

# Full Participation Requires Courageous Followership

by Ira Chaleff

## **The Journal for Quality and Participation January 1998**

A company chartered to provide insurance to physicians had a new president and CEO. He was energetic, bright, respectful of others and attuned to organizational development needs. The management team and staff saw him as a boon to their company which was struggling to retain its footing in a niche market.

Unfortunately, the CEO had a blind spot. He had hired a college buddy as VP of Marketing. This buddy turned out to be a slacker; it soon became apparent to the other executives and many staff that he was not pulling his weight. He was rarely available, taking off for the golf course at every available opportunity, and was slow to respond to requests when he was present.

It was clear to the staff that the CEO and VP Marketing were very tight, socially and professionally. The instinct for self-preservation restrained the other executives and marketing staff from raising the issue of the VP's non-performance with the CEO. They filled the gap his physical and mental absence left as best they could. A couple of VPs, braver in these matters, did raise the issue with the CEO and were told in no uncertain terms the CEO was not going to turn on his friend. From this, they too reached the conclusion it would be best to not raise this issue again.

It took a year and a half before the CEO realized how much damage his buddy was causing. Though it pained him greatly, he fired his friend, tempering the act with the usual obfuscating language used in the public announcement.

Reading this you can say, what POOR judgment for a CEO and it took him FAR too long to correct the situation. Of course, you'd be right on both counts. But, let me suggest, this would not be the primary critique to make about the situation. We could just as justifiably, and more productively say what TIMID and IRRESPONSIBLE behavior on the part of the executives and staff to let the CEO make this error for so long.

What I am suggesting is that viewing the primary failure here as a failure of followership rather than a failure of leadership is potentially more productive. Why? For the simple reason that all leaders, being human, have frailties and blind spots. To leave the onus on the leader to detect, own up to and remedy the blind spot is as unreasonable as asking you to scratch your back with your elbow. You can't reach there. Leaders can't reach their blind spots. So in both cases, outside help is needed. Now we could say that this is a function for the Board to take up with the CEO. That's a reasonable argument. But how does the board detect the need? Most boards don't see very deeply into an organization. If one of the CEO's reports brought the matter to the board's attention they might address it. But going to the Board without first raising the issue with the CEO and giving the CEO a chance to correct it smacks strongly of disloyalty. Even if done out of a higher loyalty to the organization, approaching the board without first approaching the CEO and letting him know how strongly you feel about the situation has a high chance of backfiring and the CEO would find the action virtually unforgivable. Therefore, boards rarely are the first line of help with these matters.

Who does that leave to help the CEO see his or her blind spots? It leaves the people who report to the CEO, directly or indirectly. Now as we know, it is a very tall order asking these individuals to confront the CEO on matters that in all probability will generate significant defensiveness, if not retribution. So what is the ingredient needed to do so? Let me suggest that it is that old fashioned ingredient called COURAGE which Aristotle deemed the highest virtue because it was needed to exercise all the other virtues.

Lack of courage by those serving senior leaders has contributed to the downfall of many once powerful leaders. But even in the absence of dramatic topplings, the price organizations or groups pay for lacking the

courage and skill to address dysfunctional behavior by leaders is high. You can't have a truly participatory workplace environment if the tough issues get swept under the rug and are only discussed cynically behind the backs of the group's leaders.

Let's take another, more common scenario. A young analyst recently went to work for a mid-sized energy company. Within a few weeks he made an observation. Regardless of what staff were working on and the importance of that work to internal or external customers, if a line superior made a request it was always put at the top of the priority list while other matters were delayed. The executives making the request (read: order) were in the all-too-typical fire-fighting mode and asked for everything on a more or less rush basis. They rarely enquired what the impact of their request would be on other priorities. Once again, however, the blame dear Brutus lies not with the organizational stars but with ourselves. The analyst observed that virtually no one paused to do any of the following:

- seek to understand the context of the order and its true priority;
- clarify further what was wanted in order to gauge the appropriate amount of time to spend on implementing the request and to avoid future rework;
- inform the executive issuing the order what would be delayed as a result and getting either additional resources or a ruling on the relative priorities.
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Is this the quality of participation that will make a difference? Will such behavior lead to better customer service? To faster cycle time? No, no and no. Yet you see this type of behavior occurring all the time in organizations. Unless you address this aspect of the culture — orientation to authority rather than to the mission, the customer and the processes and projects that produce and improve service to the customer — all other efforts you make to improve participation and quality will fall short. The question for the practitioner is who will address this aspect of the culture and how will they do so?

In my book, *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up To and For Our Leaders* (Berrett-Koehler) I posit that this change in culture can occur at any point in the organization where an individual can understand his or her own power to effect change, tap into the courage to take the stand required, and display or develop the skills to effectively reflect back to the positional leaders the consequences of their policies and behaviors.

Clearly, this is a very tall order. But short of this, creative, energetic and committed individuals who see their leaders falling short of the actions needed to create such a culture become somewhat cynical and alienated, depriving the organization of the vitality it needs to continually improve or reinvent itself.

Of course, you can also affect the culture by training the leaders to fully understand the imperatives that comprise quality as a few organizations have managed to do. But any practitioner in the field knows that in many organizations leaders only pay lip service to change efforts and don't engage in the training, self-examination and discipline required to actually make these changes. Do you just give up in this case? Not necessarily. You still can work with the followers.

A primary question is how does a follower find the strength to do what does not come naturally to most people — act from conviction rather than from a desire to stay in with favor those in authority? This strength comes from a combination of courage and power. Productive staff have more power than they realize and courage flows from a variety of influences. Since few of us are entirely altruistic, the corollary question is why should a follower act from conviction and risk disfavor? Aside from the obvious higher reasons, paradoxically it is often just this willingness to risk that singles one out for future leadership roles.

Take the example of a young editor with two small children who worked for a publishing house in the days when many publishing houses were privately held and run by the founder. The editor was bright, committed and a hard worker. He soon became the publisher's fair haired boy and a rising star. But as he rose in the organization, the editor gained more access to the publisher and began to observe his method of operating more closely. Unhappily, he found serious instances of the publisher mistreating authors. Rather than remain quiet about these, the editor drew on the courage of his religious convictions which were unusually strong, and began speaking out though no one else dared to do so. At first the publisher became

apoplectic and repeatedly threatened to fire the editor. After awhile he began seeking the editor out when he had a problem as he knew he would be forthcoming in his views. The screaming abated. When the publisher retired, he named the editor as his successor. Of course, not all situations work out as happily as this which is why it really does require courage to take a stand.

A second question is, how does a follower develop a relationship with a leader that permits him or her to effectively engage the leader? While on rare occasions a brave soul from down in the ranks of an organization can reach a CEO about a troubling issue affecting the organization, the executives one or two echelons below a CEO have far more opportunity to do so. The degree to which these executives can effectively engage the leader on issues that may be uncomfortable to raise is directly proportional to how well they are serving the leader and the organization and how fully they have won the leader's trust.

The president of a national trade association hired a woman to run the association's for-profit subsidiary which provided specialized products and services to member organizations. He hired her based on her strong track record but with some trepidation about her equally strong reputation for outspokenness. Within three months the president listened to and sought out her opinion on many difficult issues. What had happened? Trust had gelled.

The bedrock of the trust was the woman's business acumen – her ability to get results. Equally important, she took pains to keep the president well informed so he was never blindsided in his dealings with member organizations or his board. She alerted him to potential pitfalls and to shortfalls and how they were being dealt with. When she made recommendations she alerted him to who would not be pleased with that course of action and suggested how to minimize the fallout. In short, she served her leader well and he knew it. As a result, when she took the occasional position that countered his own he did not interpret it as an act of disloyalty; he paid very serious attention to her.

A third question is, what options are open to a follower if the leader is unresponsive? This immediately begs the question How skillfully is the follower giving the leader feedback about his or her policies or behavior? Some people do so intuitively, others need models for providing feedback effectively so they minimize the leader's tendency to become defensive.

Assuming that feedback is being given effectively, the next single most important strategy is persistence. Telling a leader something once does not absolve us from responsibility if the leader doesn't immediately change his or her counterproductive behavior or policy. The hard part is being willing to persist in our feedback to the leader over time. It raises the risk of the leader viewing us as a nuisance and finding ways to consciously or unconsciously marginalize us. But it is precisely this persistence that is needed to effect a transformation.

In order to help a leader transform (often viewed as a requisite to organizational transformation) we sometimes must first go through our own transformation. If it has been our pattern to shut up when a leader ignores or rejects our feedback, then we need to work on transforming this behavior in ourselves before we can influence the leader's behavior. The chief of staff to a political figure was accustomed to the politician setting the office agenda. When the politician moved on to head up a private sector organization he brought the chief of staff along to be director of a critical set of functions. The new director was dismayed at times at the former-politician-turned CEO's inability to stay focused on the large issues rather than on the small political touches which still absorbed a lot of his energy. But he could not help the politician grow into his new executive role until he himself unlearned the habits of a political chief of staff and became willing to articulate and operationalize an agenda for his unit without waiting for the CEO to do so. Using this agenda, he was now in a stronger position to help the CEO stay focused on the strategic priorities.

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we do not have sufficient influence to help the leader or organization make the changes needed in order to do well. At a hydraulic manufacturing plant in the mid-west the purchasing manager was on contract from the parent company in Scandinavia. He had lots of ideas about how to improve operations and repeatedly tried and failed to get his American boss, the VP for Operations, to support or champion these ideas. Eventually, the purchasing manager realized that the combination of

cross-cultural factors, interpersonal dynamics and conflicting business models would not permit any real change to occur. Though he had the option to renew his contract which would have been desirable from his family's perspective, he chose leaving rather than continuing in a situation in which he would only become embittered at the road blocks to meaningful change. This, too, requires a form of courage.

A final question is how in our role as leader (and many positional followers are simultaneously positional leaders) can we create the conditions that foster courageous followership among the people who report to us? There are many strategies we can employ but at their core they all recognize that people are easily discouraged from true participation and especially from speaking unpopular truths. Therefore, we must treat every instance in which we are given critical feedback as a vitally important opportunity to send a message throughout the organization that we really do value this, despite our natural tendency to feel defensive. And we need to supplement these spontaneous learning moments with structured anonymous vehicles for eliciting honest feedback, such as 360° evaluations which have become popular. But heed this caveat: don't ask for this feedback even anonymously unless you intend to pay careful attention to it. Otherwise, the effect will be to only heighten cynicism and reduce future participation.

To summarize, the quality of participation in an organization is directly related to the degree of courage and skill in interpersonal dynamics existing or developed in those who surround the organization's formal leaders. While leaders can and should work to create the conditions that bring out these characteristics, organizations can't always rely on leaders to do so. Those who care for that organization or have an interest in its success do not have to shrug their shoulders in despair at this. We can each be the author of these characteristics within ourselves and, by doing so, be models our colleagues and even our leaders can emulate.

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