

An Evolutionary View

What Followers Want from Their Leaders



A look into the very distant past of human existence shows that some conditions are more conducive to leadership than others and that followers naturally prefer specific forms of leadership and resist other forms. By understanding and acting on the three fundamental individual needs that result from group living and the three tough problems faced by ancient tribes, leaders can better connect with their followers.

In his Pulitzer prize-winning book *Leadership* (HarperCollins, 1978), James MacGregor Burns said that the phenomenon of leadership cannot be understood without taking into account the role and needs of followers. Yet leaders are typically chosen for their technical skills, and most employees report that the most stressful aspect of their jobs is their immediate boss. A recent survey found that people would be willing to work for only one in three of their former bosses again. Other findings suggest that half of all current executives will eventually derail, largely because of an inability to lead others.

It is taken as an article of faith that organizational success depends on leadership. But leaders depend on followers, and followers' voices are

rarely heard. So what do followers want and need from leaders?

Reliable answers can be found in an unusual quarter—the very distant past. Research from the intersection of evolution, biology, anthropology, and psychology shows that some conditions are more conducive to leadership than others and that followers naturally prefer specific forms of leadership and naturally resist other forms.

For most of human existence, people lived in seminomadic bands numbering between 30 and 50 individuals; each band could be connected with two or three other bands to form a larger clan of up to 150 people. This may be the limit on the number of people with whom an individual can identify and remain connected. It also just happens to be the number that successful companies

by David Winsborough, Robert B. Kaiser, and Robert Hogan

such as Toyota use to better structure their organizations.

Humans evolved as group-living animals because there was safety in numbers in a hostile environment that had plenty of predators and a limited food supply. Group living provided a survival advantage but also created a tension between individual self-interest and collective well-being—because what is advantageous for the individual is often disadvantageous for the group, and vice versa.

Early human bands roamed about the African savannah foraging and hunting for food, but conditions were far from idyllic. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes was right when he said that life for our ancestors was typically nasty, brutish, and short. Conflict was frequent between individuals within groups as well as between rival groups. Violence was commonplace; homicide was a leading cause of death, and tribal warfare was a major driver of human evolution.

The anthropologist Christopher Boehm has determined that for about 2.5 million years of hunter-gatherer living, human social conditions were fundamentally egalitarian and there were no formal leadership roles. Individual autonomy and freedom were deeply valued and tyranny was resisted. Power in early human groups did not reside in a dominant alpha individual but among the group members who could band together to limit an alpha's control. The group collectively gave the "leader" power by choosing to follow. If a would-be leader was not accepted by the group, he had no influence. Boehm has observed several *leveling mechanisms*—from simply ignoring commands to casting out or even killing an overbearing despot. This reverse dominance hierarchy drove the emergence of specific patterns of leadership and followership.

To understand followership, leaders need to grasp the survival benefits of social coordination. Group living requires that group members cooper-

ate to hunt game or defend against an attack. If several individuals compete to initiate a plan, collective action is compromised and the tribe may starve while hunters bicker over where to hunt. Collective action is also compromised when no one will follow—if the hunters go their separate ways, they cannot track, kill, and bring back large game. Social coordination is best facilitated by a decision-making process in which one individual initiates a plan and others agree to pursue it.

So leadership only works when followership is a rational strategy—that is, when a plan maximizes the interests of leaders *and* followers. For example, by following its most skilled hunter, an entire tribe may have enjoyed a better food supply. Followers in well-led groups do better than those in poorly led groups or groups that cannot agree at all. In this way leadership evolved as a resource for *group* success and survival. After all, it was not the fittest individuals but rather the fittest bands, tribes, and clans that survived in our ancestral past.

NEEDS AND PROBLEMS

Group living has both costs and benefits for individuals. Three fundamental needs, rooted in biology, are inevitable by-products of group living and are key to the survival of individuals:

1. Getting along with other group members
2. Gaining status within the group
3. Making sense out of the world

Early tribal groups had to solve tough adaptive problems to survive and reproduce. Of all the problems they had to overcome, three in particular reflect the major, recurring threats to the survival of early human groups that were best solved by social coordination and a rational leader-follower structure:

1. Choosing when and where to move
2. Peacekeeping within the group

3. Defending against rival groups

The three tough problems affecting group survival and the three fundamental needs motivating individuals gave rise to hard-wired responses to authority that constitute our evolved leadership psychology.

The first of the three major problems occurred when a band had to move to new foraging grounds, locate water, or seek shelter—how would a group decide where to go and how to get there? Group coordination facilitated by efficient decision making (where a trusted and competent individual took the initiative and others chose to go along) proved to be the most effective solution. Similarly, individuals who recognized slow-burn problems (such as climate change or the gradual exhaustion of resources),

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explained them to others, and led the band to more hospitable territories would have enhanced the survival of the group. So leadership charted a course and followership was required for the group to get there.

The second problem that leadership solves concerns the inevitable conflicts that arise among group members. Group members benefited from leaders who were peacemakers and prevented bullies from preying on them. In the competition with external groups for territory and resources, everyone benefited from having less internal strife and



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greater cohesion. More cohesive groups had an obvious advantage over more fragmented groups in the competition for resources.

A related peacekeeping problem concerns enforcing group norms and codes of conduct. *Free-riders* are individuals who exploit the benefits of group living without contributing. The survival of a band depended on individuals pulling their own weight; free-riders undermined the viability of the group. Someone needed to either deter or sanction free-riding when it occurred. Recent research indicates that punishing cheats and free-riders does indeed enhance group performance, but it also exacts a toll on the individual who administers the punishment. Peacekeeping offered a niche for individuals brave enough to enforce the rules and intervene before conflicts consumed the band.

The third problem that threatened group survival was bands of invaders

intent on taking the group's resources. Individuals who were skilled at coordinating group defense and organizing proactive campaigns and who were fierce and aggressive in the face of enemies would benefit the whole group. Recall the surge in approval ratings for George W. Bush after 9/11; when faced with mortal danger, people more readily defer to a central command and their preference for democratic leadership is markedly reduced.

These three problems of group movement, internal conflict, and defense against external threats created a need for individuals who could set direction, keep the peace, and devise strategies for group defense. The ability of these individuals to mandate collective action depended on their being accepted by the rest of the group. In this way the real power in early human groups did not reside in a dominant alpha but rather among the group members who collectively gave the "leader" power by choosing to follow—as long as it made sense to do so.

Moving from the group level to the individual level, the three needs described earlier also have powerful implications for understanding followers.

The most basic fact of our collective psychology as humans is that we are highly social; belonging is a fundamental human motive. We have an *inbuilt sociometer* that monitors group acceptance, and we are extremely sensitive to threats of social rejection or exclusion. All primate societies have elaborate rules and rituals that enable group members to live together. Transgressing these rules and rituals and not getting along with others almost inevitably led to exclusion, which meant death in our evolutionary history—solitary primates rarely made it through the night.

Second, all primate groups have status hierarchies, and higher status individuals typically have better lives than their low-status counterparts do. Although getting along is crucial for individual survival, obtaining status in the group—getting ahead—

promotes reproductive success. For example, high-status hunters among the Yanamomo tribes of the Amazon River basin have two to three times as many offspring than do less-respected tribesmen. Yet there are also substantial individual differences in the degree to which individuals want to compete or advance. Some people are content just to belong, whereas others want to move up the chain.

Finally, all human societies have some form of religion or cultural belief system. Belief systems provide a sense of purpose in life and a sense of control over seemingly random and unpredictable events. They also reinforce group living and help in survival. For instance, religion helped early humans cope with disease by codifying anticontagion strategies (as in admonitions against eating swine or declarations that "cleanliness is next to Godliness"). Belief systems also imbue groups with a various versions of collective identity. For example, two millennia ago the declining Roman society, with its polytheism and tendency toward predetermination, had weak traditions of mutual aid; the poor and sick had to care for themselves. In contrast, the monotheistic Christian norms of charity and mutual aid ensured assistance to the less fortunate. Historians suspect that many Romans converted to Christianity because the Christian community delivered a better quality of life. In the 250 years after the death of Christ, the number of Christians increased from a tiny number to around twenty million.

PRODUCING COMMITMENT

The three tough problems that reflect forces acting on groups and the three fundamental needs of individuals provide a key to understanding what followers want—and don't want.

As humans lived throughout most of their existence in egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies with no formal chiefs or rulers, leadership was

exercised by individuals who could persuade the group, based on their reputations for judgment, integrity, expertise, and contributions to the greater good; but these people had no power to impose their will on others. In modern research, the personality trait of dominance is unrelated to leadership in both laboratory and real-world settings. Leadership that produces voluntary commitment is best for engaging followers; dominance may produce compliance, but at the cost of alienation and resentment.

The exception that proves the rule about dominance concerns a loophole that ruthless leaders often exploit—when threatened, humans are willing to defer to autocratic leadership. Thus warlords and tyrants maintain power by inventing external threats and enemies. Robert Mugabe, who stole the 2008 election in Zimbabwe, maintains his dictatorial and ruinous leadership style by repeatedly conjuring the threat of imperialist dominance, even though white Zimbabweans have mostly fled the country.

But domination always creates a counterreaction. For example, inhumane working conditions during the industrial revolution prompted the emergence of organized labor, which fought, sometimes physically, for improved working conditions. Participative management, empowerment, and decentralized decision making tend to improve employee morale and attitudes, which are linked to greater productivity, customer satisfaction, and financial results.

Early humans were fiercely egalitarian and there were no surplus resources to distribute—the group lacked the resources to provide a disproportionately comfortable living for a leader. In modern America the average CEO salary is 280 times that of the typical worker. Employees deeply resent leaders who receive perks that are unearned. In fact, humans may even have a universal *feels-fair* norm for compensation. This would help explain the public outrage over out-

sized compensation at firms involved in the recent global meltdown in the finance industry. Evidence shows that the level of CEO compensation that is ideal for overall company performance is about six to eight times the lowest pay level and that firms with excessive CEO compensation perform worse. Further, employee morale and engagement are strongly correlated with leader trustworthiness, fairness, and supportiveness.

Finally, leadership is not always needed in human affairs. On the prehistoric savannah the necessary task of foraging was an individual activity. When individuals forage there is little call for leadership and to impose it is burdensome. Employees today resent leadership when it is not needed; they resist too-close supervision, especially when the task is simple and routine and they are competent at it. Furthermore, the performance of teams is degraded when leaders exercise unnecessary influence. In hunter-gatherer groups, individuals with particular skills such as finding or tracking prey received natural deference because of their ability to help the group. Similarly, modern research suggests that people are more willing to follow individuals with relevant knowledge and expertise. Task competence is essential for credibility with followers, and this is a challenge for general managers and executives whose staffs often know more about their functional area than they do.

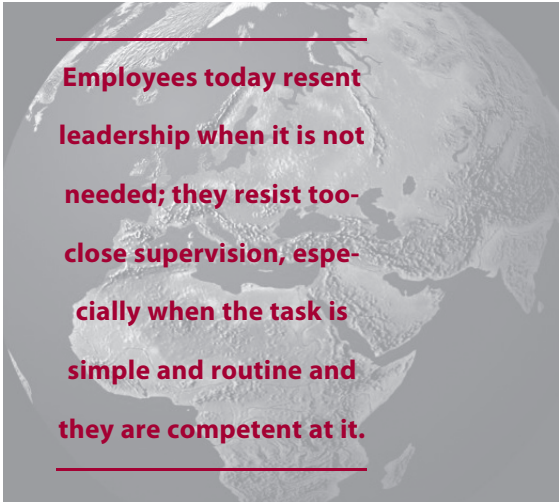
BORN TO RESPOND

In the right circumstances—when collective action needs to be coordinated and such coordination is beneficial to the group—people effortlessly adopt leader-follower patterns—hard-wired preferences about leadership. Followers mostly want to be left alone to decide how to go about their work. But they will look to a leader for

- Direction, when they aren't sure of the path forward, such as during times of disruptive change

- Peacemaking, when there is discord and free-riding within the group
- Protection, when threatened by external forces such as the competition, the environment, or bad luck

Leaders can also connect with individual followers by providing answers to the three deep needs at the



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core of human nature. Thus followers want leaders to provide

- A sense of meaning and purpose in their work lives
- A sense of belonging to a larger group or community
- Opportunities to feel safe and to get ahead and improve their lot

Finally, followers are more receptive to leaders who are both competent and generous. They are less receptive to people who are talented but selfish or generous but unskilled.

These preferences are written into the human genetic code and form the basic human orientation to leadership. They are ignored at the leader's peril. Every leader should be prepared to answer the question, Why would anyone follow me? A satisfactory answer must speak to the three tough problems that have always confronted human groups and called for leadership in some form and the three ancient needs of individuals who might follow. 