

The Ten Rules of Good Followership

Col Phillip S. Meilinger

I have often come across articles written by great leaders—generals, politicians, businessmen—that list the properties and attributes of good leadership. These lists are usually similar, noting the importance of intelligence, physical and moral courage, stamina, compassion, and so on. These characteristics are not only fairly general, but also seem to fall into the “great leaders are born, not made, category,” with the implication that if a person is not born with these charismatic qualities that make great leaders, it would be exceedingly difficult to acquire or develop them. How does one develop a sense of bravery, for example? How does one develop intelligence? Moreover, the entire subject of leadership principles always strikes me as a bit grandiose, because the authors are indeed great men or women who have performed great deeds. Although they provide useful advice for those very few who will someday command thousands of troops in battle or direct the operations of great organizations, what about the rest of us?

It occurs to me that there is a subject more relevant to the men and women of all ranks who populate our Air Force: how does one become a good follower? This is a responsibility no less important than that of leadership—in fact it enables good leadership—yet it is often ignored. Moreover, it is likely that all of us will be followers more often than we will be leaders. For my part, I have had 23 years of experience in taking orders, implementing policy guidance, and serving as an intermediate supervisor. Here are my Ten Rules of Good Followership gleaned from those years.

1. *Don't blame your boss for an unpopular decision or policy; your job is to support, not undermine.* It is insidiously easy to blame an unpopular policy or decision on your superior: “I know this is a dumb idea and a pain for everyone, but that's what the boss wants, sorry.” This *may* garner some affection from your subordinates (although even the lowest one-striper is wise enough to eventually see through such ploys), but it is certainly showing disloyalty to your superior. Unquestionably, the desire for popularity is strong,

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but it must be guarded against because of the unpleasant effects it can have on unit cohesion. One colleague with whom I served several years ago would indulge in periodic gripe sessions with his subordinates at which time he would routinely criticize the commander and his decisions in front of the youngest troops. When asked why he was undermining the boss, he would reply sanctimoniously that his integrity would not allow him to lie; he thought the policies were idiotic, and he had a duty to tell his people how he felt. He said he was exercising “good leadership” by telling the truth as he saw it. Rubbish. Leadership is not a commodity to be bought at the price of followership. If a subordinate asks you whether or not you agree with a particular decision, your response should be that it is an irrelevant question; the boss has decided, and we will now carry out his orders. That's what good subordinates are expected to do. Loyalty must travel both up and down the chain of command.

2. *Fight with your boss if necessary; but do it in private, avoid embarrassing situations, and never reveal to others what was discussed.* Chronologically this rule should come before the first, but I felt the first principle so important it deserved priority. Before the decision is made, however, you will generally have the opportunity to express your opinion to the boss. Speak honestly and frankly. Don't be a “yes-man.” There is always a tendency to tell the boss what you think he or she wants to hear; resist the temptation. In fact, if you have strong reservations about an issue under discussion, you have an obligation to express them. Fight for your people and your organization; don't roll over on principles or on any issue that you believe will be detrimental to accomplishment of the unit's mission. As a rule of thumb, you should be willing to revisit an issue three times: don't give up after the first discussion or even the second if you are in earnest. (I'm obviously not considering here decisions that are either illegal or immoral; there are other avenues to resolve those issues.) At the same time, however, remember to do this in private. A weekly staff meeting is usually not the time to challenge the boss. Human nature will take over; your stance may be seen as a threat, and the boss will dig in his heels. At the same time, however, if you are able to sway a decision or deflect a policy, it will be natural to boast to your troops: “The boss wanted to institute a new policy that you wouldn't have liked, but I was able to talk him or her out of it.” Once again, you may have just won points for yourself, but you have done so at the expense of your superior.

3. *Make the decision, then run it past the boss; use your initiative.* No one likes to work for a micromanager. We all believe we are smart enough and mature enough to get the job done without someone hovering around and providing detailed guidance. There is another side to that coin, however. One reason commanders tend to become micromanagers is because they see their subordinates standing by and waiting for specific instructions. They then feel obliged to provide it. You can short-circuit this debilitating spiral by simply showing initiative, accomplishing the task, and then briefing the boss on what you did. Very few people actually like to be bombarded with problems that require them to devise solutions. Even the most “hands-on” supervisors would generally prefer that someone present them with a workable plan and ask for their ratification. Help out the boss and take a load off his or her mind. A word of warning here, however: you may have to know your boss fairly well before you begin showing *too* much initiative. There is at times a fine line between seizing the moment to get something done and becoming a loose cannon. You don’t want to gain a reputation for the latter. In sum, always try to provide answers and not questions. As trust and understanding develop between you and the boss, begin acting on those answers once you’ve arrived at them; then tell him or her what you’ve done. A sense of initiative is something I always look for in a subordinate, but, as the next rule notes, it is often in short supply.

4. *Accept responsibility whenever it is offered.* When I was in basic training an instructor gave me what he thought was sage and sane advice: don’t volunteer for anything. It took me several years to realize his suggestion was worthless. Neither the military nor any other top-flight organization can work effectively or continue to grow and evolve unless it is composed of risk takers willing to assume responsibility. This will often be difficult, because people do not wish to fail or embarrass themselves. Most of us have a certain amount of self-doubt, combined with a healthy dose of humility, that often causes us to hold back when a challenge is offered. Will we measure up? I used to worry about feeling unworthy whenever given a new task. Then I read the memoirs of former Air Force chief of staff and war hero Gen Curtis LeMay. His comment that he had never been given a job that he felt qualified to handle put my mind at rest. Nonetheless, the fear of failure is real and must be overcome. When working in the Pentagon during the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990, we scrambled to devise a suitable response to Saddam Hussein’s aggression. In those hectic days I often saw leadership and responsibility lying on a table, waiting to be picked up by anyone who wanted it. I was amazed at how few people were willing to walk over and grasp it. The reasons given were plausible: “It’s not my job,” “That’s above my pay grade,” or “I’m not an expert in that area,” but these were rationalizations, not reasons. Their call to glory came, but they weren’t listening. Be a risk taker, accept responsibility, volunteer.

5. *Tell the truth and don’t quibble; your boss will be giving advice up the chain of command based on what you said.* Mighty oaks from little acorns grow. The same could be said

for major miscalculations that have been based on minor indiscretions. Another unfortunate human reaction is to hide or cover up mistakes before they are discovered. When asked if you accomplished a certain task, wrote a point paper, made a phone call, reserved a conference room—and you haven’t done so—the temptation will be great to respond in the affirmative, curse softly, and hurriedly do what you had forgotten about earlier. Such instances of deceit are minor and not likely to cause misfortune, but it is not hard to imagine how similar white lies can easily become magnified. For example, imagine the result of telling your commander the aircraft is ready, when in fact it is not—it’s *almost* ready—and the Klaxon goes off! In an organization as large and multilayered as the Air Force, each level must scrupulously adhere to the exact truth. If each supervisor exaggerates his unit’s achievements or capabilities even a little, the combined error of the message will be enormous by the time it reaches the chief. We have all seen examples of this phenomenon, but the most publicized recently are those regarding procurement programs for new weapons systems in which wishful thinking and sloppy reporting allowed things to get out of control. Because those at all levels bent the truth or told the boss what he or she wanted to hear, great harm was done to the nation and the military’s reputation.

6. *Do your homework; give your boss all the information needed to make a decision; anticipate possible questions.* Being a good staffer is harder than it looks. When the boss gives you a problem to solve, it is essential that you become an expert on the subject before you attempt to propose a course of action. Read up on the issue, talk to the offices that will be affected by the decision, talk to your friends and coworkers to gain insights; do your homework. Most importantly, think through the implications of the problem, what it would mean and to whom—not just now but down the road as well. Anticipate the type of questions that will be asked by your boss and prepare suggested answers. Be creative here, asking the second- and third-level questions, not merely the obvious ones. Remember too, if your boss will be making this proposal to his or her boss, you must prepare him or her properly so as to avoid his or her being embarrassed (and guess who will pay for that!). You might find it surprising how often your supervisor will rely on you to actually make policy. When arriving for a tour at the Pentagon, I was told my task would be “to lead the generals.” Few flag-rank officers have the time to study closely all of the dozens of issues they are confronted with each day. As a consequence, they will expect you to become the subject-matter expert and propose the appropriate course of action. More often than not, they will listen to your recommendation and simply state: “Make it so, Number One.” Be careful what you wish for because you may get it. And that leads me to rule seven.

7. *When making a recommendation, remember who will probably have to implement it. This means you must know your own limitations and weaknesses as well as your strengths.* Since you have just finished studying a problem in some depth and are about to make a recommendation you

want the boss to ratify, it's probably wise at this point to remember that you will likely be tasked to implement your own suggestion. After all, who better to carry out a policy than the person who just became an expert on it? In other words, don't propose a solution that is impracticable. It's one thing to recommend a course of action that is designed for an ideal world, but it is quite another to suggest something that is doable under the present circumstances and constraints. This certainly is not to imply that you should always look for easy fixes or latch on to the lowest common denominator. Yet, there is a calculus you must make that will reveal whether the ideal solution is worth the effort, or if a 90 percent solution might be more efficient. Be prepared to brief the perfect answer, but note how much extra it will cost. At the same time, bearing in mind your own role in this process, you must have a clear understanding of your weaknesses as well as your strengths. Some people are originators, while others are organizers; some are drivers, while others are facilitators; and some work better in groups, while others perform more successfully alone. Know who you are; try to put yourself in positions that maximize your strengths while masking your limitations. This will make you a more successful subordinate.

8. *Keep your boss informed of what's going on in the unit; people will be reluctant to tell him or her their problems and successes. You should do it for them, and assume someone else will tell the boss about yours.* One of the things you will notice as you advance in rank and responsibility is that people will be less inclined to talk to you. As a result, most of what you hear regarding what's going on in the unit will be heavily filtered. Staying informed on the true state of affairs is a constant but essential challenge. To really stay in touch, a boss needs subordinates who routinely drop a note or mention while passing in the hall that so-and-so had a baby, or lost a mother, or had a daughter who won a scholarship, or was complimented by an aircrew as the best crew chief on base, and so on. Most of us feel a bit queasy about blowing our own horn to the boss: if something important happens in our life or career we are embarrassed to tell anyone for fear it will sound self-serving; and similarly, we hesitate to mention our troubles because it will sound like we're complaining. Humility is an attractive virtue. That's when we need to take care of each other: tell the boss about your coworkers, and assume they will reciprocate for you. This type of mutual support will help build esprit and cohesion within the unit. At the same time, however, remember that the boss needs to know *everything* that is going on, the bad as well as the good. If there are problems in the unit, don't let the boss be the last one to know. Most difficulties can be short-circuited and solved early-on—if the boss knows about them. Keep him or her informed.

9. *If you see a problem, fix it. Don't worry about who would have gotten the blame or who now gets the praise.* Gen George C. Marshall, the Army chief of staff during World War II, once made the comment that there was no limit to the amount of good that people could accomplish, as long as they didn't care who received the credit. Although this rule might

look similar to my earlier calls for initiative and accepting responsibility, my point here is to stress selflessness. When you see something has gone wrong or is about to go wrong, fix it. Too often when we notice a bad situation developing, we shake our heads and mumble, "It's not my problem." It is our problem. Don't get wrapped around the axle wondering if you are directly affected by the problem, or if you stand to benefit from its solution. We all serve for the greater good so every time difficulties are straightened out, the service, our unit, and ourselves are better off. As you can no doubt tell by now, I'm an optimist who truly believes that good deeds will eventually be rewarded. The military really is an equal opportunity society that recognizes and responds to merit. It's not necessary to have the attitude of one big-league baseball player of whom it was said: "He'd give you the shirt off his back; then call a press conference to announce it to the world." The essence of military life is teamwork. Do your job quietly, confidently, and professionally, and trust that your colleagues will do likewise. But if you come across a problem, just go ahead and take care of it. We're all in this together.

10. *Put in more than an honest day's work, but don't ever forget the needs of your family. If they are unhappy, you will be too, and your job performance will suffer accordingly.* Americans believe in hard work. It is a matter of great pride for us that we have a strong work ethic and are among the most productive societies in the world. The military is certainly no exception. It has always been an honor for me to be associated with military men and women of all ranks and services because I'm constantly amazed at how hardworking, conscientious, and dedicated they are. That's a high standard to maintain and that is why I exhort all of you to give *more* than an honest day's labor—you have a habit of doing so in any event. But be careful that you don't become a "workaholic" and let your job become your life. Certainly, there will be times in war, in crisis situations, or during inspection visits when you will have to double your efforts and work overtime for days or even weeks on end. Don't make a habit of that, and don't let your subordinates make a habit of it either. There was a popular tee shirt a few years back that stated: "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." That's the way it was in my house growing up, and indeed still is. In addition, if things are miserable at home, you will probably bring those troubles to the office. Your family is married to the service every bit as much as you are; they too must pick up and move, change jobs and schools, leave friends behind, and start over. That periodic turmoil exacts a price from them; make sure you pay your family back for all they've done for you and your career. Remember, families are forever.

So these are my Ten Rules of Good Followership. All of us are subordinate to someone, and learning how to serve our boss well is an important responsibility. If we can master this task, and master it well, then we will, in turn, be better leaders when that challenge confronts us. We'll be ready. After all, even the greatest of military leaders must start at the bottom. We must learn to follow before we can lead. I hope you find these thoughts useful in your own journey to the stars.