

Followership
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It seems that in every fire service journal these days you see some kind of article or conference dealing with leadership. Leadership classes. Leadership seminars. Leadership degrees. The need for fire chiefs and officers to have leadership skills goes without saying and it is good that so much training is available on the subject. However, it is easy to forget that leadership requires followership – there cannot be one without the other. As leaders we must be just as effective as followers as we are as leaders. This is especially true when we realize that our followers are going to be watching us to see how well we follow our leaders.

Leadership is a relationship between a leader and the followers. This is true at every level whether you are a company officer or a department chief. It is the follower who carries out the functions and tasks required to bring the leader's vision to reality. Followership can then be defined as a role which carries out tasks and responsibilities necessary to achieve the goals or purpose established by the leader.

Effective followership, like leadership, is based on the *behavior* of the follower. Some of the behaviors that are common to effective followers are described below. As you read these behaviors, consider how well you exhibit these behaviors in your role as a follower.

Effective followers exercise independent critical thinking within their role. The follower recognizes what needs to be done, uses information available to make decisions, and considers alternatives and possibilities. This allows the leader to spend more time on management issues rather than making day-to-day decisions for which the follower is capable.

Similarly, effective followers self-manage their roles and assigned tasks to ensure the job gets done. Rather than close supervision, the effective follower only requires guidance and feedback.

Effective followers strongly focus on the success of the organization and work group. They, like the leader, have a passion towards the goal or purpose of the organization. Their actions focus on achieving the goal and making the leader's vision a reality. I should add that this does require the leader to have a goal and vision that have been clearly and frequently communicated to the followers.

Another key to this style of self-management is effective communication. Effective followers communicate frequently with the leaders and with their peers. The communication provides honest feedback to the leader – both good news and not-so-good news.

Effective followers act with courage, with initiative, and with integrity. They have the courage to be honest and take chances in a positive, productive manner. They don't wait to act, they seize the opportunity through initiative. Their behavior is guided by moral values and ethics.

Effective followers act with loyalty to the organization and to the vision of the leader. They create unity through their behavior. If something is wrong with the organization or work group they seek solutions rather than instigate dissension.

Just as with leaders, effective followers take responsibility for their actions.

Effective followers are competent professionally. Followers make professional development a priority and they are willing to attend the training necessary to build and maintain their competence.

Effective followers strive to develop credibility by keeping commitments, being professional, acting with integrity and communicating with others.

So, how do rate as an effective follower? If you rate high, congratulations! You are not only supporting your leader, but you are also a role model for your followers. If you rate lower, don't despair. It is never too late to begin adopting these behaviors that are necessary to be an effective follower.