gates of their job to the boss. They will invite him/her in to visit frequently. They will proudly show him/her the situation, explain the improvements, ask for help on problems, and seek the boss’s ideas for change.

The subordinate who can share his/her area of responsibility with the boss with unlimited and uninhibited trust, in turn, makes the boss his/her advocate—partner—and gains additional trust and freedom as a result. It’s the win/win way to go! The challenge to the subordinate is in fulfilling his stewardship responsibilities to the boss without falling into the trap of claiming ownership of the territory that the subordinate has so skillfully created and built.

4. Ask for Feedback

The job that a person does is always emotionally loaded by the subordinate’s perceived behavior of the boss—and most importantly, the subordinate’s interpretation of the meaning of that behavior. Whatever the boss does or does not do in the course of a relationship, day after day, has implied (and sometimes overt) meaning for the subordinate about the boss’s intentions and attitude.

For example, if the boss may seem to withhold important data that the subordinate believes is needed in order to do a job properly; if the boss doesn’t invite him/her to the meetings that he/she thinks are important; if the boss looks at him/her in certain ways; if the boss appears at unusual times; and on and on, the subordinate may wonder *why*. In such cases, the subordinate supplies the reasons and the motives for the boss’s behavior—and in many cases those reasons and motives, in the mind of the subordinate, may portray the boss’s dissatisfaction.

This is the start of distrust, suspicion, ill will, disloyalty, and outright animosity on the part of the subordinate. Over time, these emotions can build to the point of causing the relationship to end.

The sad thing in our human relationships is that very often the subordinate’s *perception* of the boss and the situation is entirely incorrect. And in such instances, subordinates again have the responsibility to act, because it is they who have the data, i.e., their perception of the boss’s behavior and their inferences of the meanings of that behavior. So, it is the subordinate who has the burden of taking the matter up with the boss.

In such cases, wise subordinates will choose the time and place carefully. They will also take the responsibility for the feelings that they have and the way they express them to the boss. For example, don’t start out by saying “you do so and so,” but rather “I feel so-and-so.” Usually the boss will ask “why,” and then the subordinate can describe his/her perceptions of the behavior and his/her inferences of the meaning (impact) of that behavior. This can be the beginning of a very fruitful building process that may become ongoing.

This kind of dynamic behavior on the part of a subordinate will do much to keep the boss/subordinate relationship vital and unspoiled by the pollution of unfounded suspicions.

5. Help Give Feedback

The boss, also being human, will play the same game of perceptions and implied meaning that the subordinate plays.

The wise subordinate will be aware of two important facts:

* That the boss does indeed look at the subordinate’s behavior and wonder at the implied meanings it may hold.
* That the boss may not have the guts to openly and directly confront the subordinate about the things that the subordinate does that the boss doesn’t like. It may be the boss’s tendency to “store up” resentments and irritations over little things without telling subordinates. And if this is so, this holds grave danger for the subordinate, the subordinate may be blissfully unaware of the deep resentment and irritation that some part of his/her behavior is stirring in the boss. The danger is that one little thing the subordinate may inadvertently do may wipe out the boss’s perception of all the good things the subordinate has been doing. And in fact, these irritations may (can) result in the subordinate’s dismissal. The explosion of a boss’s pent-up emotions can be dangerous to all subordinates.

The dynamic subordinate will take the initiative to probe with the boss for these hidden reservoirs of resentment. One of the best ways of doing this is for the subordinate to get the boss’s confidence, i.e. tell the boss of his/her hopes for success and to ask the boss for help—for coaching—for ideas—and for advice.

This may ease the situation so that the boss can feel free to express his/her feelings. And once this general base of expectations has been laid, then the subordinate should take the initiative to discuss the results of any major activity that he/she has fulfilled as to what went right, what went wrong, how the boss felt, etc. The process becomes critique, and not criticism.

Only the most constricted boss can fail to respond to the sincere searching of a subordinate for positive and helpful critique.

6. Share Your Needs

Subordinates also have needs, and wise bosses, realizing this, will attempt to understand and fulfill those needs. But—for whatever reasons—some bosses won’t do this or are unable to start the process.

Dynamic subordinates will not elect to feel hurt when they find that the boss is not very aware of their needs. They won’t sulk in their corner. They won’t, first off, try to find another job. Instead, they will stop waiting to be chosen and will start letting the boss know what it is that they want In reality, there is no way for another human being to actually know our needs unless and until we ourselves make them known. Oftentimes our needs do make sense to others, do fit in with higher goals and objectives, and can indeed be met. But it’s the subordinate’s responsibility to take the risk of making them known. That’s part of being dynamic.

7. Build Trust

The only relationship that is tenable for a subordinate to have is a constant, surging flow of two-way trust. Without such trust, nothing works well and the relationship is flat, unexciting and suspicious. There can be no real professionalism without trust.

Building trust is a mutual activity and is the responsibility of both the boss and the subordinate. But the subordinate must work at it harder, take the first initiative, and avoid the depletion of trust caused by ineffective behavior because the subordinate has so much to lose if the boss’s trust is lost.

When the boss loses trust, the subordinate has lost all.

Trust is built in tiny increments of positive behavior around the things that have already been mentioned: obedience with grace, accounting with absolute honesty, exercising unselfish stewardship, initiating access, and challenging and confronting. It is built by day-by-day evidence that the subordinate puts the boss’s interest first; does not upstage the boss; does not let the boss look bad; saves the boss from mistakes; rescues the boss from errors; and makes the boss believe that he/she is truly happy in second place. But getting the here-and-now job done on time, fully up to its standards and fully meeting the expectation that the boss has for it, is the single most powerful producer of trust. If a subordinate will do these things, one day his/her bank will overflow with trust!

Responsibility for Ourselves

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all for us is the opportunity we have for managing ourselves in ways that enable us to be proactive in our jobs and in our critical relationships. In my own experience, it has been neither an easy task nor a quick one. But it surely is one that is worthy of our consideration and hopefully, of our effort.

Self-management is taking charge of both our emotions and our behavior so that we are not just reactive robots to every emotional stimulus that becomes activated within us. Since our emotions are, potentially, powerful motivators of our behavior, then it seems to me that we need to learn a system that puts us in charge. But the fact that I may choose self-management as an option and the actual act of fulfilling that choice (i.e., making self-management an actuality in my life) are miles apart!

There follow some ideas on how we can make a start toward self-management.

1. Acquire Self-Awareness

Our first challenge is to be aware of our own behavior and the feelings it may trigger in others. Do we behave in ways that arouse feelings of anger, hatred, frustration, fear, insecurity, and distrust in others toward us? To the extent that we generate these feelings in others by our own behavior—and since feelings generally cause (motivate) dysfunctional or inappropriate behavior—then we are sometimes a direct catalyst of such behavior in others. Thus, in this sense our behavior is ineffective.

Since we each “own” our feelings and are responsible for our ways of reacting, we cannot “blame” others for our reactions. And when we hit someone’s hot button (either deliberately or by accident), we are participating in and contributing to their inappropriate behavior, whatever it is. Therefore, our challenge is to become aware of the impact of our own behavior and to behave in such ways that we do not set in motion destructive and inappropriate chains of behavior in others—and most especially our bosses.

One important aspect of self-awareness is to examine our habit patterns of dress, of facial expression, of body language and of speech. Have we fallen into the trap of “you knowing” the end of every sentence? Do we interrupt? Do we listen? Are we cynical? Self-awareness requires eternal vigilance of ourselves by ourselves and, if possible, a trusted friend to insure that we are indeed fully positive.

2. Managing Our Feelings and Our Behavior

a. Managing the Way I Behave—One way we can cope with our feelings is through a process of self-disciplined control of our behavior. This requires that we remind ourselves that we are responsible for our own behavior and can shape it in a variety of ways. We can each develop a *range* of ways of behaving to different persons, in different situations, and for different results. This is to say that sometimes one deals with a bastard as a bastard deserves!

However, it is well to remind ourselves that certain roles “call for” certain behavior (and control). Thus, parents have an obligation for restraint toward their children, or a boss needs to consider what responsibilities are for the well-being of his/her subordinates who have been entrusted to him/her by the organization, and subordinates must consider the boss’s need for respect and loyalty. This kind of self-restraint is not a denial of the feeling; it is an optional kind of behavior that we have selected for that person in that situation. Emotionally responsive behavior is not the only choice I have for coping with the way I feel. It’s just one way, and all too often it’s not the best way!

I believe that it’s worth my effort to manage my behavior for two reasons. First, because it does save us from many a behavioral blunder. Our perceptions aren’t always accurate enough in sensing the true feelings or motives of others, despite their overt behavior, for us to risk basing all of our behavior upon them. We cannot assume that we always make the correct evaluation of their intentions and interests toward us. And second, when we do succeed, it is a great psychic reward to us because of the increased “self-esteem” that flows to us from a successful encounter with ourselves. We can be responsible for our own behavior!

b. Managing the Way I Feel—My second option for self-management is harder even than the first. This is to embrace the concept that my emotions are also my own to deal with in just the same way as my behavior.

I know and accept the fact that no one can make me “feel motivated,” “feel trust,” “feel love,” “feel happy,” and so on, unless I, too, am a willing party to that process with another person. This does not mean a denial of the feeling once it is in being, but it does mean that I don’t need to have the feeling in the first place unless I lay the feeling upon myself.

For example, someone does something which I interpret in a way that means to me that I have been snubbed. The frequent “human” emotional response to that would be either anger or hurt—or maybe some of both. (In my case, I probably would feel both.) A common rejoinder is that the other person made me feel these ways, and the behavioral response might be to *get even* in some way or other—to punish the person either by overt act or by withdrawal.

But my feelings (emotions) are *not necessarily an automatic reaction* to the behavior of another, unless *I myself let them be* (maybe even want them to be!). It’s like turning on a light bulb. There is power in the line, but the bulb won’t shine unless I turn it on. There is behavior (power) in the system (the way the person acted), but my emotions (the light bulb) needn’t be (won’t be) activated—turned on—unless I want them to be.

I like this view, and have experimented with it enough myself to know that it is viable—though it is not easy, and I fail about as much as I succeed.

c. Our Response to Personally Hurtful Behavior—If I do what others demand of me just because my boss, my subordinates, or others get angry—swear, pout, threaten, and abuse me—then I have become a participant to their process. I am partially responsible for what they are doing to me. Their behavior is effective for them because it does achieve their objectives with me!

The most telling (best) response to the personally hurtful behavior of anyone is to deny that person the achievement of his/her objective when he/she uses hurtful and inappropriate behavior toward us (Workers in business and industry all over America are in reality doing this by their uncaring attitude about the job.) We all learn from our experience, and if our behavior doesn’t get the results that we want then we will change it pretty quickly!

3. Our Responsibility to Confront—We subordinates are enmeshed in a web of intricate and conflicting human relationships. We often feel that we are the pawns of powerful forces that use us, direct us, and sometimes discard us, at will. Perhaps the thing that is the most important for us to learn, to accept and to practice, is to assume full responsibility for ourselves, for our professional growth, and for our behavior. This means that we must learn to attain a high degree of self-management. This means that we do not delude ourselves as to what we wish for any situation, and that we know what we want to have happen for ourselves as well as for our bosses. This means that we keep ourselves close to the realities of our relationship and not let ourselves be carried away by our emotional fantasies.

Finally, this means that we have the internal personal security to take whatever risks there may be for insuring that all facets of our jobs and relationships are indeed dynamic. Perhaps the greater risk is not risking. The status quo may be the ultimate indignity.

Thus, our own self-discipline, self-management and professionalism become the underlying forces that fuel our dynamic subordinancy. We are indeed responsible for ourselves and for our own behavior. To me, this means that if I honestly have done all the foregoing, then I take the risk of telling the boss my perceptions of the situation—my degree of psychological pain and my solutions for changing the situation. If the boss, for whatever reason, can’t change either his/her own behavior or the situation, then I can exercise my final and ultimate freedom—I leave! I owe it to myself to do exactly this—not as a threat and not in anger, but for my own long-run self-esteem.

Edgar Friedenberg has said, “All weakness corrupts, and impotence corrupts absolutely.” The traditional state of subordinancy is powerlessness and dependency. But as we make people dependent, we increase their capacity to hate. As we make people powerless, we promote their capacity to violence.

The thing we must learn as bosses is how we can grant people freedom despite all of the demands that the work situation puts upon us.

The challenge we have as subordinates is to secure for ourselves an enhanced self-image, a sense of potency, and a feeling of significance without resorting to the ultimate power—violence! If all of us don’t learn how to achieve this for ourselves and how to teach others to achieve it for themselves, then our organizations are in for a continuing era of violence—not because people are bad, but because they hurt so much around the deprived condition of their human needs.

\* \* \*

“A major theme, dominant in setting the tone, was the assertion that me need to rediscover the phenomena of leadership; the pursuit of rigor and precision has led to an over-emphasis of techniques at the expense of knowing what is going on in a direct, human way.”

—James Lester

*“We need to understand the reality around us—the reality of the whole. The best social science reporting comes from journalism, not from researchers. Norman Mailer’s ‘Of a Fire on the Moon’ is an excellent example of someone’s immersing himself in and trying to understand a large complex system, rather than fragmenting it.”*

—Peter Vaill

THE UPWARD LEADER’S CALLING

From Michael Useem, *Leading Up: How to Lead Your Boss So You Both Win*, New York: Random House, 2001, pp. 279-294. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

None of us is ever likely to face the extraordinary conditions confronted by Sandy Hill Pittman on Mount Everest, George McClellan on the peninsula, or Roméo Dallaire in Rwanda, or to suffer the calamitous events that befell Joseph Johnston, Beck Weathers, or Thomas Wyman. Few of us will reach the heights of public responsibility achieved by Charlene Barshefsky, Domingo Cavallo, or Peter Pace—or the pinnacles of private enterprise achieved by Robert Ayling, David Pottruck, or Eckhard Pfeiffer. Few, if any, will shape a nation’s future as profoundly as did Robert E. Lee in 1863. All of us can only appreciate the accounts of what Abraham, Moses, and Samuel have given to others.

Yet we can all look to what they did—and in some cases did not do—to prepare ourselves for those times when we, too, are called to lead from below. Learning from successes and failures in the past is a potent recipe for securing triumphs and averting disasters in our own future.

Heroic moments and moments of great crisis make the best accounts, and the best accounts make the best teachers. But even when the scale of our endeavor is smaller, opportunities for leading up come to almost all of us. In the best organizations, leadership is company wide. As the great prophets of the Old Testament demonstrate, nobody’s superiors, even God on high, are so superior that they can never benefit from guidance within the ranks.

But leading up is not a one-way street to the top. Upward leadership requires an ability to work in two directions at once, each with its hazards. Leading up isn’t about rebellion or usurpation; it is about stepping into the breach when there is no one else to do it and about listening to such leadership when it emerges. Had the commander of the U.N. forces in Rwanda decisively—and convincingly—conveyed the signs of genocide, he might have acquired the means to stop it; had his superiors given more heed to his warnings of holocaust, it conceivably would not have come to pass. Had the mountaineers on Everest insisted that Scott Fischer not go up, he might have come down; had Fischer encouraged them to question him before he needed it, they might have been emboldened to do so when he did require it. We want—without the ironic twist—what movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn Jr. once said of his own operating style: “I don’t want any yes-men around me,” he declared. “I want them to tell me the truth, even if it costs them their jobs.”

The fates of our superiors often depend on our actions, just as our own fates depend on the actions of those below us. While we must look for ways of leading up ourselves, we must also give our subordinates the means of leading up. Building that capacity in ourselves and others requires an appreciation for the measures that make the greatest difference.

Each of the sixteen people listed below was called to face a critical challenge upon which much depended. How they reacted is a measure not only of their own characters and of how well or poorly they were prepared to lead up by the people who were supposed to lead them, but also in many cases of the corporate cultures in which they functioned. A summary of the challenges and the practical implications of their individual responses follows.

The Difference That Upward Leadership Makes

When organizations fail to foster or refuse to accept upward leadership, the costs can be acute; when they receive upward leadership, the benefits can be great. The sharply contrasting styles of two naval commanders offer stark examples of each.

British Admiral Sir Clowdisley Shovell was sailing triumphantly home in 1707 from skirmishes against a French fleet in the Mediterranean. As he neared Great Britain, his ships became enveloped in a dense fog for several days, and he summoned his navigators to determine their location. The navigators concluded that the fleet was safely clear of the Brittany peninsula, but one of Sir Clowdisley’s sailors approached him to report that he had independently tracked the fleet’s location. The Royal Navy forbade navigation by inferiors, but the seaman was so alarmed by his calculations—they placed the fleet on a fatal path toward the Isles of Scilly, a string of 150 tiny islands off the southwest tip of England—that he felt compelled to step forward. Rather than heed the unsought counsel, the admiral hanged the sailor on the spot. Soon thereafter, the fleet’s five warships smashed into the fog-enshrouded shoals, sending 2,000 men to a watery death.

Almost three centuries later, in equally hazardous waters off the British Isles, an American vessel faced peril of its own, but with dramatically different results. The captain of the USS *Daniel Boone*, a nuclear-powered submarine, was guiding his craft late one evening in 1979 toward a port on the coast of Scotland. Just before retiring to his quarters for the night, he ordered his sub to proceed without its running lights or yellow beacon, and he selected Thomas Flint, who had graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy just four years earlier, to pilot the vessel. Flint, serving for only his second time as “officer of the deck,” was now fully responsible for a vessel thirty-three feet wide and more than a football field in length. With nuclear-tipped missiles and a full crew on hoard, Flint’s premier obligation was for a safe and secure passage.

As Thomas Flint stood atop the submarine’s conning tower that evening, the (winkling lights along the coastline gave him good reference points for his twelve-knot course toward a naval port adjacent to an air base at Prestwick. When a tiny flickering yellow light mysteriously came into view dead ahead, Flint queried his quartermaster about its origin. With navigational charts at his fingertips, the seasoned quartermaster concluded that it was a beacon at the Prestwick air base straight ahead. Flint kept a watchful eye for a while on the beacon until, almost imperceptibly, it seemed to be closing faster on him than the other lights at the air base. “It didn’t feel right,” he recalled. Ten minutes later he asked the officer below for reconfirmation of the beacon’s identity. Yes, he was reassured, the light was indeed from the air base. Five minutes later Flint asked yet again, and now with irritation the quartermaster once more reaffirmed its source.

Moments later the light seemed to pop out of the darkness, only a half mile ahead. Then a “blacker than black” mass took form immediately in front of Flint, the yellow light squarely on top. With only seconds to act and no time to consult, he barked, “Left hard rudder, all ahead flank!” The submarine’s engines roared, the vessel veered, and as it came abreast of the onrushing mass, Flint discerned a very familiar shape: another submarine. Now fearful of both hitting the shoals on the left and having his tail swiped by the onrushing sub, he ordered a hard right just seconds later, bringing the two subs back to parallel courses, only now some twenty-five yards apart instead of nose to nose.

So close were the two vessels that Flint could make out his counterpart’s insignia on the other’s conning tower. As the two submarines silently glided past each other, Flint’s commander rushed on deck, turned to Flint, and said simply, “Tom, you saved the ship!”

The right decision in this instance had not been the obvious one. With shoals to the left, the prescribed tactic would have been to veer right. But since the oncoming sub was ever so slightly to the right, that decision would have proved fatal. Flint still does not understand precisely why he ordered the hard left, since the two subs were so closely aligned on their collision course. But his instinct served him well, and it served well the lives of more than 100 sailors and the careers of more than a few officers. And it was an instinct honed by training and a commander’s willingness to be led from below. Unlike the commanders of the British navy nearly three centuries earlier, American naval commanders had set a premium on leadership in the ranks, and on this occasion that practice had served the navy well.

But even an institutional premium on upward leadership will lose its punch if not routinely practiced and reinforced. This was evident on February 9, 2001, when the nuclear submarine USS *Greenville* abruptly surfaced into a Japanese fishing boat, the *Ehime Maru*, sending nine passengers to the bottom of the sea just nine miles south of Honolulu’s Pearl Harbor.

A U.S. Navy investigator reported that a visiting officer, Captain Robert L. Brandhuber, had sensed that the *Greenville*’s commander Scott D. Waddle was rushing preparations and cutting corners for a surfacing demonstration for sixteen civilians on board—but that Brandhuber said nothing to the commander about his concerns. Similarly, Lieutenant Commander Gerald K. Pfeifer, the second-ranking officer, who carried the most explicit obligation to challenge questionable procedures, had failed to voice his own doubts about their rapid pace, including an abbreviated periscope inspection of the horizon just before the surfacing. Pfeifer, the naval investigator said, “was thinking these things, but did not articulate them to the commanding officer.” Another sailor on board knew that a sonar reading had revealed the presence of a surface ship near the *Greenville*, but he noted that the civilians on board made it difficult for him to convey the information to his commander. He also believed, evidently incorrectly, that the commander already knew of the sonar reading.

The naval investigator concluded that the crew members so respected their captain that they were reluctant to challenge him. Commander Waddle, said the investigator, “doesn’t get a lot of corrective input from subordinates because he’s very busy giving directions, and the ship has experienced a lot of success when he does.” Had the institution more effectively stressed its principle of upward challenge, had the visiting officer and the commander’s subordinates been emboldened to question his actions, five fishermen and four high school students on board the Japanese boat might be alive today.

A capacity for upward leadership has become so important that some executive search firms include it in their screening. In looking for the chief executive of a start-up enterprise, one search firm placed a premium on whether candidates were effective at upward persuasion—in this case with prospective investors. In another case, the search firm was seeking a chief financial officer for a national subsidiary of a multinational corporation. This time, the sine qua non was an ability to communicate upward with the parent’s chief executive and chief financial officers.

A price can sometimes be placed on that capacity. The chairman of Samsung Group, Lee Run Hee, decreed that Samsung should invest $13 billion to become a car producer, targeting 1.5 million vehicles by 2010. Auto making was already a crowded field, plagued by global overcapacity, but Lee was a powerful chieftain and a passionate auto buff, and none of his subordinates questioned his strategy. A year after the first cars rolled off the line in 1999, Samsung Motors was history. Many of Samsung’s top managers had silently opposed the investment, and Lee later told them he was puzzled why none had openly expressed their reservations. By then, though, Lee had reached into his own pocket for $2 billion to placate angry creditors.

Sometimes the capacity to lead up can be nearly priceless. If your subordinates believe you’ll always go on the line for them, they’ll unswervingly do the same for you, as Peter Pace learned in Vietnam. If they believe the opposite, they’ll do the opposite, happier to see you falter than prosper, as other commanders learned the hard way in Vietnam when shrapnel seemed to come from behind the lines, not only the front.

A Bias for Upward Action

A common element in all of the experiences considered here is the presence or absence of a driving urge to make things happen on high, an unflinching willingness to take charge when not in command. A fortifying culture can nurture upward leadership, but in the end, it’s up to the individual to act. Some people need reminders, others require none. David Pottruck stepped up on his own to persuade Charles Schwab of an online future, while Beck Weathers did not think to press Rob Hall for a contingency plan. Robert E. Lee revealed all to Jefferson Davis, while Joseph Johnston shared nothing. What made the difference was a profound personal bias for upward action.

As a case in point, consider a group of teachers in a large suburban high school. For more than a decade, they had worked for a tyrannical department chairman who micromanaged, dismissed ideas, and criticized everybody. Teaching languished, instructors quit, and students paid, and though the department’s problems had become well-known within the school, the principal never intervened. Mustering all their courage to challenge a boss who had a record of forcing out critics, the teachers sent their chairman a letter detailing how he should mend his ways. To the surprise of most, the chairman wrote back, saying that he would have to change, and for the next two years he solicited weekly feedback from three teachers who had volunteered to provide upward coaching. In time, the superior changed in just the ways his subordinates had urged; he would not have if they had not so acted.

Individuals, in short, can and must make the difference. But organizations can make it infinitely easier for that to happen. Had the United Nations depended less on bureaucracy, it may have been more alert to its mission. Had the boards of British Airways, CBS, and Compaq Computer been less aloof, they might have enabled their chief executives to catch the wave before it toppled them. Leading up is the product of not only an individual bias for upward action but also a collective readiness to act.

Some Just Don’t Get It

Like liverwurst and lederhosen, leading up just isn’t for everyone. We’ve all known bosses who couldn’t accept suggestions from below and who had no knack for downward leadership either. We’ve known colleagues and subordinates, too, who seemed utterly incapable of upward support. Can these paragons of anti-leadership transcend their own limitations? Sometimes the answer is simply no.

Charles, the founding owner of a hotel chain, had given all daily operating responsibilities to Robert, his chief executive. Under Robert’s tutelage, the chain had a great year, and Robert expected to see a bonus of $l million. Charles savored the good news but decided that Robert’s performance was worth no more than $100,000. When the CEO learned that he was to receive only a tenth of what he thought he deserved, he went on strike, taking no calls, attending no meetings, making no decisions. Robert got the axe. Expert at leading down, Robert showed all the subtlety of a two-year-old when he was required to lead the boss toward his own vision of just compensation.

Mary, a rising analyst at a prominent information-services company, had hoped for guidance from Frank, her midlevel boss. But Frank’s style proved a near perfect anti-model. He arrived late for meetings, even those he had called. When he scheduled a meeting for the entire office to hear a project report from Mary, he appeared half an hour late and then tapped on his laptop computer throughout what remained of her presentation. Later, when Mary asked Frank privately for reactions to her presentation, he offered a few cursory observations while simultaneously checking his voice mail, answering his e-mail, and placing phone calls. Mary saw him do the same with clients: When briefing them by telephone, he browsed his e-mail, rolled his eyes when client questions seemed beneath him, and occasionally raised a middle finger when client requests seemed burdensome.

In work guidance, Frank proved equally inept. The company sent Frank to open an office in London, and it asked him to continue overseeing Mary and the New York staff. When Mary completed her newest work assignment, she sent an e-mail to him in London, asking what he wanted her to do now. “Just keep researching whatever it was we agreed that you would be working on during this time,” he replied. Unfortunately for Mary, no “whatever” had been previously agreed upon. “Whenever I think about Frank’s antics,” she said, “I can’t help but think that I couldn’t have invented a worse example of a manager if I tried!” Finally, in desperation, she approached her boss’s boss, but he too offered no direction. Mary persisted, still believing if upper management were brought to it senses, it would get far more from its talented ranks, but several months later she threw in the towel, accepting a better-paying position at an arch rival.

What percentage of an average workforce has the potential to lead upward? Proportions will vary dramatically, depending on the existing corporate culture, but the experience of one banking executive suggests rough figures when starting cold. The manager had just taken charge of a major operation of a U.S. bank in 2000. The division required revitalization from its historic role as a passive asset manager into a far more aggressive role as a seller of asset-management services. The new executive believed that would only happen if everybody in his senior ranks stepped forward to produce it. Through speeches, messages, and forums, he pressed his top 100 people to excite the troops, devise new products, and strengthen the strategy. He discovered to his disappointment, however, that too few were ready for the task: One-third were reluctant to rise up, having long worked in a pecking order that had never valued such subordinate behavior in the past; another third was indifferent about doing so, waiting to see if the new guy at the top really meant what he said; and only a third was eager to do so, brimming with ideas for the new executive to consider. Granted, one in three might not sound like much, but in baseball it’s an all-star average, and in business it can be a solid base to build on.

Most Can Learn It

Even if upward leadership now seems a distant concept in your organization, be heartened: Its absence is often more a matter of conceptual blinders than inherent incapacities. There’s no “leadership pill” to get you where you want to go, no silver bullet, no magic ten-step program that will turn inherent followers into budding leaders, but upward leadership can be inspired if you’re willing to take the time and do the often very hard work. This is a journey of many small steps, each one important.

Once established, a company wide culture of leading upward can serve as a kind of inertial guidance system, continually reminding managers that they are obliged to stand up without the need for any superiors to say so. For building that mind-set, five initiatives are in order:

**1. Identify Managers for Development.** Finding those with a capacity for upward leadership is an essential first step. Who has shown fearlessness when a leadership vacuum above threatened a product or program? Who seems willing to look in both directions for opportunities to lead and listen? Traditional leader-development programs have been reserved for a select few, but remember: Company wide leadership grows best when it grows at many points throughout the organization. If you look widely when you identify the managers for development, then you are likely to be widely rewarded.

**2. Coach Managers One-On-One.** Begin by engaging those closest to you in a dialogue on upward leadership; then ask them to do the same with their associates. It is especially useful to discuss your own moments of upward success and setback, and then to ask others to synthesize lessons from their own past experiences. Providing them with private coaching and personal mentoring helps, too, and General Electric Company chief executive John F. Welch Jr. has done precisely that. GE had long used one-on-one mentoring of its next generation of top talent, but in 1999 Welch stood the concept on its head. He asked each of his 600 top executives to reach down in their ranks to find an Internet devotee who could teach them the ropes. “E-business knowledge is generally inversely proportional to both age and height in the organization,” he explained. His reverse mentoring was intended to “change that equilibrium.” Welch himself picked Pam Wickham, who ran GE’s main website; chief financial officer Keith S. Sherin asked Nevin Zimmerman, the firm’s e-commerce strategist; division head Lloyd G. Trotter selected Rachel Dorman, a developer of his unit’s website. Dorman reported that the experience of looking up had emboldened her to better tell managers what they should be hearing from below. CFO Sherin said that his biweekly coaching from down under provided an invaluable sounding board for his prospective corporate Internet partnerships. Midlevel managers reported they had become more comfortable in feeding ideas upstairs and pressing their boss to change; top-level managers reported they had become more comfortable in eliciting insights from below.

**3. Create Development Programs.** Introducing an upward component into existing or new management-development programs is also useful. In 1999, Ford Motor Company initiated for some 2,000 managers an annual “new business leader” program built around an “up and out” thrust. The organizers formed teams to identify fresh ways of transforming the company’s way of doing business. Ford executives coached them in the arts of upward persuasion, and the teams then proceeded to sell their ideas outside their own operations. Ford’s vice president for human resources, David Murphy, explained the program’s rationale: “We want people at all levels who will take risks, who are prepared to coach and to counsel, and who can make decisions.” By program’s end, participants were pumped. “I’ve got this idea that could transform the company,” said Kris Rogers, who worked on Ford’s receivables, “and no one is telling me that I can’t try it out.” Jason Harvey, a marketing manager, offered, “I always wondered, ‘How do I bring this idea to the big boys?’” Now, “not only do I have an idea that can change the company, but I also have license to pursue it.” David Murphy explained why these upward capacities had become so vital to the company: “We can’t afford to wait for decisions to come down from the top.” Otherwise, he said, the consumer “would be gone before those decisions even got made.”

**4. Focus Managers on Upward Experience.** Another avenue is to ask your managers to consider what others have achieved when their opportunity for upward leadership was either skirted or seized. By examining in detail what others have done, we can better appreciate what we should do ourselves. The more that past experience can be brought to life, the better it can inform present behavior. To appreciate what George McClellan, Joseph Johnston, and Robert E. Lee faced as they made their fateful decisions in 1862, you may want to take your managers for a day or two to the Virginia peninsula where those decisions helped shape our nation’s history.

**5. Set Examples for All.** A final course is to begin behaving as though upward leadership seems natural. William Copacino, managing partner for Andersen Consulting’s strategy division in America, had been told in 1997 by his immediate boss. Peter H. Fuchs, and the chief executive, George Shaheen, to grow his business by expanding his 2,000-person workforce by 30 per year to keep up with the rest of the company. Copacino studied the options, concluded that he could not hire the quality he required at such a torrid rate, and told his very demanding superiors that it simply could not be done. They heeded his warning. Just as important, an example of leadership had been set for all to see. Three illustrations from the world of health point to the same:

* A New York medical doctor told his staff nurses and physicians from the day they were hired that if he was doing anything wrong—or could be doing something better—they must tell him. He publicly commended all who did.
* When a drug company was acquired by a large U.S. pharmaceutical firm, it included a division whose products were unrelated to the new owner’s core business. The parent took little interest in the division, allowing it to drift, even though the division’s executives repeatedly asked for a vision of its future. The division began hemorrhaging talent and energy—until its president filled the void by concocting a strategy of his own.
* A hospital administrator had slashed a proposed $50 million renovation and expansion for one of its units back to $30 million, but the medical director for the unit believed the cut was unconscionable. She argued with the administrator to no avail, and even hired an outside group for an independent opinion. The consultants reached the same conclusion, and the medical director argued again for the full amount. When the hospital administrator angrily denounced still another reopening of the issue, the medical director asked to take the issue to the board, which the administrator grudgingly permitted. The board unanimously restored the original amount.

Leading up takes courage: the courage to be corrected, the courage to take over when others won’t look your way, even the courage to buck the system and force your way to those who can set things right. The rewards aren’t always great for those who take such steps, but the institutions they serve are almost always better for their gumption.

Managing and Leading

Sometimes we see managing and leading as exclusive spheres, each following its own logic, each with a separate purpose. But however different managing and leading might be conceptually, the truth is that the two are joined at the hip. Without successful managing up, businesses lack the structural sinew that holds day-to-day operations together; without successful leading up, they forfeit the courage and creativity that can come from anywhere in the company.

The prescriptions for managing up are many. Business school faculty John Gabarro and John Kotter have urged consistency and honesty for “managing your boss.” Management expert Leonard Schlesinger advises: Stop whining about your boss, start thinking for your boss, get courageous when your boss is not, and know that “it doesn’t take a wizard to build a better boss.” A column in the *Wall Street Journal* recommends using job interviews to help spot “bad bosses before you get stuck working for them,” and another column asserts that “competent bosses recognize” the “importance of managing up” and advocates telling your boss of your operation’s achievements. AT&T has issued its own company guidelines for dealing with “problem bosses.” Among the suggestions: Resolve as many business problems as you can before they ever reach the human problem above you. Writer Richard Stengel proposes the use of “strategic praise” but also warns that the “greater the status difference between you and your target, the more subtle your flattery should be.” (Be wary, in short, of telling the CEO that he or she is a “genius” if you are a lowly technician.) Author Jeffrey J. Fox has said it is important “to make your boss look good,” but it’s even more so to make “your boss’s boss look better.” Above all, most say, any hint of manipulating your boss is sure to backfire.

Whatever your formula for managing up, building a method for leading up is essential as well. Managing up strengthens the organization; leading up can save it when the peril is greatest and the right course of action is most difficult to see from the lofty heights of the boardroom. For this, you will have to customize your way, but from Charlene Barshefsky and Robert E. Lee to Peter Pace and David Pottruck, we already have a rich lore of experience to help you take command when you’re not in charge.