

What Leaders Need to Know About Followers: Harvard Business Review

The December 2007 issue of Harvard Business Review features storytelling. It's the subject of the editor's letter, the lead article "*The Four Truths of a Storyteller*" (pages 52-59) and the theme of Barbara Kellerman's article on what leaders try to do with stories: "*What Every Leader Needs to Know About Followers.*"

The editor, Tom Stewart, writes that "the leader's role as a storyteller is an important topic because it is through stories that leaders so often enlist others in support of their ideas – so that they, too, aim for the stars."

What Every Leader Needs to Know About Followers

Barbara Kellerman is a Lecturer in Public Leadership at the Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge Massachusetts.

She begins by noting the leadership literature has spent too much talking about leaders and not enough about their followers:

"The modern leadership industry, now a quarter-century old, is built on the proposition that leaders matter a great deal and followers hardly at all. Good leadership is the stuff of countless courses, workshops, books, and articles. Everyone wants to understand just what makes leaders tick – the charismatic ones, the retiring ones, and even the crooked ones. Good followership, by contrast, is the stuff of nearly nothing. Most of the limited research and writing on subordinates has tended to either explain their behavior in the context of leaders' development rather than followers' or mistakenly assume that followers are amorphous, all one and the same."

Definition of leadership

It should be noted that Kellerman adopts a hierarchical definition of leadership:

“I define followers according to their rank: They are low in the hierarchy and have less power, authority, and influence than their superiors. They generally go along to get along, particularly with those in higher positions. In the workplace, they may comply so as not to put money or stature at risk. In the community, they may comply to preserve collective stability and security – or simply because it’s the easiest thing to do.”

Her leaders are thus managers, rather than the transformational leaders who form the subject of *The Secret Language of Leadership*. Hers is a world of command, control and compliance. Thus it could be said that her article is not about real leadership at all, but traditional hierarchical management.

Typology

Kellerman suggests that the critical step for “leaders” is to classify followers into five categories: isolates, bystanders, participants, activists, and diehards.

BARBARA KELLERMAN: FIVE TYPES OF FOLLOWERS	
based on level of engagement	
Isolates:	Scarcely aware of what is going on around them, and do not care about their leaders, know anything about them, or respond to them in any obvious way.
Bystanders:	They observe but don’t participate. They stand aside and disengage, both from their leaders, and from their groups and associations.
Participants:	They are engaged in some way. They may or may not support their leaders. But they are willing to invest time or money to try to make an impact.
Activists:	They feel strongly one way or another about their leaders and organizations and they act accordingly. They are eager, energetic and engaged.
Diehards:	They are prepared to go down for their cause. They may be for or against their leaders. They exhibit an all-consuming dedication to something of someone they consider worthy.

B. Kellerman: What Every Leader Needs to Know About Followers: HBR, Dec 2007

She notes that three other ways of classifying followers have been suggested by Zaleznik, Kelley and Chaleff: see the attachment. She doesn’t give any clear reasons why these other classifications were rejected, or what new advantages her classification offers.

What action follows

Kellerman notes that once having classified one's followers, the key question becomes: then what? Kellerman answers this as follows:

BARBARA KELLERMAN: RELEVANT ACTION	
Isolates:	Find out why they are isolated.
Bystanders:	Find the root cause of their alienation.
Participants:	Find out whether they are for or against you.
Activists:	Find out whether they are supporters or not, and whether their activities support the organization or not.
Diehards:	Find out whether they are using their influence and passion to support their leader, or to undermine him or her?

B. Kellerman: What Every Leader Needs to Know About Followers: HBR, Dec 2007

Thus it turns out that having classified one's followers is only the first step in a process. This must be followed by efforts to find out what is driving the particular individuals and whether it is likely to be helpful or harmful to the leadership's cause.

The classification may give some indication of the extent and kind of damage or help that a particular group of followers may offer to a manager, but it doesn't really offer much practical guidance in terms of what to do.

Evaluation of Kellerman's article

The article makes valuable points about the importance for leaders to understand their followers.

The fact that the article is given so much prominence in Harvard Business Review, the "gold standard" of management practice, is also a positive sign that more attention is being paid to his critical issue.

Nevertheless a few qualifications are in order.

- Her **failure to distinguish management and leadership** is disappointing. To limit leadership to hierarchical situations is a stunted view of the subject, and a surprising one for someone in the field of government. Some of the most important leadership challenges include leading horizontally across

boundaries where there is no hierarchy involved, as well as leading upwards in a hierarchy. By ignoring these central issues, one gets a very limited view of the subject. Moreover, the implicit assumption in the article seems to be that one has discovered disgruntled diehards, activists or participants, the leader should use hierarchical power to “deal with” these people. Naturally, where the leader has no hierarchical power, this option is not available.

- The article doesn't reflect **the radical diversity in today's workplace**. Kellerman seems to be talking about a world where the challenge is to manage people who are **mostly like us**. She doesn't seem to notice that the main challenge in organizations today is not this at all. It's to lead people who are **often not like us**. Burgeoning diversity also makes the communication challenge tough. It's amusing to read the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and find that his notion of a diverse audience is one comprising middle-aged men from Athens and Sparta. By modern standards, those audiences look remarkably homogeneous. Now the audience in the workplace or the marketplace comprises not just Athenian and Spartan men of the same age, but people of different gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, lifestyle, age group, and geographical location. Common assumptions, values, and beliefs are the exception rather than the rule. How do you connect with people when they have different views about virtually everything?
- The implicit assumption of Kellerman's article is if we can only find the right taxonomy of followers, that will solve the problem. She doesn't seem to grasp that **the solution doesn't lie in finding the right taxonomy**. Taxonomies don't and can't solve the problem. It's true that the earlier classifications of Kelley, Chaleff and Zaleznik didn't help much. But adding a new taxonomy doesn't help much either.
- For one thing, **the diversity is too complex for a taxonomy to be useful by itself**. There is diversity of nationality, gender, age, values, religion, race, personality, learning styles. NLP. The more abstract information you have about the audience, the more complex the task of communication becomes. There are simply too many variables for any communicator to absorb. Thus suppose we have determined that our audience is preponderantly female, financially strapped, Generation-X, Catholic, Latino, visual learner, a outward-looking participant in the change but with values that are different from the leader: what then? A stack of abstract attributes may be useful initial information, but they provide little clue as to what sort of communication is going to resonate with this audience.
- As a result, looking for a better a classification isn't going to be the solution. Instead, one needs to get to the level of **the follower's unique story**.

What's the story of the individual? What is background her experience, her hopes, her fears, her dreams? It's only at this level that you can begin to understand what sort of communication will resonate with this listener.

Kellerman never gets there.

- This limited utility of Kellerman's approach becomes evident when she talks about what action follows from having classified one's followers. It turns out that the action is to find out what is driving them to act the way they are acting and to find out where they are heading. There no way to accomplish this except by understanding their story.

Conclusion

Tom Stewart in the editors' letter announced that the December HBR issue in general and this article in particular were about "what leaders try to do with stories." Unfortunately this article never gets to first base.

To find out what is involved in understanding one's audience and getting inside their story, read chapter 4 of *The Secret Language of Leadership*.