



Focus

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The First Follower

By definition, a leader must have followers. Therefore, attracting the first follower is an essential step in leadership development.

This is especially true for transformational leaders – the people who cause change in beliefs and in human hearts. Without a core group of followers, a lone person espousing a radical new vision is often dismissed as a nut or, as best, eccentric. That’s why the first follower is so important.

Gaining that first, brave follower may take some time, but the process is accelerated when the leader communicates a crystal-clear vision and exhibits behavior that is easy to follow. Actions always speak louder than words, so the leader should model the behavior wanted from followers.

The would-be leader must have faith in his or her idea and fearlessly press ahead until a first follower approaches. Then comes a crucial step. The leader must embrace the first follower as a full member of the team and encourage that person so they quickly become comfortable in their new role.

The first follower brings magic pixie dust and transforms the visionary from a lone wolf into a leader.

Once the first follower has reduced the barrier to joining, a second follower soon shows up. Also brave, that second follower transforms (more pixie dust!) the previous two-person group into a “crowd,” as described by entrepreneur Derek Sivers in his *Leadership Lessons from Dancing Guy* video. Sivers says, “It’s not just two nuts, it’s three nuts. Three is a crowd and a crowd is news!”

Growth is rapid from that point forward as more people join and momentum builds. The ultimate number of followers depends on many things, and the founder must continue to

inspire people, but now he or she is a bona fide “leader.”

My point here is not about how to become a leader. Instead, it’s about how a single person can create leaders, even if he or she does not occupy a formal position of authority, power, or even influence.

You can help develop a leader by becoming a first or second follower, or adding a supporting voice. Reflect on your experience with group behavior, and recall the impact of the first supporting (or disapproving) comment to an idea.

If you are already a leader, then nurture more leaders. In my judgment, the leader’s role in developing his or her successor is vastly undervalued. Besides a successor, good leaders develop other leaders throughout the organization and in the society beyond. Like smiles, an abundance of leadership talent does not have many downsides.

Finally, thanks to my friend Matt for inspiring this article.

Tom Wagner

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