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WHEN THE LIGHT GOES OUT

Understanding Follower Disillusionment Through Power and Dependence

By Dr. Anthony W. Adams

"To be successful in leadership, you must become a student of human behavior."

One of the statements I frequently make when teaching leadership at the university level or in one of our SAILS—School of Advanced Innovative Leadership Studies—courses is this: To be successful in leadership, you must become a student of human behavior.

Leadership is ultimately about people. And people can be challenging. One of the greatest mistakes a leader can make is assuming that people will continue to behave tomorrow exactly as they behaved today. A person who is deeply committed to the organization today may become disengaged tomorrow. A follower who once worked tirelessly to help the leader succeed may suddenly reduce his or her effort—or leave the organization altogether.

THE KEEPER AND THE BEACON

For years, the great lighthouse on the northern cliffs never went dark, and the town below never worried.

The Keeper of the light was known throughout the valley for his absolute devotion. Every evening, he climbed the three hundred stone steps to trim the wick, polish the heavy brass lenses, and feed the flame. He endured bitter winters and howling gales without complaint.

To the townspeople and the elders who governed the valley, the Keeper wasn't simply an employee. He was the embodiment of their safety and their shared purpose.

Then one afternoon, everything changed. The Council of Elders decided to modernize the town. They arrived at the lighthouse unannounced, accompanied by auditors and architects. They marched past the Keeper without greeting him, treating him less like the guardian of the building and more like a fixture of it.

They discussed replacing the oil with a cheaper synthetic blend. They considered replacing the hand-polished brass with automated steel. Finally, the Lead Elder turned to the Keeper: "Beginning tomorrow, you will carry twice as many oil barrels up the stairs. We are reducing your assistant's hours to balance the budget."

The Keeper looked at the Elder. He looked at the brass lenses he had polished until his hands bled. He didn't argue. He didn't yell. He simply nodded. "Understood."

That evening, the sun disappeared below the horizon. The townspeople looked toward the cliffs, expecting the familiar warm, golden beam to pierce the darkness.

It didn't.

The horizon remained completely black.

Panic struck the Council. They rushed up the cliffside and burst through the heavy oak doors of the lighthouse, expecting to find the Keeper injured or trapped. Instead, they found him sitting quietly at the bottom of the stairs, reading a book by the light of a single candle. The great lantern above was cold.

“What is the meaning of this?” the Lead Elder demanded. “You have abandoned your duty! You have lost your loyalty to the town!”

The Keeper closed his book.

“My loyalty did not vanish when the sun went down,” he replied. “It vanished this afternoon when you showed me that we were no longer protecting the valley together.”

“You see the light as a line item on a ledger, and you see me as the machine that turns it. I didn't stop caring because the stairs became steeper. I stopped caring because the summit no longer mattered.”

THE LEADERSHIP LESSON

Power Is a Relationship

That story illustrates an important principle of leadership: Power is reciprocal.

In 1962, sociologist Richard M. Emerson developed the Power-Dependence Theory. Emerson argued that power does not simply reside in a title or position. Rather, power emerges from relationships of dependence.

In simple terms: If I need something from you, you have some degree of power over me. And the reverse is also true. If you need something from me, I have some degree of power in relation to you.

$$P_{(AB)} = D_{(BA)} \quad \bullet \quad P_{(BA)} = D_{(AB)}$$

Power in a relationship is related to the other party's dependence.

This is important for leaders because organizations are built upon networks of mutual dependence. A leader may possess formal authority, but the leader is also dependent upon followers. The organization needs employees to perform their responsibilities. Employees may depend upon the organization for compensation, opportunity, belonging, purpose, relationships, professional development, or other resources.

The leader needs followers to accomplish the organization's mission. Followers need leaders to provide direction, resources, support, recognition, opportunity, and sometimes protection.

Leadership is therefore not simply about authority. It is about relationships of influence and dependence.

WHEN THE BALANCE CHANGES

Social relationships can be relatively balanced when both parties depend upon one another in meaningful ways. Problems arise when that relationship becomes significantly imbalanced.

Imagine an employee who once depended heavily upon the organization. The job provided income, purpose, relationships, professional development, and a sense of belonging. The employee was highly committed.

Then something changes. Perhaps the leader repeatedly dismisses the employee's ideas. Perhaps recognition disappears. Perhaps the employee is treated as replaceable. Perhaps the organization begins demanding greater sacrifice while simultaneously communicating that the employee's contribution is not particularly valuable.

At some point, the employee may discover something important: "I don't need this relationship as much as I once did." That realization can dramatically change the relationship.

The change may look sudden to the leader, but the conditions for the change may have been developing for a long time.

FROM EXEMPLARY FOLLOWER TO ALIENATED FOLLOWER

Followership research gives us another helpful way to understand this phenomenon. A follower can begin as what Robert Kelley described as an exemplary follower—someone who thinks independently, participates actively, and contributes significantly to the organization.

But when trust, respect, perceived fairness, or relational commitment deteriorates, the follower's behavior can change. The person may become increasingly detached. Eventually, that individual may move toward what Kelley described as an alienated follower.

This is an important warning for leaders: Alienated followers are not necessarily people who began as bad followers. Some may have once been among the organization's most committed people.

The leader may look at the person and ask, "What happened to them?" Sometimes the better question is, "What happened to the relationship?"

Imagine a beautiful glass sculpture. A warm beam of light passes from the foundation of the organization, through the leader, and toward the follower. The follower appears strong, stable, and flawless.

Then a tiny hairline fracture appears. It may be almost invisible. But underneath the surface, the structural integrity of the glass has been compromised. Eventually, the fracture propagates throughout the sculpture.

Leadership relationships can work the same way. A follower may continue showing up. They may continue performing. They may continue smiling. They may even continue saying the right things. But internally, the relationship may already be fractured.

And when that fracture finally becomes visible, leaders sometimes say: “They changed overnight.” They probably didn't. The leader simply noticed the change when it finally became visible.

THE LEADER'S RESPONSIBILITY

If leadership power is influenced by follower dependence, then leaders should not attempt to maximize dependence. Instead, healthy leaders should work toward reciprocity.

A leader should ask:

- Do my followers believe that I value their contribution?
- Do they believe that I need them as much as they need me?
- Do I keep my commitments?
- Do I listen to their concerns?
- Do I recognize their contributions?
- Do they understand how their work contributes to the mission?
- Have I unintentionally communicated that they are replaceable?
- Am I asking for increasing sacrifice while providing decreasing support?
- Have I created an environment where people can succeed and flourish?

STABILITY REQUIRES RECIPROCITY

The lesson for leaders is not that followers should always get what they want. Leadership requires difficult decisions. Organizations must sometimes reduce budgets, change responsibilities, restructure departments, or make unpopular decisions.

The problem is not change. The problem is how people experience the relationship during change.

A leader can make a difficult decision while still communicating: “You matter. Your contribution matters. We are still working toward this mission together.”

That message can preserve relational stability.

The opposite message can be devastating: “You are simply a resource we can use.”

A QUESTION FOR LEADERS

“Have I mistaken their commitment for an unlimited resource?”

THE KEEPER WASN'T CARRYING OIL

Go back to the Keeper. The Council thought they had a problem with employee performance. They were wrong.

The Keeper wasn't refusing to carry the oil because the work was difficult. He had carried the oil for years. The problem was that the meaning of the work had changed.

The Keeper no longer believed that the Council and he were pursuing the same purpose.

The summit no longer mattered.

People will often endure difficult circumstances when they believe they are part of something meaningful. They will carry heavy burdens when they believe the burden is shared. They will sacrifice when they believe the sacrifice serves a worthwhile purpose.

But when people begin to believe that the relationship is one-sided—that the organization takes while they give, that the leader demands while failing to support, or that their contribution is valued only when it produces something—the relationship can begin to fracture.

Leadership is not simply about getting people to follow.

Leadership is about creating the conditions in which people continue to believe that following is worthwhile.

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