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Raymond L. Forbes

Franklin University, ray.forbes@franklin.edu

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## A Theory of Brain-Based Followership

Raymond L. Forbes Jr., Ph.D.

Franklin University, Columbus, OH 43215 USA

### ABSTRACT

**Studies and theories of followership have tended to take a back seat to their more prominent cousin, leadership research. There does, however, seem to be considerable agreement among researchers about the integral role of the follower in co-determining organizational performance. Until relatively recently there has been little focus on the overall contribution of the follower to organizational success. The intent of this paper is to shed new light on the current state of followership research, identify some of the critical issues that confound its findings, and to propose an alternate theoretical approach that is based in neuroscientific research. The suggested brain-based theory is based on a synthesis of the current research on followership as well as recent findings in brain science**

**Key Words:** Brain Science, Followership, Leadership, Organizations, Theory

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, followership research has been viewed as something of a poor adjunct to leadership studies. In a rare study of 304 academic leaders, Essa and Alattari (2019) did extensively measure the relationship between their followership and leadership styles, finding that the exemplary followership approach was the most frequently observed. However, more typically, Robertson and Manning (2016) have noted that although there is an extensive body of literature on leadership, significantly less attention has been given to follower roles. Additionally, Junker, Segmann, Braun & Van Dick (2016) have asserted that implicit followership research is still in its infancy.

As a counter point, much of the explosion of basic leadership research in the 1980s often included leader-follower relationships as an important variable when considering effective leadership styles. Leading exponents of this relationship were: The Managerial Grid (Blake, 1985); Situational Leadership (Hersey and Blanchard, 1982); and Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1984). In particular, Situational Leadership (Hersey, 1986) identified the most critical variable in the success of a leader as the relationship between the leader and the follower.

More recent theories of leadership appear to offer a more nuanced view of the importance of the follower in the leader-follower equation. Particularly illustrative models that focus on follower impact are: Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1998), Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1985) and Authentic Leadership (George, 2004). Controversially, Barrow (2019) has suggested that in order to be a good leader one must also be a good follower and in order to be a good follower one must also be a good leader.

### **TRADITIONAL FOLLOWERSHIP APPROACHES**

Given the perceived complexity of human relationships, conventional approaches to Followership Style are often concerned with attempts to integrate a wide variety of influential factors. In the main, traditional approaches have tended to assume that follower relationships are primarily ones that emphasize compliance and are mostly voluntary in nature (Blom & Lundgren, 2020).

Most followership approaches appear to be focused on identifying those variables that directly or indirectly influence the thinking and actions of the follower. Among the factors that have been considered are: active independent thought, ability to process self-related information accurately, collective orientation, and relational transparency. Additional variables that have been researched include: the demands of the task, stage in the decisioning process, suitability of the targeted issue and relative relational dynamics. More recently Peterson, Peterson & Rook (2020) have investigated organizational citizenship behaviors as an important followership determinant.

Employing a Constructionist perspective, Benson, Hardy & Eys (2016) have independently researched characteristics associated with successful followers. These factors included: active independent thought, ability to accurately process self-related information, collective orientation and relational transparency. The three researchers assert that proactive followership is situational and necessitates an awareness of how to best calibrate actions with existing circumstances.

Need-based approaches (de Waal-Andrews & van Vugt, (2020) imply that followers select different leaders in different contexts depending on the follower's needs. Representative needs are seen to include: guidance toward a shared direction, protection against threats, and judicious dispute settlement. Thomas (2014) explored the possible impact of cultural differences on followership. The principal finding was that American follower cultural preferences tended to favor critical thinking and active engagement with leaders.

Followership research (Riggio, 2020) has also been criticized as being too overly focused on negative follower characteristics. Among the adverse followership factors noted are: having a lower status, possessing less intelligence, and receiving lower pay. Also mentioned as important were: order-taking, providing less value and risk avoidance.

Two of the most popular approaches for assessing followership style come from Chaleff (2016) and Kelley (1992). Employing a self-developed measurement instrument, Chaleff was able to assign respondents into four distinctive categories: partner, implementer, resource and individualist. Kelley's assessment instrument employs two dimensions, engagement and critical thinking, to derive five styles: alienated, passive, conformist, pragmatist, and exemplary.

#### **What's Missing**

Notably absent from many current approaches to followership research is the interpersonal style of the follower as an important determinant of follower behavior. As early as the early 1940s pioneering social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1951) proposed a field theory of human behavior. This view suggested all human behavior was a combination product of internal (the individual) and external factors (the environment).

Following Lewin's concept, Follower Style can be viewed as a complex behavior; an amalgam of factors internal to the follower and those associated with the external environment in which the leader-follower relationship coexists. In particular, the effects of neuroscientific elements on followership appear to have been neglected in the press of the rapidly evolving research on brain function.

### **Links to Brain Research**

Brain research has expanded exponentially over the past decade. Employing advanced technologies that focus on deep brain imaging, brain scientists have been able to explore human brain functioning under a wide variety of conditions. The research employed esoteric technological tools such as: functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), ElectroEncephaloGraphs (EEG), Positive Emission Tomography (PET), Single Photon Emission Computerized Tomography (SPECT) and MagnetoEncephaloGraphy (MEG).

fMRI employs a very powerful magnetic field and sophisticated computer analysis to measure blood flow as an indicator of specific neuronal activity in the brain. EEG makes use of electrodes placed on the scalp to detect brain wave patterns displayed on a computer screen. PET is an imaging test of the brain that employs a radioactive isotope introduced into the blood stream. Single photon emission computerized tomography. SPECT introduces a controlled beam of electromagnetic radiation into the brain and translates the results into visual images. MEG produces brain images generated by analyzing the brain's magnetic fields.

Using these modern brain imaging tools, Neuroscientists have delved into thinking and decision-making styles. The results serve to enable a better understanding of the leader-follower relationship. Some of the models developed as a result of this research include: Herrmann Brain Dominance (Herrmann & Herrmann-Nedhi, 2015), Whole Brain Living (Taylor, 2021), and the Neuroscience of Personality (Nardi, 2011).

The Herrmanns' approach identifies thinking categories based on a division of the brain into upper (cerebral) and middle (limbic) areas coupled with a left/right hemisphere orientation. This results in four distinct styles: facts based (upper right), form based (middle right), feelings based (middle left), and futures based (upper left). Whole Brain Living is also founded on simple brain anatomy employing either a cognitive or emotional focus coupled with a right or left hemisphere preference. The consequence is four styles: Left Thinking, Left Emotional, Right Thinking and Right Emotional. The Neuroscience of Personality model is rooted in extensive EEG studies of the whole brain related to the sixteen personality categories of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Drenth, 2017).

Recent progress in understanding brain function has also been translated into practical advice for enhancing leader-follower effectiveness and in recommendations for improving leader-follower relationships. Some examples of this work include: the idea of the brain as a limitless technology (Kwick, 2020), neuroscience-based leadership techniques (Swart & Chisholm, 2015) (Dimitriadis & Psychogios, 2020) and human performance enhancement (Kotler, 2021).

## **A THEORY OF BRAIN-BASED FOLLOWERSHIP**

Building on the progress in brain research it is now possible to construct a theory of followership based on brain function. Although the approximately 84 billion neurons that

comprise the brain are highly interconnected, they appear to be organized into overlapping circuits that perform specific functions and activities. The outer layer of the brain, or cerebral cortex, is multi-layered, has a jelly-like appearance, is about the thickness of a nickel, and consumes about 20% of the body's available energy.

Generally, the middle and lower brain regions, including the brain stem, operate unconsciously. The cerebral cortex is considered to contain the base of conscious awareness and most of the functions that distinguish humans from other animal species. The cortex is also composed of four main lobes and is further divided into two hemispheres. The forwardmost area, or prefrontal cortex, appears to be the principal seat of decision-making and problem solving. The hemispheres are connected together by a thick bundle of nerves called the corpus collosum that facilitates communication between them.

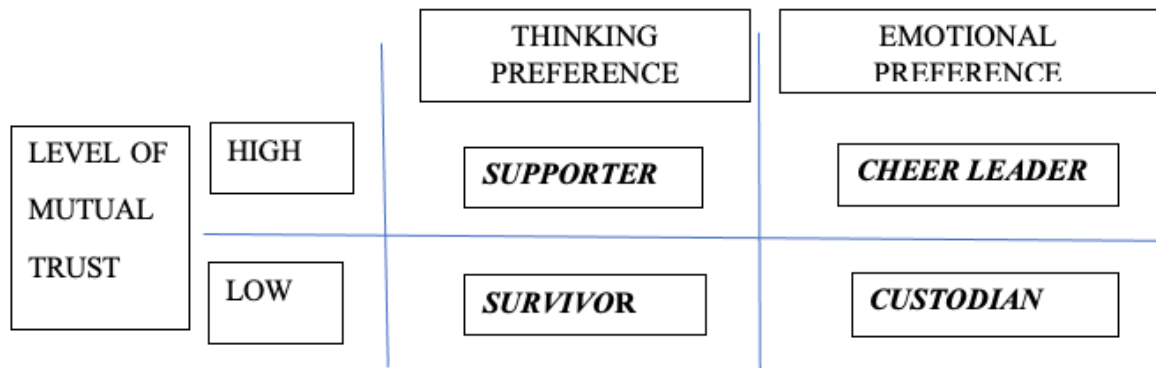
Combining what is known about basic brain anatomy, the results of technological brain research, and a large number of the significant studies of leader-follower relations it now seems possible to construct a tentative theory of brain-based followership. This nascent construct is also influenced by the application of Bowlby & Ainsworth's attachment theory to followership (Hinojosa, 2014). Attachment theory stresses the importance of situational emotional relationship bonding between individuals.

In considering the possibility of a prototype brain-based followership construct it was necessary to first sort through the many options posed by the research and their relative influence on the leader-follower relationship. Particularly influential was the work of David Rock, the founder of the field of Neuroleadership. Rock (2020) proposed the SCARF model of social threats and rewards. The model describes how the brain influences human behavior by moving toward or away from certain values. SCARF is an acronym for the qualities of: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. Status relates to social position relative to others. Certainty is concerned with the ability to predict outcomes. Autonomy focuses on a sense of control over events. Relatedness is involved with feelings of safety with others and Fairness is about fair exchanges between people.

Two crucial factors emerged from an analysis and subsequent synthesis of all the followership and brain studies considered. One element was the extent of a primary emphasis on either thinking or emotions within the leader-follower relationship. The second critical component was the perceived level of mutual follower-leader trust. Trust enables the follower to feel valued, his or her voice heard and that hidden agendas are absent from the relationship.

The recent research on brain anatomy and function suggests individuals may be predisposed in interpersonal relationships toward preferring either cognitive thinking or emotional modes of expression. Additionally, trust has been implicated as a fundamental underlying element in the establishment of successful working relationships. Combining the expressive and core factors visually results in a simple four box matrix.

## Brain-Based Followership Styles



### Style Descriptions

***Supporter***: Characterized by a high level of mutual trust and an orientation toward thinking, the follower is encouraged to respectfully confront the leader's thinking and actions. Particularly, to challenge leaders when they are operating in ways seen as counter-productive or to assure consideration of all possible relevant factors. The leader and follower will together engage in collective problem solving and decision making. The follower may also offer new ideas and suggestions as well as indicate potential adverse effects to proposed course of action. The follower is in accord with the leader's overall goals and is also open to developmental feedback from the leader.

***Cheerleader***: Combining an emphasis on emotion with a high trust environment, this style emphasizes socio-psychological support and encouragement of the leader. The cheerleader acts as a sounding board for the leader and feels free to offer suggestions as well as interpersonal feedback without fear of reprisal. The cheerleader may also provide the leader with a supportive linkage and alternate information channel to other key members of the organization,

***Survivor***: This follower style combines an emphasis on thinking within a low trust environment. In this type of environment followers will tend to withhold any new ideas and improvement suggestions out of fear of ridicule or retribution. Risk-taking will be minimal. Leader feedback will likely not be solicited and, if provided, may be ignored, distorted or distrusted. The follower's creativity may also be suppressed. The follower may entertain a sense of fear, uncertainty and doubt in the leader's presence. The follower will do just enough to survive.

***Custodian***: This follower approach combines an emotional orientation in a low-trust environment. The follower is unable to get many of his or her emotional needs met in the relationship. Interaction with the leader is generally dissatisfying. The follower may experience feelings of fear, rejection, being neglected and poorly understood. Creativity may be redirected to activities outside the follower role. Overall, this condition may result in minimal job performance, avoidance of contact, and a search for other job opportunities.

## Next Steps

As a relatively major departure from current approaches to determining followership styles, significant additional work will be required on the theory in order to determine its ultimate utility. It is anticipated that further refinement as well as validation and testing of the theory will need to be done. This will require soliciting and using feedback from a number of different audiences. If the testing results appear viable, a simple instrument will be constructed to initially determine the face validity of the brain-based follower construct. If the theory then appears to show continued promise, more formal validity and reliability studies will need to be undertaken to demonstrate its overall viability.

## SUMMARY

Recent developments in brain research have offered the possibility of applying some of the relevant findings to improving the usefulness of theories of followership. Research on followership has historically lagged that on leadership. However, more recent followership studies appear to be indicative of a resurgence in interest. A significant issue in followership research has been the identification of a large number of variables that appear to impact successful follower performance in the role. Some of the variables identified appear to be confounding and potentially mutually conflicting.

Currently the predominant follower style measurement approaches come from two different researchers. Kelley employs a four-category approach while Chaleff utilizes a five-styles method. What seems to be absent from most approaches to assessing followership style is the incorporation of neuroscientific findings in brain function.

A theory of brain-based followership styles was proposed incorporating recent discoveries in brain function and anatomy. In this new approach two salient dimensions are used as principal determinants of style: either a primary emphasis on thinking or emotions and the perceived level of mutual trust in the leader-follower relationship. Trust is considered indispensable and at the core of any productive leader-follower relation, A number of steps were proposed to further explore and validate this new construct.

Overall, there seems to be little common agreement among researchers concerning the most critical factors that determine what it means to be a successful follower. It is hoped that this paper has reduced the level of confusion and has added some clarity to the ongoing debate.

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