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By Christian Monö

Natural Followership and Why it is Important

Since the early 1900s, the idea of leadership has infiltrated every facet of society. It is sought after, trained for, discussed, and analyzed everywhere – from business and politics to sports and arts. But what *is* a leader? What is the official definition? If you don't know, it is because there isn't one. Scholars and experts cannot agree on what a leader is. The only thing they agree upon is that leaders are important. Yet, how do we know leaders are important if we don't know what a leader is?

Most theories on leadership and followership have been crafted by people who view the world from a leader perspective – followers are generally regarded as “the collective” who react rather than influence their surroundings.

Despite this uncertainty, organizations around the world invest billions of dollars in leadership development every year. In contrast, investments in followership are almost non-existent. This is largely due to our perception of followers. People still see followers as passive, uncritical minions, but I have spent almost two decades exploring what I term *natural followership*. That is, I have studied *why* and *how* people follow leaders when free of hierarchies and dominance. As you read on, you will see that true followership is far more fascinating than commonly believed.

Why having a followership perspective can change our view of the world

My interest in followership began in early 2007 after a conversation with a relative. He had been pondering why companies were investing time and money in leadership



and not followership. His question intrigued me and for the next few weeks I spent hours searching for relevant books, articles, and research papers on the topic. There was not much out there at the time and what I found was mostly irrelevant. I wanted to know *why* people follow each other, but scholars, even those writing about followership, were generally more interested in how followers should be led.

Frustrated, I gave up and decided to start anew. I remember writing on a piece of paper, “What makes me want to follow someone else?” Little did I know that at that moment, I chose a *follower perspective*, and it would transform my life.

Most theories on leadership and followership have been crafted by people who view the world from a *leader perspective* – that is, they view the world from a leader’s lens. With this perspective, followers are generally regarded as “the collective” who *react* rather than *influence* their surroundings. Leaders, on the other hand, are expected to influence their surroundings, which is why companies invest in leadership and not followership.

I find this perspective peculiar. If leaders are expected to influence their followers, then what is the point of living in a democracy? The term “democracy” comes from the Greek *demos*, meaning “people”, and *kratos* meaning “rule”. In other words, democracy means rule by the people. But how can we believe in democracy and at the same time argue that people must be led?

The problem is that we are caught in a loop where our focus on leadership only amplifies our attention on it. This has led to *inattentive blindness* so that we only see leadership as the solution to all our problems. As a result, the leadership industry revolves around two key questions - “*what* makes someone a leader?” and “*how* does one *become* a leader?”

These two questions assume there are specific factors that turn people into followers, and so experts and scholars have spent decades chasing what I call the *Holy Grail of Leadership*. By this, I mean they are trying

The leadership industry revolves around two key questions - “what makes someone a leader?” and “how does one become a leader?”

to identify a *recipe* on how one can become a leader. I am sure you have seen articles with titles such as “10 Steps to Becoming a Great Leader” or “7 Steps to Becoming an Effective Leader”.

With a follower perspective it seems unlikely that there is a formula on how to become a leader. Followers are *human beings* not passive robots waiting to be switched on. We all have different thoughts, opinions, and feelings. If we cannot agree on what political party to vote for or which movie is worth watching, why would we all want to follow the same person?

It is time we re-evaluate our focus on leadership, and a good place to start is by letting go of the idea of the Holy Grail of Leadership. Instead of focusing on what makes someone a leader and how to become one, we could explore the question “*who* determines if someone is a leader?”. This is a far more interesting question. It allows for the possibility that people *choose* their followership.

To understand true followership, we must explore the subject in a more natural environment, and that means turning to our history.

In search of natural leadership and followership

If you were a zoologist studying the natural behaviour of lions, would you conduct your research in a zoo or in the wild?

For years, I have asked workshop participants this question and so far, not a single person has answered “the zoo”. Clearly, it makes sense that to identify an animal’s innate behaviour, one must study them in their natural environment. Yet, when it comes to research on leadership and followership, the vast majority has been conducted in *unnatural* environments, most typically workplaces.

In many ways, the workplace is the human equivalent of a zoo. Employment is based on a *contract* between employer and employee. This contract includes everything from job description to wages and benefits. In most organizations, you will also be given a manager whose orders you are expected to follow, regardless of your feelings for this person.



In other words, much like animals in a zoo, an employee’s behaviour is directed and controlled by external factors that affect people’s behaviour. If we try to examine leadership and followership in such environments, we run the risk of making flawed assumptions, like confusing leadership with hierarchical authority. So, to understand true followership, we must explore the subject in a more natural environment, and that means turning to our history.

Homo sapiens made their debut in Africa approximately 300,000 years ago. As far as we know, our ancestors spent the first 240,000 years of their existence in small, so-called ‘band societies’. These were groups of no more than 20-40 individuals living as nomadic hunter and gatherers.

Individual freedom was greatly valued, while there was a clear aversion to hierarchical behaviour, especially dominance. To protect equality and freedom, our ancestors appear to have invested significant effort in preventing individuals from gaining power and status.

Thanks to interdisciplinary cooperation, we have a fairly good idea of how band societies traditionally lived and behaved. Not being hierarchically structured, they lacked formal decision-makers, institutions, laws, and contracts. Individual freedom was greatly valued, while there was a clear aversion to hierarchical behaviour, especially dominance.¹ To protect equality and freedom, our ancestors appear to have invested significant effort in preventing individuals from gaining power and status.² For instance, if someone displayed a desire to dominate others, the group intervened.³ Anthropologist Christo-

1 Boehm, C. (Juni 1993) Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy. *Current Anthropology* 34, no. 3. p 227

2 Woodburn J. (September 1982) Egalitarian Societies. *Man. New Series*. Vol.17. No3. p. 433

3 Wiessner, P. (April 2002) The Vines of Complexity: Egalitarian Structures and the Institutionalization of Inequality Among the Enga. *Current Anthropology* Vol. 43, no. 2. p 235

pher Boehm referred to this behaviour as *Reverse Dominance Hierarchy*.⁴ Rather than one person monitoring and controlling the group, it was the other way around. The group collectively protected individual freedom. Anyone displaying qualities like selfishness, bossiness, or a desire to appear superior, were met with criticism and scorn.⁵

Does this mean band societies lacked leaders? Not necessarily, but to identify their leaders, we must reconsider our definition of what a leader is.

Leader rotation and collaborationship

When people discuss leaders today, they often picture individuals with a particular level of influence and a status *that remains relatively constant over time*. Managers are leaders during work hours, and a president is a leader while holding that position. But in band societies, where there were no formal decision-makers, people had a far more ingenious strategy. They would follow *different individuals depending on their vision, needs or objectives*.

For instance, when hunting, members tended to follow the hunter that was most skilled or successful,

4 Boehm, C. (Juni 1993) Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy. *Current Anthropology* 34, no. 3. p 236

5 Boehm, C. (Juni 1999) *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press. pp 73-74

When socializing with friends, we do not identify a decision-maker; instead, we make use of each other's differences. Whatever challenge we are facing, we will turn to the person best suited to help us.

but when facing other challenges, like needing to solve a conflict or delivering a baby, people would follow someone else. This does not mean that skilled individuals could claim the role as leader, or even assume they would be asked to lead the others. Anyone who displayed signs of dominance was ridiculed and ignored. Instead, the members chose their leaders based on what they thought was best for the group at any given time.

In other words, true leaders are more like *guides* than decision-makers. They are used as tools to help a group reach a common goal, objective, or vision.

This form of *leader rotation*, as I call it, has been observed in egalitarian band societies worldwide. It is so prominent in these societies that even when members face similar tasks, leadership will rotate between different individuals.⁶ I would even go so far as to argue that

⁶ Silberbauer, G. "Political Process in G/wi Bands." in *Politics and History in Band Societies*. Cambridge University Press, p 29.



leader rotation is one of the oldest and most fundamental features of human interaction. Even today, people engage in leader rotation without realizing it. When socializing with friends, we do not identify a decision-maker; instead, we make use of each other's differences. We know who among our friends is the best organizer, the most adventurous, creative, a better listener, etc. Whatever challenge we are facing, we will turn to the person best suited to help us.

This is important to understand. It would be ineffective and frankly absurd for a group to follow a single individual *all the time*. It would make the group weak, not strong.

To conclude, true leadership and followership arise when people join forces to build synergies, thus maximizing the chances of reaching a common goal or vision. I have chosen to call this process *collaborationship*, and without it, there is no reason for people to lead and follow one another.

Two different relationships

Once we have identified the process of natural followership, we can conclude that there are two central relationships which are often confused. One is the relationship between leader and follower. The second is between decision-maker and subordinate.

The relationship between leader and follower is deeply rooted in human nature, while the relationship between decision-maker and subordinate is socially constructed. Understanding the difference between these two relationships is crucial if we want to bring about change in our organizations and societies.

The relationship between decision-makers and subordinates is built on power dynamics where the decision-maker holds power over the subordinates. Between leaders and followers, it is the latter who wield power over the leader. People always choose their leaders, just as they choose when they

want to follow and for how long. Thus, we can define ourselves as **followers** *when we voluntarily choose to follow someone else's directives for a limited period of time to achieve a purpose shared with the leader and other followers*. This means that we are **leaders** *when someone temporarily gives us the task to guide them toward a shared goal or vision*.

The relationship between decision-makers and subordinates, such as the one between a manager and employees, is different. **Decision-makers** possess the right or power to make decisions for a group of people, granting them a formal role that others must adhere to, whether they want to or not.

Subordinates, on the other hand, are someone under the authority or control of another and are often regarded as less important than his or her superiors.

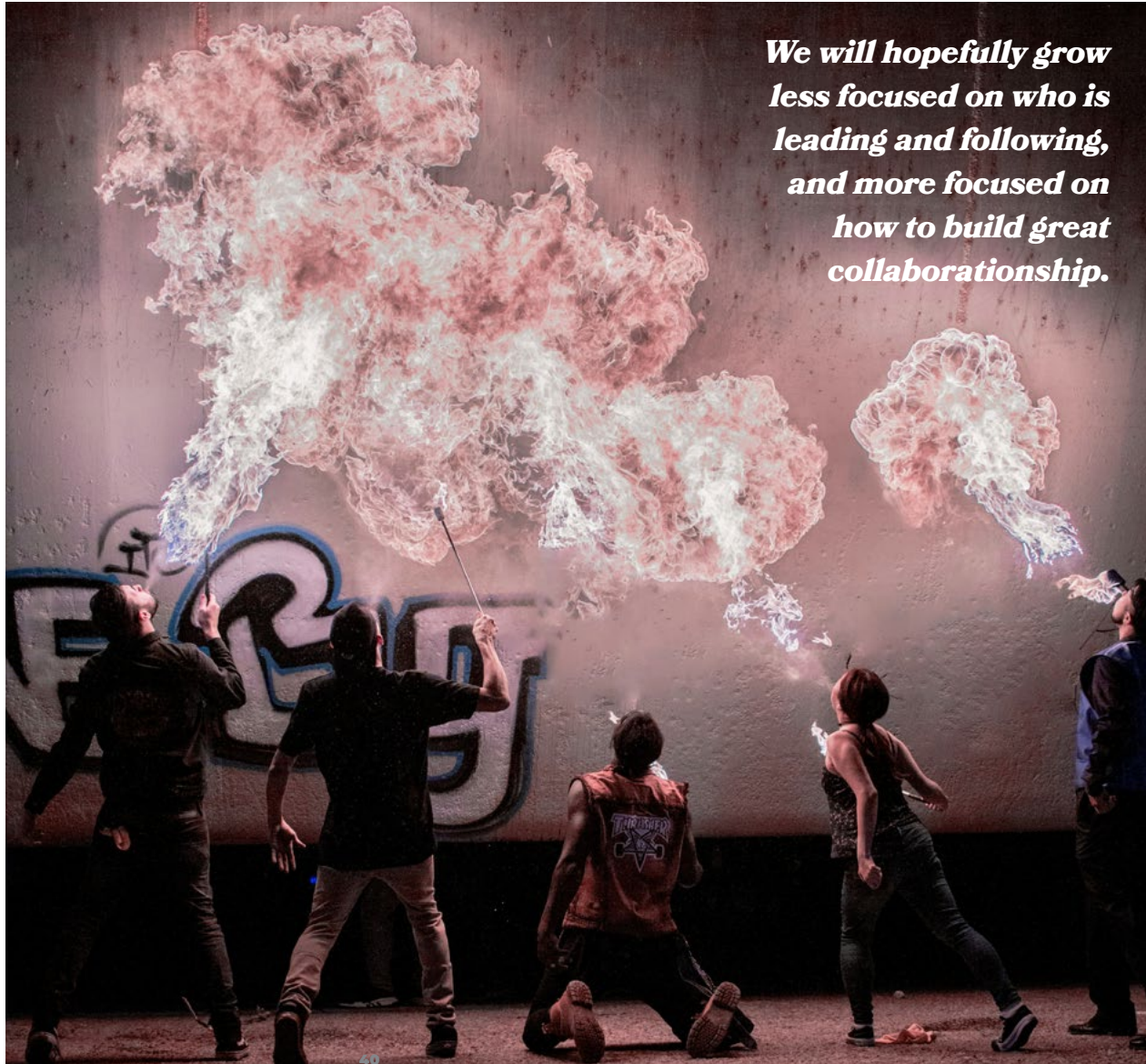
While the relationship between leaders and followers revolves around a shared purpose, the relationship between decision-makers and subordinates is typically rooted in tasks or areas of responsibility. That means the relationship between decision-makers and subordinates can persist even if the parties are driven by entirely different visions and goals. For example, you can be employed at a company, fulfil your job duties, comply with your boss, and still be entirely disinterested in the company's vision.

We will hopefully grow less focused on who is leading and following, and more focused on how to build great collaborationship.

We are standing at a crossroad – now what?

In 1992, American management professor Robert E. Kelley published *The Power of Followership*. To my knowledge, it was the first English-speaking book focusing solely on followership. Three years later, the now renowned followership expert, Ira Chaleff, published his book, *The Courageous Follower*.

When I started my work on followership in 2007, Kelley's book was already out of print. Interestingly, Chaleff's book remains one of the most popular books on followership today. Why is it that two books that were published at roughly the same time, discuss the importance of followers, are well-written, and have the word followership in the title met such different fates?



Well, while both books spotlighted followership, Kelley's book *confronted* the leadership industry. He had an entire chapter titled: "Warning: Leadership May Be Hazardous for You." He claimed leaders contribute no more than 20 percent to the success of most organizations and coined the term "Leadership Myth" to describe people's irrational belief in leaders and their significance.

Chaleff, on the other hand, chose a different and perhaps wiser approach. Instead of challenging the leadership industry, he presented followers in a manner that fitted the traditional perspectives on leadership. In his book he describes followers as subordinates whose primary focus is to *serve* and *support* their leaders. With this careful approach, Chaleff cleverly avoided a confrontation with the leadership industry.

While I admire Kelley for daring to challenge the industry at a time when the global interest in leadership was at its peak, we probably have Chaleff to thank for today's growing interest in followership. It is easier for people to accept followership as a concept when it does not challenge their existing perspectives.

Followership is gaining worldwide attention, and we are standing at a crossroad. If we continue to adapt followership so it fits the leadership industry's precon-

ceived view of the world, then we won't learn anything new. We will have the same leadership theories, only packaged differently.

If, on the other hand, we are genuinely interested in what makes people follow one another, then we must have the courage to view the world from the followers' perspective. If we do this with an open mind, followership will lead us to new discoveries. With time, we will hopefully grow less focused on who is leading and following, and more focused on how to build great collaborationship.

Of course, changing perspective is not easy. As one CEO told me during a workshop – "Chris, you are breaking my brain." It is far easier to defend old perspectives than embrace new ones, but unless we dare to think differently and explore new perspectives, we will never grow.

*Author and speaker **Christian Monö** has dedicated almost 20 years to exploring natural followership and its impact on individuals, organizations, and societies. His insights and expertise have been sought by clients ranging from universities to the Swedish Armed Forces.*

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