

TALKING HEAD

Creating the Followers of Tomorrow

By Duff McDonald

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Our national obsession with creating leaders has reverberated so widely that the words “leader” and “leadership” have made way into mission statements of virtually every business school in the world. Corporate spending on leadership programs now totals \$50 billion annually. If all the books on leadership were gathered in one place, the collection would probably look a little like the Library of Babel.

It stands to reason, though, that if leadership is important, so too is followership. You can’t have one without the other. While it’s hard-pressed to find a graduate school that promises to churn out “tomorrow’s followers,” the movement is real and growing, spawning serious academic inquiry as well as accessible books on the subject, the latest of which is Ira Chaleff’s “Intelligent Disobedience: Doing Right When What You’re Told to Do Is Wrong.”

An executive coach and management consultant, Mr. Chaleff is also author of “The Courageous Follower: Standing Up to and Supporting Great Leaders,” now in its third edition. He sat down recently to discuss why a good follower is hard to find.

Can you explain what you mean by “intelligent disobedience”?

The idea comes from the world of guide dogs. One of the things guide dogs are taught to do is called a counterpull. If the leader is about to step off a train platform, for example, they pull in the opposite direction. Now think of human organizations, whether companies, schools or police forces. The best followers — and they can be very senior — know when to pull the leader back from the edge.

But a counterpull isn’t enough. Say there’s construction on the way to the train. The leader says go forward and the dog resists. It can’t only resist. It also needs to find a safer way to the train. If followers get a command that wouldn’t be safe or smart to execute, they need to create a rational case for a better way to achieve the desired outcome.

Every M.B.A. student in this country wants to be one of its “future leaders.” How can you sell the idea of followership to them?

I’d start by framing the idea not as followership per se but as the creation of powerful partnerships. You see the partner style of followership when subordinates robustly support the leader’s agenda but are equally willing to speak up candidly.

Consider the issue of ethics. There’s a lot of criticism that M.B.A. programs don’t teach ethics seriously enough. But I’m not sure that’s the problem. People tend to know what is and is not ethical. I think the shortcoming is that M.B.A.s are not being prepared to operate under the pressures of hierarchy and the metrics most frequently used to reward or penalize them.

You do make an interesting point about how performance targets are the source of so much bad behavior. How can we be intelligent and disobedient when “missing the target” is considered a disaster?

That’s a tough one, and it’s important not just in the corporate world but in government and education as well. Consider the case in Atlanta where so much importance was put on performance metrics that administrators and teachers falsified test results and wound up in jail. And it wasn’t simply whether test scores had improved, but whether the percentage of improvement was greater than the previous year. That’s very analogous to forecasting corporate results and then falling short of that forecast.

What can be done about it? I think we need to start by helping people understand the pressures that they will be under surrounding metrics. I’m not so presumptuous to think that I can create a revolution in how we deal with metrics, but I would like to think that leaders and followers can make a difference in their own sphere.

What do you say to the person who wants to exercise intelligent disobedience but is afraid of being fired?

I’d start by talking about the brain. Generally speaking, we have our primitive brain and higher-level functioning brain. The primitive brain is designed to keep us alive and is triggered about 10 times faster in moments of perceived danger. When you’re in a situation where you feel like saying something might get you fired, your primitive brain says, “Don’t do it! Your life is going to be a disaster!”

It’s critical to step back and assess that initial reaction. In any situation, there is complexity. What power do you have or don’t you have? The fact that you are a subordinate doesn’t mean you have no power. You might have technical expertise, a strong professional track record or the law in your corner. I suggest people appraise the relative power in a situation before deciding they are powerless.

There’s no guarantee you won’t get fired, of course, so you do need courage. But courage isn’t the absence of fear; it’s what you do in the face of fear.

Duff McDonald is writing a book about Harvard Business School.

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