

# If managers lead, do employees follow? – Rethinking the role of followership for modern leadership

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## Abstract

*Followership is well-researched and yet a partially biased topic. Being a follower is not perceived as achievable as it is with being a leader. This work aims to clarify the awareness and impact of followership by interviewing a group of managers, employees and leadership consultants. Results have been analysed according to the qualitative content analysis procedure by Mayring.*

*The results show that followership (1) can have serious negative consequences, such as demotivation or resigning, when going into the wrong direction. (2) Followership provides further opportunities to tackle the topic of motivation and self-organization. (3) Different to cults, a positive employee-followership can be built on trust without requiring high sympathy. Conclusively followership pictures itself as the next big topic for the upcoming leadership decade.*

**Keywords:** Followership, leadership, managers, impact.

## Introduction

The topic of leadership has evolved over more than a century and still there is no golden rule one can follow to learn how to become a successful leader. Meanwhile, the requirements towards leaders are growing and changing rapidly. The 21<sup>st</sup> century started with new challenges developing into a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) state which makes hierarchical leaders more or less obsolete. This led to new leadership styles (like transpersonal leadership). This led to new leadership styles showing that the soft skill part of leading gains more importance (e.g. emotional intelligence).<sup>21</sup>

A whole leadership world, that does not stop to be further developed, tested and discussed, has come up. 'Followership' still resides in its shadow. According to Kellerman<sup>18</sup>, followers have gained enormous power and influence over the last decade moving to a situation where followers push their leaders, demand and challenge them. Social media underline how far or less people can come based on the followers they have, thus raising the importance of further research and attention towards the topic of followership.

The shift of attention towards followership is further supported by another important change in leadership culture: empowerment. Giving responsibility towards employees,

enabling them to take part in decisions that influence them and ultimately having self-organized, agile teams that develop the right path themselves. But this also means giving up a part of control and aspects (like decisions) that are traditionally seen as the managers duty. Hence paying more attention to the topic of the follower and leader relationship is overdue.

The last year was especially challenging for everyone. COVID-19 has changed the way people arranged their private, social and work life. For the majority of office-workers, this also meant working from home which brought new challenges for many leaders as well. Again, leaders are forced to adjust to the situation and ultimately finding a way to stay connected with their employees and keep performance and goals at a similar level. Zheng<sup>33</sup> named the ability to adjust to the individual employee needs as critical to get them through the crisis. Yet again, this topic is scratching the surface of followership: understanding what moves your employees and how to react to it as a leader.

Literature is dominated by various scientific researches, experiments and theories about leadership which have partially led to a blurred picture whether leadership is a role, a lifestyle or even an 'artform'.<sup>2</sup> But even though one can easily understand that something (or someone) can only lead if there is a following equivalent, the topic of 'followership' is only slightly touched. Furthermore, traits like 'confidence' or 'decision-maker' that are associated with leading are generally seen as something worth striving for. Whereas no one is telling their child that it is okay if another kid is winning the race because leaders need people to follow them. Moreover, being a 'follower' is often associated with being weak or obsequious which is why this is not something someone actively strives for (like becoming a leader).<sup>18,19,24</sup> Simply searching for the term 'leadership' shows 674 million results on google, whereas 'followership' has only 1,2 million entries (search done 6<sup>th</sup> March 2021).

But still many people are following others, may be due to politics, religion or simply social media. Some few researches have already identified the benefits of paying attention to the concept of followership in the manager-employee universe.

## Theoretical Foundation

In 1987, Rear Admiral Grace Murray Hoppers gave the (nowadays famous) statement 'You manage things, you lead people'<sup>29</sup> as an advice for the younger to her interviewer Philip Schieber. The majority of management and leadership

literature seemed to agree with her since a differentiation of the human-focused tasks and organizational tasks can often be found.

Peter Drucker’s definition of tasks of a manager fit to what Hopper said even though his research was done nearly two decades before Hopper’s interview. Back in the 1970s he already called developing people as a main duty of a manager. For the other four duties (set goals, organize, motivate and inform, assess) he mentioned (soft) skills such as empathy, authenticity and honesty as a prerequisite.<sup>7</sup>

Fredmund Malik identified similar topics for what he named effective management. These are setting goals, organizing, decision making, control and again developing people. Additionally, he added trustworthiness and the individual analysis of each employee to the list of soft skills.<sup>23</sup>

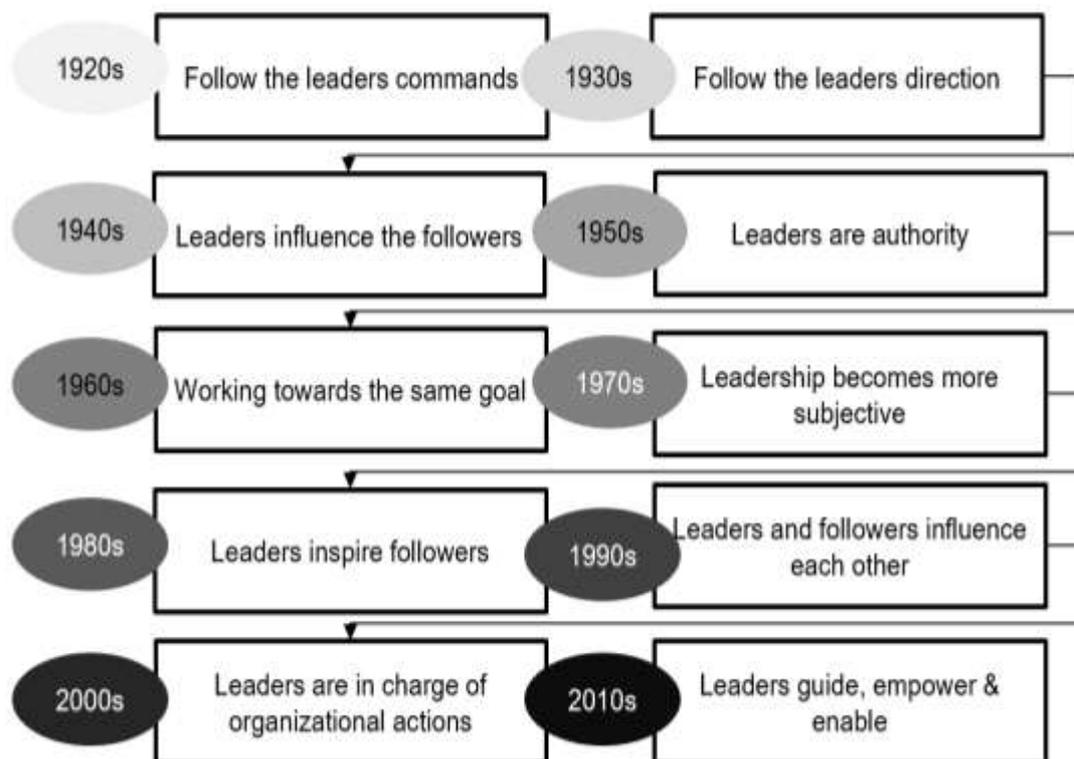
Following Hoppers statement, both what Drucker and Malik described as soft skills would fall into the leadership part of a manager as they are targeting people rather than things. But the isolated topic of leadership is subject to thousands of researches and studies as well. Over the last century, many attempts to define leadership have changed as the whole world did.

In early stages and days of war, leadership was embossed by the military. The leader was the one heading the troop. It was critical that the commands were followed. Since sometimes this was a matter of life or death, there was no room for challenging these commands. Stogdill<sup>30</sup> also explained the

leader dynamics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the fact that the majority of nations had a monarchical head at this time, what could later be called, blind followership or obedience more common and even natural.

When leadership became a topic for companies as well, it was still lived like that. The leader orders, the others do. After some time, this started to change into a more guiding and influencing way of leading. People understood that the leader will not succeed by only giving commands and started to integrate the targets of their action (the followers) into their thinking. As soon as that happened, the individuality of each, follower and leader, opened the door for many well-known theories (e.g. situational approach). Nowadays, leadership moved even further into a collaborative and supporting role that highlights the dependency and importance of the ones being led since in the end, employees and not leaders make up most of a company.<sup>17</sup>

But before describing followership the baseline of leadership needs to be considered. Despite leadership theories, the evolutionary and psychological literature provides further explanation about following a leader, being a leader and being a follower. Malakyan<sup>24</sup> depersonalized leading from being a leader and following from being a follower allowing the idea that a person can lead in one situation and follow in another one. Bass and Stogdill<sup>3</sup> supported this view stating ‘leaders and followers exchange roles over time and in different settings’, thus challenging the famous ‘leaders are born not made’ by Vince Lombardi.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 1: Evolvement of leadership**  
 Source: Own illustration based on Bass et al<sup>2</sup>

Malakyan, amongst others, highlights the importance of the situation and context that require a leader in a group. Based on Van Vugt's<sup>31</sup> research about the socio psychological and evolutionary origin of leader and followership, following scenarios force the appearance of a leader:

- Emergency situations
- Missing coordination
- Rivalry with another group or within the group

Following the idea that everybody can become a leader or a follower this would also apply if no one in a group has been perceived or selected as 'the lead'. These scenarios are based on the evolutionary approach and can therefore also be found in the animal world, which make them sound rather radical when talking about a business context.

On the one hand, Van Vugt<sup>31</sup> criticises the independent development of the evolutionary and psychological definitions and that they are rarely considered as complementary. On the other hand, he doubts that both can lead to contrary results which partially is the case. As a starting point, the reasons that make someone follow need to be explained further. Simply speaking, people are willing to follow if this will result in benefits for them. These could for example be:

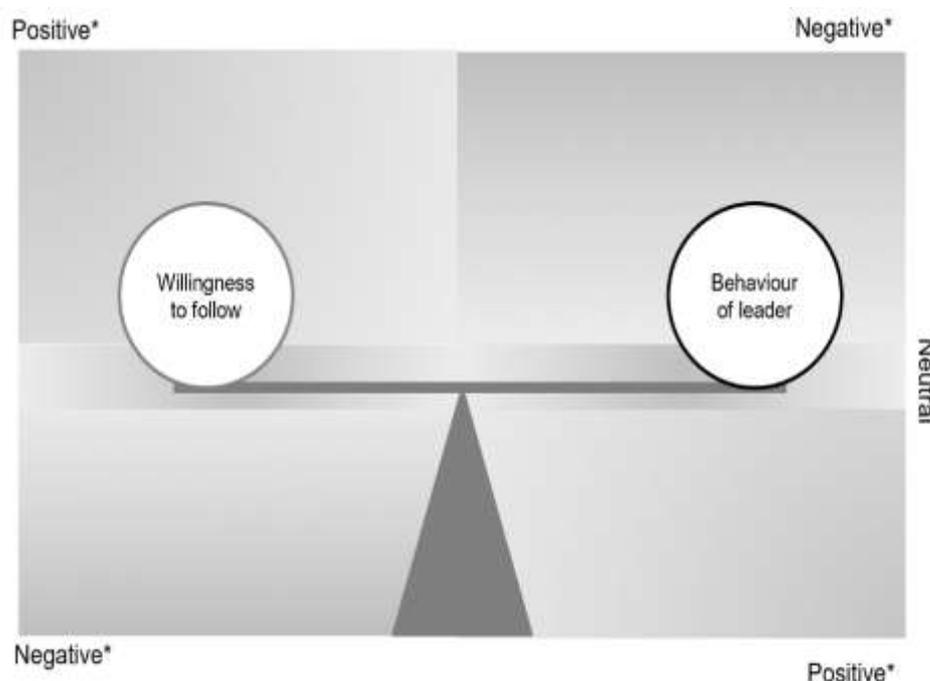
- Safety
- Prosperity
- Success
- Group Membership

whereas the reason people lead could be one of the below:

- Status/Reputation
- Power
- Success
- Self-Realisation.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, Van Vugt<sup>31</sup> states 'Perhaps followership and consequently leadership have been selected for by virtue of their contribution to the success of groups in addition to that of individuals'. If the follower perceives that they will achieve their desired goals from following that specific leader depends on how the leader behaves. Since it often takes a while until the follower receives the first advantages, the leader is challenged to keep the followership high. To do so, they need to behave in an appropriate way and as the follower would expect to see (Figure 1) to be a 'good' leader in their eyes.

Due to the subjectivity of every human being and his or her preferences, a leader will never be able to satisfy everyone in the group entirely. On the contrary, it is also possible that people are not following voluntarily (or having a negative follower attitude). This can especially happen if the leading one has taken the role by force (e.g. in politics). Nevertheless, there is one other option: If the task of the leader (manage things) is separated from the role, one can also separate the true mindset of following from the state where one simply must obey to the leaders' commands. Thus, raising the question 'What if a leader has no followers?' Meaning the person that is meant to follow i.e. the employee, does not see benefits in following their assigned leader and therefore is not fulfilling the definition of followership.



\*The definition of „positive“ and „negative“ is subjective depending on the ideals, beliefs of a person

Figure 2: Simplified: Leaders influence on followership

As Favara<sup>9</sup> stated: ‘Leadership cannot exist in a vacuum. Its operation requires the presence of followers.’ In that case, another constellation is opened. If an individual does not want to follow but is still forced to do so, the person is likely to have a negative kind of following (e.g. working against the leader). Hence the person could resign or disobey. Moreover this could lead to demotivation for an employee.

The types of followers provide some further insights about different possible behaviours in such cases. Moreover, managers should strike for engaged people.<sup>27</sup> The expectancy theory, first introduced by Victor Vroom in 1964, provides further insights about this. Vroom identified a relation between the expectations of a human and their influence on motivation. First he acknowledged similarities between what is called motivation and behaviour decisions. Both show a strong connection to the psychological literature. Vroom named the origin of motivation in an old Greek theory called hedonism. Hedonism basically describes that an individual always chooses the path that brings it closer to pleasure and away from pain. Over the time, this has evolved into more precise models and theories like the ‘law of effect’ by Lewin.<sup>32</sup>

Within his theory, Vroom<sup>32</sup> focused more on what he defined as outcome and its dependencies, requirements and results. It starts with the effort that employees puts into their work, thus affecting the performance. This affection is bound to the perception the employee has about which performance level they can reach. This connection is called the E-P-Linkage

and leaders can do several things to influence, moreover strengthen it. Isaac et al<sup>15</sup> named the below as important:

- Appropriate challenges
- Development
- Appreciation
- Clear expectations

Summarized, leaders need to know their people, the capabilities, strengths and weaknesses and how they perceive themselves. In the end, the E-P-Linkage and therefore the Expectancy [E] is subjective and ‘resides entirely within the mind of the follower’. The expectancy can have a value between 0 and 1 and is furthermore an action-outcome-association. Meaning a certain action leads to a certain outcome. The more the individual (here follower) believes in the likelihood that this specific outcome will be achieved, the higher is the value of *E* and vice versa.<sup>32</sup>

Next, the performance is pointing to a certain outcome continuing the linear growth (higher effort means higher performance which leads to a higher outcome). This dependency is called the P-O-Linkage. Again, Isaac et al<sup>15</sup> concluded the most important aspects that strengthen the PO-Linkage:

- Trust
- Fair treatment
- Honesty

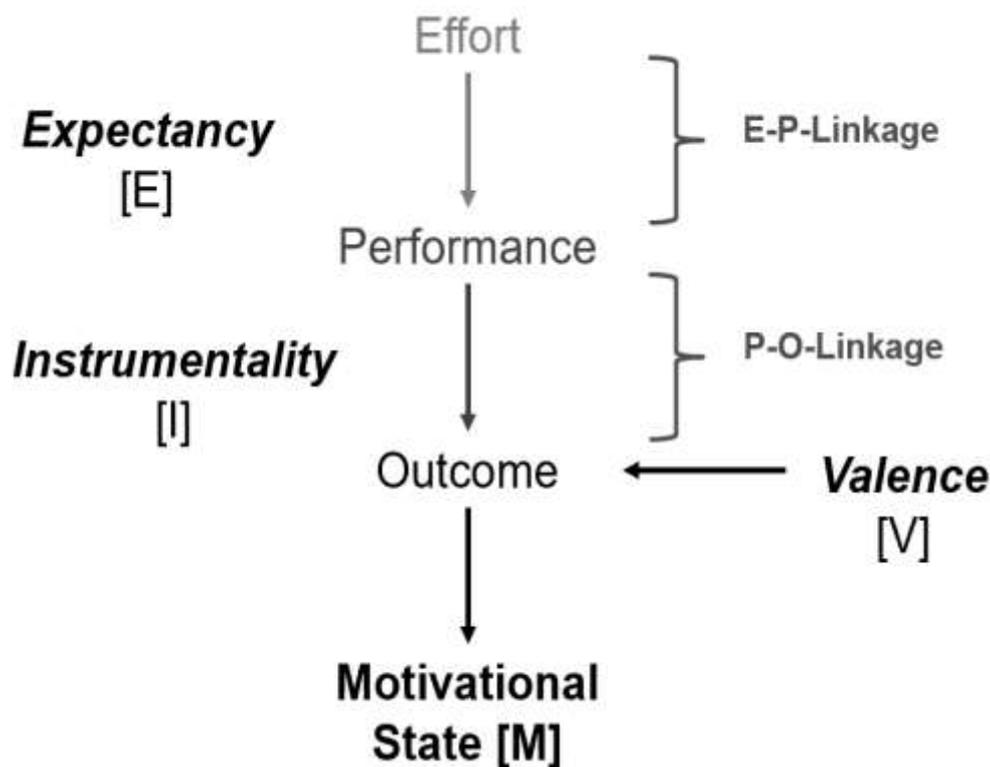


Figure 3: Expectancy Theory developed by Vroom<sup>32</sup>  
 Source: Own illustration based on Isaac et al<sup>15</sup>

If the employee cannot rely on a promise made by the leader (may it be the salary increase or the next project lead that was promised), the P-O-Linkage will suffer. Same goes for a fair and consistent behaviour towards all the employees. This applies to good and bad reactions. Especially when it comes to the rewards in connection with the outcome. The instrumentality [I] needs to be perceived as fair by the recipient and peers.<sup>15</sup> Moreover instrumentality is an outcome-outcome association and can have values from -1 to +1. As an example, if the perception is that outcome, x will undeniably lead to outcome y and outcome y is not achievable without outcome x, this would result in a higher and positive value for I.<sup>32</sup>

Conclusively the outcome leads to the motivational state [M]. One might interpret the continuing linear growth then. As higher effort means higher performance, it leads to a higher outcome means and a higher motivational state. But another important factor that feeds into the motivational state is the valence [V]. Valence describes the value the employee is awarding with the outcome/reward.

Moreover, it puts them into a certain order by showing which outcome, out of several options, the receiver prefers the most. The latter does not automatically mean that it will actually satisfy the person as expected. Since in the end no one can foresee if what someone thinks they want will turn out exactly like they imagined it to be.

The valence can have a value of zero and can be positive or negative. A negative valence means the person would prefer not to get the outcome over getting it. Consequently, a positive value means getting it is preferred over not getting it. A value of zero means that the receiver is unsure about the preferences. Ultimately, motivation needs a positive valence.<sup>32</sup>

Three aspects of this are challenges for the leader:

- Attractiveness of the reward is subjective.
- Alignment of the follower's personal goals with the company goals.
- Changing conditions (environment, private situations, company strategy etc.).

Especially the attractiveness of the reward is of importance for the following or in other words, 'what benefit does the person get?' which reminds of the basics of followership: expecting a benefit. Thus, proving that followership influences employee motivation. The below (simplified) formula of the expectancy theory underlines this statement:

$$M = E * I * V$$

Since the expectancy is multiplied with the instrumentality, which is multiplied with the valence, instead of being added, a weak followership (meaning negative or zero value of the

rewards) is therefore minimizing (or even nulling) the motivational state. This applies for all other parts of the calculation, too. Hence M can only be 'as strong as its weakest link'.<sup>15</sup>

Even though Vroom later admitted that he did not consider the factor of intrinsic motivation enough, this theory underlines the importance of creating a beneficial situation for the follower.

Contrary to the depersonalized approach from Malaykan, some of the few that paid attention to the topic of followership have developed models that allow to classify different types of follower styles. The author Barbara Kellerman named Chaleff, Kelley and Zaleznik as the more or less only ones that cared about research on followership.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, the earliest work by Abraham Zaleznik even dates back to the 1970s. Over the years, each of them has defined their own approach, always using a different baseline, to determine the follower type characteristics. But still, they all show a variation of followers from (in the eyes of the leader) a 'high to 'low' scale but also sort of a passive follower type that is, to some extent, ignorant about the behaviour of the leader (even if it may be e.g. unethical). Furthermore, the follower type can be based on its characteristic either 'good' or 'bad' for the leader. In general, Kellermann<sup>19</sup> further distinguished good and bad followership in terms of whether the supported leader is good or bad one. She also stated that e.g. being passive about a bad leader makes you a bad follower.

Bjugstad et al<sup>4</sup> proposed that these styles shall be matched according to the well-known leadership styles. Within their work, they demonstrated a theoretical approach on how to integrate Kelley's<sup>20</sup> theory into the situational leadership approach from Hersey and Blanchard. Favara<sup>9</sup> proofed the relation of job satisfaction and job performance. It turned out that specific follower types achieved higher results in both areas which can lead to a strategic advantage for the company. He used the model of Kelley as foundation, hence the term for the exemplary followers was used to describe this desired type of followers.

Furthermore, he pointed out that the missing, unique definition of followership leads to the dangerous assumption that leader and followership are one-dimensional construct. The latter would tempt to think that not being a leader automatically means being a follower and vice versa. But as already identified by Van Vugt<sup>31</sup>, Malaykan<sup>24</sup>, Stogdill<sup>30</sup> and Bass<sup>2</sup> leading and following do not exclude each other as attributes in a person's character (situational approach).

Therefore, Favara<sup>9</sup> introduced a two-dimensional view which adds a level (high to low) to the degree of leadership and followership and moreover includes the quality of the leader respectively follower.



This approach furthermore allows and supports the theories of Kellerman<sup>17</sup>, Kelley<sup>20</sup>, Chaleff<sup>6</sup> and Zaleznik that followers as well can be ‘good’ or ‘bad’. So the question is rather ‘What type of followers are my employees?’ rather than ‘Do my employees follow me?’

But when it comes to the question ‘What makes someone a leader?’ two main theories are dominating literature, the trait versus situational approach. Van Vugt’s<sup>31</sup> research found arguments that support both even though they state opposing concepts. Collectively and based on the previously described theory, the qualities below can be seen as requirements towards a leader:

Requirements derived from the psychological review:

- Decision-Making
- High Self-Esteem
- Intelligence
- Communication
- Expertise
- Generosity
- Fairness
- Trustworthiness
- Being supportive

Requirements derived from the evolutionary review:

- Age (too young -> less experience/too old-> might die/be killed easily)
- Health (good health -> long reign/bad health -> might die/be killed easily)
- Gender (Men often perceived as dominant->strength/women perceived as soft skill oriented)

The three above factors have been assessed regarding their importance towards leadership in Van Vugt’s<sup>31</sup> research. Even though the result showed the evolutionary explanation to be legitimate, it is questionable whether modern Employee-Leader-Relationships are still influenced by these ancient factors keeping in mind the major progress made in terms of a more diverse leadership culture. Since the data gathering will not include a personal/psychological analysis of the interviewed people and only a limited amount of people will be interviewed, these three attributes will not be further conducted during this thesis.

Requirements derived from the Expectancy theory:

- Imagination and Initiative
- Intuition/Empathy
- Honesty
- Consistency
- Communication

Many theories build upon the so-called trait-approach meaning that a leader (or an efficient leader) requires certain traits as listed above<sup>30</sup>, consequently also stating that a follower cannot have such traits because then this person would be a leader. Interestingly, there is little research on what makes someone a follower instead.

On the contrary the situational approach names the situation in which the person is as an indication for arising leadership and style, if at all. Thus, supporting the evidence of Van Vugt, that certain surroundings enforce a leader even within a group of persons without such traits. Fleenor summarized that the truth may lay somewhere in between both. So far, neither of the approaches has been proven as completely right nor completely wrong.

Based on the performed literature review, general assumptions have been derived:

- 1 People not in leadership roles can have traits known for leaders (and vice versa) and are aware about that
- 2 People in leadership positions are aware about the impact of followership and actively work on strengthening it
- 3 Positive employee followership is more important than any other aspect of leadership

These will be reviewed again after the results of data analysis have been conducted. This way the general assumptions may be either fully, partially or not supported by gathered evidence.

After reviewing the historical and dominating literature, it turned out that the modern leader, more than ever, needs to be aware about his or her employees. Only if they are following (and preferably in a positive context), both can be successful.

Hence the focus of this work especially lies within the effect of followership on employees and leaders and whether this impact is known and actively targeted by the managers. The latter shall especially be challenged and compared with other aspects that influence the employee, like motivation, to determine the importance of a positive followership again.

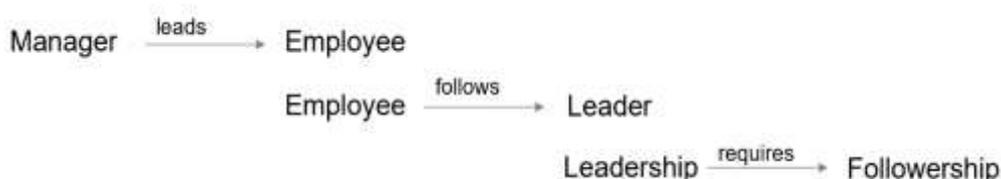


Figure 5: Research Framework

Referring to the above research framework, the consequences of a missing/negative employee followership shall be highlighted. Such a lack of employee followership would mean a missing arrow and break in this manager-employee chain.

**Methodology**

The methodology of this work is onion peeling as per views of Saunders et al<sup>28</sup> research by starting at the philosophy layer. As literature has proven, leader and followership are still subjective. Even though theory may show alignment over the years, the reality does not provide a common ‘leadership’ guideline that everyone can learn. Or as Saunders et al<sup>28</sup> stated ‘philosophical disagreements are an intrinsic part of business and management research.’

Hence the interpretivism philosophy applies for this thesis. On the next layer, the hybrid approach will be used. This allows combining categories that have been identified before the interviews (deductive) and possible new categories that turn out during the interview (inductive). The inductive approach is especially useful if a topic has not been researched in detail and only limited literature is available<sup>28</sup> which applies to followership.

The interviews will be held on the baseline of an interview guide developed after ground research as part of primary data-collection. To get a diverse picture of the leader-follower dynamics, the interview candidates will be a mixture of managers, employees and leadership consultants. The employees and managers will be part of the same organizations. As the interviews will only be a snapshot of the current state, the time horizon is cross-sectional.

**Table 2**  
**Research approach based on research onion**

Research onion layer	Applied for thesis
Philosophy	Interpretivism
Approach	Hybrid inductive/deductive
Research strategy	Grounded Theory
Methodology choice	Mono Method
Time horizon	Cross-sectional
Technique & procedure	Interviews

The gathered data will be analysed using the qualitative content analysis from Philip Mayring (mono-method) as it provides a structured approach to systematically review and analyse communication creating results that are theoretically supported (Mayring, 2015). Furthermore, the work is focusing on individual aspects of employee-leader-relationships that do not include any type of correlation (e.g. the more employees the higher the peer-pressure to follow).

Additionally, since the topic of followership is still new to many people it is likely that a larger group will not increase the amount of people familiar with it, hence no new results

would be collected. In addition to that, the pure awareness and relevance of followership have not been completely researched and proven which indicate that further research on its baseline is required before any of it can be tested in a wider area. Hence a quantitative analysis is not applicable.

The questions that will be asked during the interviews have been developed based on the literature review. The categories shall later help to identify whether the general assumptions are supported or not. Each question will contain a closed question followed by an open question to further explicate the answer.

During the interviews, the legal manager is seen as the leader and the employee as the follower. After question 8, the literature definition of followership will be provided by the interviewer to avoid a misunderstanding in the last two questions. For the three interview groups (managers, employees, consultants), some of the questions vary in their wording to adjust to the subject’s perspective.

The interview shall identify whether the candidate is aware about followership and if the candidates would describe themselves with the criteria that have been identified for a good leader.

Furthermore, the candidates shall share their view on switching the follower and leader role and consequences of a leader’s behaviour on their employees. Question eight is forcing the candidate to either choose a leader they like or a leader that brings success for the team. Lastly after the theory of followership has been explained, the candidates shall share their view on the importance of creating a positive followership and on the consequences entailed when such is missing.

To analyse the data gathered during the interviews, the qualitative content analysis as described by Mayring will be used. This procedure contains the following steps:

- Determination of material
- Analysis of situation arising
- Formal characterisation of material
- Analysis direction
- Theoretical differentiation of formulation of questions
- Determination of analysis techniques and procedure
- Definition of analysis units
- Re-validation of category system based on theory and material
- Interpretation of results based on general assumptions.
- Application of content-analytical quality criteria.

Each category has two sub-categories that function as the level of fulfilment for the questioned aspect. Then, each of these have been defined including the rules (codes) that define when which level of fulfilment is reached, thus, creating a comprehensibility of the results.

**Table 3**  
**Interview guide**

S.N.	Category	Closed question			Open Question		
		Manager	Employee	Consultant	Manager	Employee	Consultant
1	Awareness	Have you ever heard about followership?			How would you describe followership?		
2		Was it part of a leadership training?	Do you think followership and leadership is something only managers need to learn about?	Would you include followership in a leadership training?	If 2 -> yes: What did you learn and do you agree to it? If 2 -> no: Would you have liked it to be included?	Why do you think so?	Why would/wouldn't you include it?
3	Traits	On a scale from 0 to 10, how important are the following for a relation between manager and employee? -Trust -Sympathy			Why do you think so?		
4		Which of the following would you use to describe yourself? -Decision-Maker - Confident (High Self-Esteem) -Intelligent -Communicative -Expert -Generous -Fair -Trustworthy -Supportive -Imaginative -Initiative -Intuitive -Empathic -Honest -Consistent		Do you think people have certain traits that determine whether they will be a leader or a follower?	What other word would you use to describe yourself?		Based on your experience what traits make someone a leader? What make someone a follower instead?
5	Switching Roles	Do you think people can lead in one situation and follow in another?			Why do you think so?		
6	Impact/Awareness of behaviour	Are your employees' goals important for you?	Do you think your manager helps you in achieving your goals?	Do you think managers should always consider their employees goals?	How do you consider them in your work?	Why do you think so?	Why do you think so?
7		Do you think you are aware of the consequences your behaviour is causing?	Does the behaviour of your manager influence your work?	Based on your experience, do you think managers are aware about the impact of their behaviour?	What behaviour are you trying to show? What are you avoiding and why?	What behaviour do you expect from your manager? How does it influence your work?	What advise do you give managers in regard to how they should behave?

8	Importance of good leader	Choose one: a) a manager that you do not like personally, but brings the team forward b) a manager that you do like personally, but does not bring the team forward		Please explain your choice			
<i>Input: Followership defined as seeing a benefit in following the leader. There are different types of followers which need different leadership styles.</i>							
9	Importance of good followership/ Consequences followership	Do you actively work on strengthening the followership of your employees?	Do you see a benefit in having a manager?	Do you think managers should actively work on strengthening the follower-ship of their teams?	If 6 -> yes: How do you do that? If 6-> no: what else do you do?	Why do you think so?	If 6 -> yes: How should they do that? If 6-> no: what else should they do instead?
10		Do you think good followership is necessary for successful work?			What do you think is the consequence of bad followership?		
-		Would you like to add anything else?			What would you like to add?		

**Table 4**  
**Category definitions and code**

Main category	Sub-category	Definition	Code
Awareness		Knowledge about followership and its impact	
	High		The candidate knows what followership means and how it can influence people
	Low		The candidate does not know what followership is and cannot precisely explain what it is.
Traits		Degree of matching traits known for leaders	
	Matching		Candidate shows more than 70% matching traits
	Not matching		Candidate shows less than 70% matching traits
Switching roles		The understanding whether leading (or following) are part of one's personality	
	Possible		It is perceived that roles can be switched
	Not possible		It is perceived that roles cannot be switched
Impact/ Awareness of behaviour		The perception of how much the leader's behaviour influences the employee	
	Strong influence		The leader is aware about the impact of their behaviour.
			The employee feels heavily impacted by the leader's behaviour.
			The behaviour of the leader is seen as very influencing.

	Medium/ Low influence		The leader is not that aware about the impact of their behaviour.
			The employee feels less impacted by the leader’s behaviour.
			The behaviour of the leader is seen as not very influencing.
Importance of good leader		Whether the candidate prefers to have a leader they like or a leader that brings success.	
	Option a)		The candidate chooses to have a leader they that brings success over liking them.
	Option b)		The candidate chooses a leader they like over one that brings success
Importance of good followership		Whether or not teams can be successful without good followership	
	Important		The candidate thinks that good followership is required for good performance
	Not important		The candidate thinks that good followership is not required for good performance
Consequences of negative followership		How the candidate perceives the consequences of negative followership	
	Demotivation		The candidate thinks that negative followership leads to demotivation
	Resigning		The candidate thinks that negative followership leads to resigning

For the awareness of followership, the provided answer can either be high or low, depending on whether or not the candidate can explain what followership means. This way the personal impression and thoughts about the topic can also be conducted and possibly lead to further deductive categories. Secondly, the number of matching traits will decide if a candidate is a fit for the matching sub-category. This degree was set to 70% as the list contains soft skills (such as honesty) that are very likely to be answered with a yes from all participants. Since the traits will not be tested, it is not expected that people will openly announce themselves to be dishonest.

Therefore, a 100% demarcation would lead to unrealistic results. The next category targets the ability to exchange the follower and leader role. Here the answers shall either support the view that the exchange of roles is possible or on the contrary support the trait approach and state that the role is more or less part of the personality.

Next, the behaviour of the leader and its influence will be distinguished with regard to the awareness on the manager’s and the employee’s side and complemented by the leadership consultant’s view. Thus, the chosen option will determine the categorization. Additionally, the next category

shall underline how important good followership is to achieve high performance. In theory it could be possible to still fulfil targets without requiring positive followership. Lastly, the effects of negative followership on motivation and fluctuation will be focused when analysing the candidates’ answers. As these were identified during literature review, it shall be identified if the candidates suggest these themselves without being informed by the researcher upfront.

**Results and Implications**

In total, ten interviews have been conducted. It was expected that no new insights could be gathered and answers were repetitive after this amount. The candidates were all part of either the employee (E), manager (M) or leadership consultant (LC) group. Three out of the ten candidates were female (F) (one in each group) and 7 male (M). The group was a mixture of mainly two areas (IT and HR). The age of the participants is between 27 and 54 which displays an average of 35. Interestingly only the two leadership consultants mentioned that they have heard the term followership during the first part of the interview. All other candidates either did not know it or did not feel comfortable enough to describe it themselves.

**Table 5**  
**Interview candidates**

S.N.	Gender	Age	Function	Group	Leadership-Experience	Team size	Branch
1	M	31	SAP-Consultant	E	N/A	N/A	HR-IT
2	M	27	RPA-Developer	E	N/A	N/A	HR-IT
3	M	48	Manager	M	18 years	36	IT
4	M	28	Agile consultant	LC	N/A	N/A	Consulting
5	M	37	Engineer	E	N/A	N/A	IT
6	M	54	Manager	M	15 years	7	HR-IT
7	M	54	Manager	M	20 years	22	HR-IT
8	F	27	Personal Assistance	E	N/A	N/A	IT-Infrastructure-Network
9	F	33	Management Consultant	LC	Led smaller teams in the past	N/A	Consulting
10	F	38	Manager	M	2 years	19	IT

**Table 6**  
**Awareness of followership deductive results**

Category	Sub-Category	Interview source	Anchor Example
Awareness of followership	High	I9	<i>"[...]as part of my business psychology studies[...] dealt with it a bit outside of my studies [...]"</i>
		I4	<i>"I am quite familiar with the topic."</i>
	Low	I10	<i>"I haven't heard anything directly yet [...]"</i>
		I8	<i>"I haven't heard of it directly [...]"</i>
		I6	<i>"[...] no great background information there."</i>
		I7	<i>"I haven't heard of it as a term yet, no."</i>
		I2	<i>"I don't know what it is."</i>
		I1	<i>"Under the direct name no."</i>

Even though the term followership was unknown to the majority of the candidates, they could still imagine something behind it. Furthermore, followership was seen as the equivalent or counterpart to leadership by three other candidates. Additionally, the perspective of the employee was named three times as well (partially by the same candidates).

Two candidates indicated that being a leader is part of the personality, but these candidates also provided an answer stating that it can be possible to be a leader/follower contrary to your business role.

Therefore, the common answer shows a tendency to the situational approach and less to the trait approach as described by Favara. Based on that no further need for an inductive change could be found as all candidates argued in a similar way such as "depends on the situation" or "every manager has a leader as well".

Only the managers and employees have been asked to match the list of traits according to their personality. The leadership

consultants have been asked about their view on important traits. These answers have been added to the inductive categories of managers behaviour impact. The results showed that one employee showed a high number of matching traits (highest with another manager) and that also one manager showed the same coverage as the majority of the employees.

In general, these questions have been directly asked to the candidates and were answered based on their self-recognition without performing any kind of background check or evidence.

Therefore, it could also be possible that some answers would turn out differently when tested. Furthermore, the list contained traits that are overall seen as favourable and as candidate three mentioned "all qualities that we hope to encounter in our relationships also outside of work".

It was noticeable that the managers seemed to be a bit more confident when answering which could be due to the fact that they usually faced some kind of personality analysis before.

**Table 7**  
**Awareness of followership inductive results**

Category	Sub-Category	Interview source	Anchor Example	
Awareness of followership	Common goal/active involvement	18	<i>"[...]about active participation by the employees - and that they are involved in the work [...]the influencers can only be successful if they also have active followers who then also like, share and react to posts in such a way that they also know what the followers want to see and hear on the basis of the feedback [...]"</i>	
	Counterpart to leadership	14	<i>"Followship always has something to do with leading in any case [...]there are always two dimensions: Being led, being able to lead."</i>	
	Employee perspective	17	<i>"[...]more from the perspective of an employee[...]I would actually wish that the perspective of the employee, the follower, would be taken into account much more in order to simply awaken the understanding of the manager [...]"</i>	
	Relationship between Manager and Employee		15	<i>"[...]a kind of interaction between trust and leadership, between the employee and the manager."</i>
			14	<i>"[...]how people interact with each other in certain life situations[...]"</i>

**Table 8**  
**Switching roles deductive results**

Category	Sub-Category	Interview source	Anchor Example
Switching roles	Not possible	19	<i>"[...]for me these are so anchored qualities in your- in your being, which you don't discard when it's 5:00 p.m. and you finish work. They are anchored in you and that's why I believe that they are also recognisable in your private life[...]"</i>
	Possible	19	<i>"[...]a person who is perhaps more of a follower in a professional context can also take the reins in an area of his or her private life that is super important to him or her[...]"</i>
		11	<i>"[...]every person has to be able to subordinate themselves in that sense. And also realize that you can't be the leader in every area [...]"</i>

All participants agreed that the behaviour of the manager has a strong influence on the employees. The manager group also partially stated that they are aware about this, namely two out of four. One candidate even named the behaviour of the employee towards the manager as important as well.

The others interviewed did not deny the influence but moreover provided further insights about what behaviour they are trying to show and why. Some of these characteristics such as honesty, empathy and decision making are also part of the list of traits that according to the

trait driven theory should be part of a manager’s personality. This list was expanded by further well-known aspects like giving feedback or transparency.

According to one of the leadership consultants, the topics of self-reflection is of increasing importance which was also supported by one of the managers.

First the candidates have been asked to rate each on a scale from 0 to 10. Below shows that most of the candidates, nine out of ten, rated trust higher than sympathy. Half of the

group rated trust with a full score of 10. Only one employee stated that sympathy is more important and even a prerequisite for trust. On average, sympathy was rated 6.7

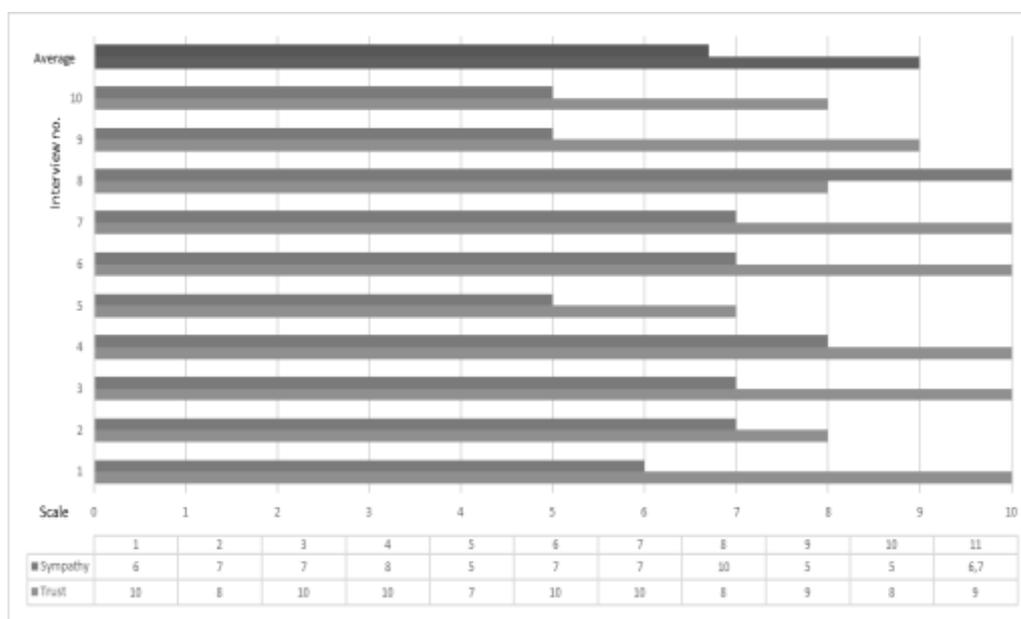
and trust 9. Whenever a candidate provided a range as an answer, the higher grade was taken for the calculation.

**Table 9**  
**Matching traits results**

Category	Sub-Category	Interview source	Matching traits in percentage	Group
Traits	Matching	I7	73%	Manager
		I6	80%	Manager
		I5	87%	Employee
		I3	87%	Manager
	Not matching	I11	53%	Employee
		I12	67%	Employee
		I8	67%	Employee
		I10	67%	Manager

**Table 10**  
**Impact/Awareness of behaviour deductive results**

Category	Sub-Category	Interview source	Anchor Example
		I8	<i>"[...]if a positive atmosphere is created where you feel comfortable, then it's easier to get more involved or maybe even to actively shape something - to give active feedback to the boss [...]if you didn't get on so well with the person, then you would perhaps do less and be more reserved [...]if he is also a bit interested in you as a person and also appreciates the work, so he also gives you praise or general feedback, then I think you definitely feel more comfortable at work."</i>
	Medium/Low influence	N/A	N/A



**Figure 6: Trust and Sympathy ratings**

**Table 11**  
**Impact/Awareness of behaviour inductive results**

Category	Sub-Category	Interview source	Anchor Example
Impact/Awareness of behaviour	Authenticity	I3	<i>"[...]all qualities that we hope to encounter in our relationships also outside of work[...] contradiction would be if there would be completely different answers outside of work."</i>
	Calm	I4	<i>"[...]a certain inner calm, [...] - as a leader [...] it is important in certain situations [...] to keep calm and not to fall into hectic and actions[...]"</i>
	Feedback	I8	<i>"[...]receive appropriate feedback and can also give feedback[...]"</i>
	Honesty	I6	<i>"[...]honest and fair with my employees[...]"</i>
	Reflection	I9	<i>"I have already been able to coach some managers where I have given them a few reflection questions and where I have noticed that they have never asked some questions about what their behaviour could trigger in certain situations with certain people."</i>
	Topics	I1	<i>"[...]my work is influenced by the topics I am assigned and the extent to which I can develop in them."</i>
	Transparency	I7	<i>"[...]clarify a lot of things[...]open transparency and also of showing options[...]"</i>
	Empathy	I3	<i>"[...]empathy on it in both ways and understanding from the manager side as to which position the employee is in and vice versa."</i>
	Decision making	I3	<i>"[...]trying to show trust, decisiveness. In case I feel that decisiveness is needed and passion[...]"</i>

For the multiple choice question, eight out of ten chose the second option of a successful but uncongenial leader. Many also stated that missing sympathy does not hinder them from building the amount of trust that is required for a professional relationship. Nevertheless, they also stated that sympathy supports to build a trustful relationship and that it is helpful when communicating with each other. It turned out that the relation of trust and sympathy was very difficult, yet interesting and large part of the interviews.

Beside trust and sympathy, this part of the interview led to other important aspects of the leadership and employee relationship. In the context of followership, these could be the things the follower expects to develop a positive kind of followership. Whereas some of these are not new in the leadership context (appreciation, communication, development etc.), three categories could be more a result of the last decade: feedback, self-organisation and being a role-model. One might say that feedback is not new.

**Table 12**  
**Importance of good leader deductive results**

Category	Option	Sub-Category	Interview source	Anchor Example
Importance of good leader	Option b)	Importance of Sympathy	I10	<i>"[...]with sympathy you can win people over faster, it makes things easier[...]I have to be professional enough to manage that, even if I might not get along so well with the person personally."</i>
			I9	<i>"[...]if you have a strong manager with a strong vision, with a commitment and a willingness and if he or she also exemplifies this, then this leader can also take people along with him, even if he is perhaps not completely sympathetic[...]"</i>
		Importance of trust	I4	<i>"[...]that's what everything is based on. If that doesn't work, then you don't need self-realisation, self-organisation."</i>
	Option a)	Importance of Sympathy	I8	<i>"[...]only if you perceive sympathy as positive, can you really feel comfortable at work and develop fully[...]it is important to me that this sympathy is there, because then you also feel good at work [...]"</i>
			Importance of trust	I8
		I11		<i>"[...]trust is the be-all and end-all, so if I don't trust my advocacy, I can't follow[...]"</i>

But in particular the communication channel from the employee to the manager is still an untaken path in many cases even though the importance of follower-feedback was noted in the past by e.g. Bass and Bass<sup>2</sup> stated 'Followers are an important sources of feedback for leaders'. Reasons for that may lie within the former perception of an 'untouchable' manager and that it is dangerous to speak up against people in a higher position.<sup>19</sup>

This missing feedback can lead to a dangerous gap between self- and outside view<sup>5</sup>. Self-organisation, especially agile teams are becoming more and more popular in all sizes of organizations. Since the principles have grown out of the software development area, many others have adapted its methods.

Grass et al<sup>13</sup> summarized the benefits in more creativity, commitment and job satisfaction. Demonstrating behaviour that is seen as desirable by the follower is a fundamental part of followership. Being a role model is leaning onto that by further expanding the leader behaviour as not only being perceived as advantageous but motivating others to adapt it. In this context preferably by showing the expected behaviour

themselves. Jaussi and Dionne<sup>16</sup> proved the dependency of a creative leader role model and its effect on follower's reactivity. This way leaders could indirectly influence what kind of followership their employees develop with the role that they model for them.

The last part of the interview concentrated on the consequences of negative followership. Nearly all answers stated that either demotivation or resigning (or both) would be the result. Some thought that such a team could work short-term but not long-term. It was also perceived among the group that acceptable results may be achieved but with less teamwork and innovation. The latter could also lead to damaging the reputation or attractiveness of the employer brand of a company.

Additionally, further consequences have been named by the participants which underline the importance and impact of good followership. If the followership is of a negative kind, for long-term it will negatively impact the leader, other employees, the performance and the trust between manager and employee.

**Table 13**  
**Importance of good leader inductive results**

Category	Sub-Category	Interview source	Anchor Example	
Importance of good leader	Appreciation	I5	<i>“Whether it's always just trust - it's also a bit of a question of appreciation[.]”</i>	
	Clear responsibilities	I4	<i>“[.]give responsibility to employees, who can then in turn realise their own responsibility through this negotiation and can show what they are actually capable of achieving.”</i>	
	Communication	I8	<i>“[.]the interaction between employees and managers only works if everyone knows what it's all about[.]name your own interests or your own strengths and he is happy to promote them accordingly and thus also gives you the opportunity to achieve your own goals.”</i>	
	Development	I10	<i>“I want to support everyone and make it possible for everyone to develop their potential[.]”</i>	
	Keep the back	I3	<i>“[.]they would like a manager to take care of certain things being their development, standing up for them and protecting them[.]”</i>	
	Motivation	I2	<i>“[.]if I can't work because I can't, or because my team isn't being moved forward, because things aren't being decided, etc., then that's simply demotivating to keep me satisfied by solving my problems that are outside my sphere of influence [..]I would be much more demotivated because I might have to deal with a lot of things that would otherwise take away my time to work on my goals.[..]if my manager shows me a lack of interest in my subject, or doesn't listen to me when I describe to him that we have problems, then it will definitely affect my motivation to work on this problem myself [..]”</i>	
	Role model		I9	<i>“[.]the topic of role model was also a topic and there are also all these leadership styles Leadership by example, Leading by example, I find that a very exciting aspect [..]”</i>
			I4	<i>“[.]the role model function plays an essential role here. - So I think every leader should have something about them, subconsciously, actually, not consciously, -how they can act as a role model in the work environment.”</i>
	Self-Organisation		I6	<i>“[.]give the employees as much freedom as possible in their area of work and to give them the corresponding freedom to make decisions, so that they can develop within the framework[.]to involve them and to actively get advice, to actively involve them in decisions[.]”</i>
			I5	<i>“I don't need the manager to tell me how to do my work best, but in which direction we are moving as a team, as individuals for the job[.]”</i>

	Others	I6	<i>"[..]commitment on both sides[..]reliability is also part of it, on both sides[..]"</i>
		I4	<i>"[..]to be able to admit mistakes."</i>

**Table 14**  
**Consequences of negative followership deductive results**

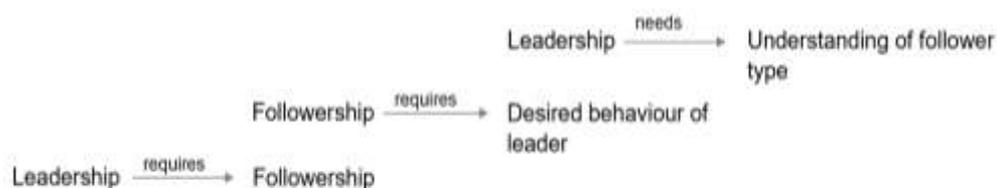
Category	Sub-Category	Interview source	Anchor Example
Consequences of negative followership		I7	<i>"[..]such people are then rather, I would say, self-centred, perhaps go into their own shell, express their own inner resignation or, in the best case, still do duty by the book. But in any case I think they will no longer contribute positively to the team idea."</i>
	Resigning	I8	<i>"[..]as a company or something would not be attractive for new applicants or that employees would want to change jobs because they don't feel comfortable or new applicants might quit after the probationary period[..]"</i>
		I3	<i>"[..]people at the end of the day wouldn't buy into it and would simply just leave."</i>

**Table 15**  
**Consequences of negative followership inductive results**

Category	Sub-Category	Interview source	Anchor Example
Consequences of negative followership	Negative impact on leader	I10	<i>"[..]that can also be demotivating for a manager. Because then you don't only have the topic itself, but also the team, which then doesn't really go along with you and I think that can of course also affect your own motivation[..]"</i>
	Negative impact on peers	I5	<i>"[..]other employees can also take this departing employee as an example[..]"</i>
		I1	<i>"[..]creates competition[..]conflict among staff."</i>
	Negative impact on performance	I9	<i>"[..]Maybe you really miss opportunities, maybe you let a culture of cooperation develop that is not inspiring, that is not constructive, that is not motivating[..]"</i>
		I8	<i>"[..]you don't think in a really innovative way, because you don't have the input of the employees."</i>
	Negative impact on trust	I6	<i>"[..]with negative followership there would be a lot of mistrust[..] would also lack trust[..]"</i>

**Table 16**  
**General assumptions review after results**

General assumption	Result
1. People not in leadership roles can have traits known for leaders (and vice versa) and are aware about that	Supported - the research showed that managers as well as employees can take the leader or follower role
2. People in leadership positions are aware about the impact of followership and actively work on strengthening it	Not supported - Followership is still unknown to the majority of people. Nevertheless, aspects of followership such as motivation and goals are already actively targeted by managers and employees
3. Employee followership is more important than any other aspect of leadership	Partially supported - Even though the supporting arguments for positive followership were somehow vague, the results for the consequences of negative followership clearly show why it is of utter importance.



**Figure 7: Research framework comparison after results**

Conclusively it can be argued that the importance followership is undeniable. It is important for managers and employees on every level to understand when, why and how they are following or being followed. To understand what follower types one is surrounded by, can help to bind with the allies and actively target the passives. If a negative follower type is detected, the leader may not always be able to change that, but they are aware of them and can act accordingly.

To further make use of the advantages of followership, leaders should:

- Understand what follower types they are surrounded by.
- Understand when and how they follow others.
- Reflect their behaviour according to its influence on followership.

**Discussion**

This study underlined the low awareness about the terminology of followership. Despite that three main results could be derived from the analysis. First, missing to pay attention to followership can lead to fluctuation, demotivation (employees and leaders) and bad performance. The interviews showed that all participants found one or multiple negative consequences in negative or passive followership.

As underlined by Kellermann<sup>19</sup>, it is also negative when followers highly support an unethical leader. She used the supporters or bystanders during the Nazi times in Germany as a very clear example for such a case, thus showing the danger that lies in blind followership. An additional instance

are cults that drag people into some sort of alternative reality thinking. But one thing these examples teach us is the influence within the group<sup>10</sup> which for a manager means that one negative follower will not be alone for a long time. Therefore, followership can help managers to understand behaviour patterns and group cohesion and work towards a positive followership atmosphere creating better results and teamwork. So far, followership theories have been analysed individually, but merely compared all together.

This study showed that they agree in their basic theory of positive and negative followership with different levels of support/interaction. Further possibilities lie within the group dynamics and the influence of each follower type on each other. One example that was stated during one of the interviews compared followership with social media followers, it does not help an influencer to have many followers that do not like or share their posts, that do not buy the things they promote or use their affiliation code, or even worse only write negative feedback. There is on the contrary a certain range where people became famous just out of negative press, not taking into account what kind of followers these groups may have.

Secondly, the shift towards self-organized teams also moves the attention more towards the employees and their involvement. Therefore, followership could be a supporting framework that can help determining the right group of people for a team. It is no big news that leaders impact their employees. But adding the perspective of followership to this can help managers to further understand how they for short term and long term influence their followers even when

they are not directly involved. The topic of being a role model further contributes to the impression that someone has of their leader. Different follower types may be able to achieve different levels of self-organizations depending on how much they need their leader to advise or command. According to Hess and Neuburger, self-organized employees are more involved into their work achieving greater results. The equivalent active/engaged follower type could therefore be more fitting for mature self-organized employees.

So far, self-organization has not been reviewed focussing on the follower type of the individuals and the group. The perception of the leader may also shift completely in a team where the formal manager is acting as a servant leader in the background, it could happen that someone in the group is then seen as the leader instead. In general, it could be questioned whether the manager always needs to fulfil the role of the leader in a group of self-organized employees.

Lastly, contrary to the cult that usually has some kind of a charismatic leader<sup>10</sup>, the interviews showed that many people do not require sympathy with their leader to build trust. So far, the relation or perhaps correlation of trust, sympathy and followership has not been deeply analysed.

According to Dufour et al, trust is crucial to empower employees and create better performance including enhanced creativity from the recipients. Thus, being an important part of forming self-organized teams, this study could function as a starting point for further and wider research and experiments.

However, sympathy is hard to learn and can be perceived differently by every individual. Hence leaders should more focus on the trust basics that were found within this study such as reliability, transparency and a clear strategy. By doing this, the basement of the expectancy theory can still be met, meaning employees receive the expected outcome and feel attracted to such. It was indicated that sympathy allows faster and easier trust building which could lead to a two-dimensional view of the manager-employee-trust relationship whereas one part is rational and based on objective facts and the other subjective and according to the personal recognition of each other that is a prerequisite to reach a certain level of followership, as in cults (e.g. diehards according to Kellermann).

This study underlies the following limitations:

- a. The focus was on follower-leader-relationships where one leader has a group that follows. Other combinations e.g. multiple leaders or a one-to-one relation have not been considered.
- b. The interviewed employees are not in all cases part of the team of the interviewed managers which would have allowed further research about e.g. the performance influence.

- c. Additionally, the retrieved picture is only reflecting the current momentum and does not consider any development over time.
- d. No psychological or any other background analysis of the individual candidates has been done.
- e. Therefore, the behaviour or traits could not be verified in testing scenarios or other experiments.

For future research directions, a quantitative analysis based on the developed assumptions would be possible. In fact, Mayring<sup>25</sup> suggests a mixed research to follow up upon qualitative research which is then followed by another qualitative analysis.

Furthermore, the impact on a group of followers with one or multiple leaders could be researched, especially taking into account the effect that a strongly positive or negative follower has on its peers. In addition to that the actual influence of sympathy and trust could be evaluated further. It would also be possible to include personality tests and a more psychological background within further research.

Moreover, the mid-and long-term effects of targeted followership could be tested by observing over a longer period and frequently repeating the interviews. These could also include hard factors like performance and satisfaction survey results.

Lastly, self-organization and followership open a new field of hypotheses that could be deeper researched and evaluated considering how and when the follower types respond to different levels of enablement.

## Conclusion

To adapt to change is crucial for companies to survive nowadays. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven this recently.<sup>26</sup> Hence using the tools of agility is essential too.<sup>14</sup> Part of that is the shift towards self-leading teams which incontrovertibly need a change of the leadership role as well. This shift is exactly what makes followership one of the most important topics for leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The future is less about 'what do I give the employees' and more 'what do I get (back) from my employees'.

The benefits of a positive followership are undeniable too. They may have been known already hidden in theories about motivation and situational leadership. But with the shift to a state where the employees become more and more active and the leaders more and more supportive, time has come to give followership its own name and space.

Authors like Barabara Kellermann<sup>17-19</sup> are already contributing to that, inspiring other authors to do the same and rethink follower-and leadership to be prepared for the next decade. The results have clearly shown the advantages of treating followership equal to leadership, not as its subordinate and to pay it the deserved attention.

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