

# Great Leaders Follow First

## Nine Rules for Dynamic Followership

MAJ GEN MICHAEL D. ROTHSTEIN, USAF\*

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed or implied in the Journal are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government. This article may be reproduced in whole or in part without permission. If it is reproduced, the Air and Space Power Journal requests a courtesy line.



**A**s military professionals, we love to talk about leadership. This focus on leadership, however, may induce a blind spot: every single one of us is first and always a follower. We all have a boss. We all report to someone. Our senior leaders remind us—and rightfully so—that our Airmen deserve great leaders. But if we want to have truly effective teams, our leaders need great followers too.

It's hard to find a flight, squadron, directorate, or team that excels without having a combination of great leaders and great followers. We know this intuitively, but we spend much more time thinking about leadership than we do followership. A simple Google search of the word *leadership* yields 3.8 billion hits while searching *followership* brings up only a mere 1.1 million hits. Even as im-

---

\*The author would like to thank those who provided key insights and reviews for this article, including Col Jeff Donnithorne, Prof. JC Carter, and Prof. Gene Kamena.

perfect as this metric is, the almost 4,000-percent difference in those results underscores the relative importance we tend to put on the two topics. This article's central idea is that being a great follower is every bit as important to a team's success as being a great leader, and every single one of us can be an even better follower than we are today.

This article offers nine consistent practices of great followers. Nothing described below is likely to tell you anything you don't already know. However, I hope to *remind and reinforce* a few things that you may have forgotten or to perhaps provide a perspective you may not have considered. Great followers don't have some special insight about "the secrets" of being a great subordinate; they are just uncommonly good at the execution of common sense. Not surprisingly, modeling these nine behaviors will not only help you become a great follower, but they will also improve your leadership.

## **1. Think Two Levels Up**

Leaders value subordinates who consistently and effectively think two echelons above their own. What does this mean? In the Air Force, it means a flight commander can think through the lens of his group commander, a first sergeant through the lens of her wing command chief, and perhaps an action officer on a numbered air force staff can accurately consider a major command commander's perspective.

This kind of vertical empathy is important for two reasons. First, it keeps the follower from being parochial in his approach to the decision at hand. If the flight commander only thinks about what is best for his flight and not what is best at the squadron or group level, he risks being out of alignment with his leaders' intent and priorities. Second, thinking two levels up helps followers broaden their perspectives on variables to consider in a decision so they can bring better recommendations to their bosses.

When I was a brand-new squadron commander at Nellis AFB, Nevada, I approached my boss with a recommendation to change the traffic pattern for the B-1 bombers that regularly flew at Nellis. The visiting B-1 squadrons had requested the change, and our air traffic control team worked hard to devise procedures that would be safe and effective within Nellis's complicated air traffic pattern. My operations group commander listened as we used a large map to detail the proposed routing, sequencing options, and radio calls. It was a good plan, and I was proud of how well the team had thought it through and pitched it to the boss! When we were done, he turned to me and said, "I appreciate the effort on this, but we're not going to do it. Why would we want to fly the loudest aircraft in the inventory right over the top of base housing?"

I had failed to think two levels up. My boss was thinking like a wing commander who understood the need to balance the needs of the flying operations with the potential community impact. Had I been better at thinking two levels up that day, I might have anticipated those concerns and approached the problem in a better way. Thinking two levels up is not always easy, and you don't necessarily get it right all the time, but like all things, the more you practice, the better you get and the more valuable you become to your boss and the team.

## **2. Speak Truth to Power**

The great follower is particularly effective at telling the boss what he needs to hear, even if it may not be what he wants to hear. She is willing to disagree, to provide constructive criticism, and to provide alternative perspectives. This candor is incredibly valuable because we all know that the boss is not always right, nor does the boss always have an accurate sense of what may be happening in the lower levels of the organization. Good leaders value subordinates who will talk straight with them as they are humble enough to recognize that they are not infallible. So how do you get better at speaking truth to power? Followers who do this really well tend to have four things in common:

- They clarify expectations ahead of time with their boss about the underlying importance of professional candor both up and down the chain of command. They then practice this candor and make it a habitual part of the relationship. But they also let their boss know, in both word and deed, that they will support and execute decisions loyally even if they've advocated for another pathway.
- They learn their particular boss's style and personality to know how best to disagree or present those "inconvenient truths." Some leaders are far more receptive in private than public, some prefer to hash things out at the time versus revisiting discussions later, and some prefer verbal dialogues while others might be more receptive with a written argument. Study your boss's style and be smart about your approach.
- The really good followers have learned to disagree without being disagreeable. They remain mindful that their underlying goal is not to tell the boss that he is wrong but rather to influence the boss in a positive direction. They remain polite and respectful and are aware of not only their words but also their tone and body language. They project confidence and avoid hesitancy but allow for the fact that they, too, may be wrong.

- They don't allow a lack of courage to be their reason for silence. Let's face it: speaking up can be hard. It is often easier to "go along to get along." However, great subordinates care more about mission success and what's best for the team than their personal promotion. They don't necessarily speak up every single time they have a different viewpoint—they are wise enough not to fight every battle. But they do not shirk from ensuring that the boss hears the important things that need to be heard.

### **3. Don't Bring the Boss a Problem—Bring Proposed Solutions**

A great subordinate values his boss's time and works hard to bring his boss problems only after he has first tried to resolve them for himself. If he can't solve the problem, or if the decision properly belongs to the boss, then the shrewd subordinate comes armed to the conversation with having thought through considerations, options, and recommendations ahead of time.

Anticipate that every time you bring a problem to your boss, she is going to ask, "Okay, I hear your problem. What are my options for dealing with this, what do you recommend I should do, and why?" If time permits, don't bring up the problem until you have some answers to those questions. Notably, the boss is not asking what should be done from the subordinate's perspective but rather what should the boss do. This difference in perspective is subtle but important and relates directly back to "thinking two levels up." What are the equities from the leader's perspective? Does the boss have the authority or resources to solve the problem, or will he need to go to higher levels in the organization? Who might the boss need to engage to address the issue, and what would be the most effective way to do that? It comes down to helping your boss with the appropriate contextual thinking and doing the necessary staff work ahead of time.

Do not underestimate the number of opportunities to improve your performance as a follower by slowing down to think through proposed solutions before bringing the boss a problem. This approach may require a more initial investment in time but routinely results in better decisions and not only protects the boss's valuable time but saves time overall in the long run. Here are a few examples to underscore the difference between bringing mere problems versus bringing proposed solutions:

- Consider "Boss, when do you want to have the next meeting?" versus "Boss, reference the timing of the next meeting, the Thursday after next will give the team time to get the data compiled. The Monday before that would also work per your schedule if you are willing to accept a bit rougher product. I

recommend Monday so the team can get your feedback sooner and make adjustments.”

- Consider “Boss, what do you want to do to meet the commander’s objective of improving internal training?” versus “Boss, to meet the commander’s objective of improving training, we looked at several options. To ensure we get everyone on the same sheet and get this accomplished quickly, we thought you’d agree that doing it in one day was better than a piecemeal approach. If so, the 15th makes the best sense as it minimizes impact to the rest of the wing, and there is time to advertise the closure. If not, then the next best option would be to send two people at a time over the next several months.”
- Consider “Boss, if we don’t get the replacement part in by Wednesday, we won’t be able to meet the schedule” versus, “Boss, to get the part by Wednesday, I recommend you call headquarters now to convince them to spend the extra money to expedite shipping. I tried already at my level, but they tell me only the supervisor can approve that, and frankly, you will have more sway than I will. I think the key to convincing him is to highlight our need to stay ahead of the timeline for our upcoming deployment.”

Sometimes, you will want to bring the problem to the boss even though you have not determined the proposed solutions. If the problem is big, or if it is time-critical, you typically want to inform your boss sooner rather than later. You don’t wait to tell the ship’s captain there is a hole in the hull until after you’ve figured out how to possibly fix it. Another reason to consider involving the boss early is to promote transparency, build awareness, and provide a coaching opportunity while the subordinate continues to work the problem. Finally, there will be times when as a subordinate, you just don’t have any great ideas on how to solve a problem—don’t let that stop you from alerting the boss to problems she needs to know about.

#### **4. Internalize and Work the Boss’s Priorities**

Here is a quick exercise I’d invite you to do. Take a short break from this article and write down your boss’s priorities in two areas—first for the organization overall, and second for your particular part of it. If you can do this, great! If you struggled with that exercise, then I’d encourage you to have a discussion with your boss because you can’t be a great follower if you don’t clearly understand what is important to the leader. Ideally, the leader concisely communicates his broad and specific priorities regularly, and everything is nicely spelled out for the organization, but we all know that’s frequently not the case. So, the great follower takes

ownership to ensure he knows his boss's priorities. If it is not clearly spelled out already, then one effective approach is for the follower to write down what he thinks the priorities should be from the boss's perspective and then take it to him for his edits, intent, and guidance.

Knowing the priorities is the first part; next comes internalizing them. I use the term *internalize* because there often needs to be considerable mental translation done between how the boss may have articulated her priorities and what that implies you should focus on in your particular corner of the organization. This mental translation may be especially needed in larger organizations when we are trying to align priorities with not only our immediate supervisor but also with a boss or commander two or more levels up. In this internalization process, the great follower also uses their bosses' priorities to help determine what not to do and where to accept risk so they can focus on what's most critical.

Finally, the great follower works his bosses' priorities and areas of emphasis. The *good* follower works his assigned tasks. The *great* follower goes beyond working his assigned tasks to align effort and resources into working his bosses' priorities and achieving the intent. Bosses appreciate subordinates who ask, "Boss this is what I think you are trying to accomplish, and this is how I, or my part of the organization, can support that goal." The key difference, of course, is a *proactive* versus a *reactive* mindset. More often than we think, the areas that the leader is trying to emphasize don't come wrapped in specific tasks and deadlines. Maybe they should, but the reality is that they often don't.

Here is one simple example. During my first tour as a wing commander, I routinely shared my intent with group and squadron commanders to make unit-level physical fitness an emphasis area. I never assigned them a specific task, nor set any formal feedback loops or reporting criteria. (In retrospect, had I done that, I would have certainly driven more tangible results.) A good number of the squadron commanders, though, took my intent and moved out to make it a priority for their units. I respected and appreciated their great followership in this area. Others did not make it a priority for their units, and without dissecting the underlying reasons, I'd argue that they missed an opportunity to work one of their boss's priorities.

## **5. Give Good Readbacks**

In the flying environment, when air traffic control issues navigation instructions over the radio, the pilot repeats those instructions back to the controller. This procedure, called a readback, confirms that the pilot actually received and understood the controller's instructions and is an important feedback loop that ensures the plane is going in the right direction at the right altitude. In a similar vein, a

leader needs regular readbacks from his subordinates to ensure that the organization is going in the right direction and in accordance with the leader's intent.

The savvy subordinate knows that the boss has many plates spinning in the air and that keeping track of their status takes significant time and energy. They appreciate that from the boss's perspective, an order given does not always result in an order that was received and understood as it was intended, or that it was carried out effectively.

So, the great subordinate is especially good at using readbacks and periodic updates to close feedback loops with the boss. These periodic feedback loops increase confidence that the boss's direction and guidance were actually received and implemented in the organization's lower levels. The great subordinate asks himself key questions such as what information does my boss need from me and how often does he need it so that he can be confident that my part of the mission is on track? He then builds his own plan to provide that information in the most appropriate format—a quick verbal update, an email, or something more formal. Regardless, the great subordinate is actively looking to regularly keep his boss informed of progress.

One of my subordinates was truly outstanding at giving good readbacks. First, if she had any doubt about what I wanted, she immediately sought to clarify my intent and expectations. This practice not only sharpened my thinking but also saved her from a lot of work in those times when my direction and guidance were unclear. She was also disciplined about acknowledging emails from me that contained any tasking or important information, so I knew that she had received and read the message. Next, she kept a really good list of the different things that I had asked her to work on or track. Finally, she would periodically get with me for 5–10 minutes to give me quick status updates. She succinctly told me what was tracking, what was not, and where she might need help, advice, or guidance. We all occasionally give our boss good readbacks. This particular subordinate's superpower as a follower was her uncommonly consistent and effective execution, and I've always admired her for it.

## **6. Hold Yourself Accountable for Your Performance**

Leadership literature often highlights the importance of holding subordinates accountable. Great followers, however, don't need to be held accountable by their boss—they hold themselves accountable for their own performance. Additionally, great followers think not only in terms of being accountable for their own performance but also more broadly about the performance of the entire team.

Great followers ensure they are clear about what is expected of them and then take pride and ownership in meeting and exceeding those expectations. They self-

assess and are transparent with their boss about the areas in which they are doing well and those that need improvement. They also understand that they likely have blind spots and so they value an on-going performance dialogue with their boss. Great followers are secure enough to walk into their boss's office and readily admit when they have fallen short on something, though they also come armed with a plan on how they are going to fix it.

One way to work on being an accountable subordinate is through your approach to feedback sessions. Instead of the traditional mentality where it is the supervisor's responsibility to schedule a session, prepare for it, and have the subordinate show up to receive feedback, I suggest flipping the approach to have the subordinate schedule, prepare, and lead the session to self-assess his performance. Of course, the supervisor actively participates by providing additional feedback, alternative perspectives, guidance, and coaching. Great subordinates gravitate toward this "inverted" approach to feedback because they want to hold themselves accountable for their performance. In the Air Force, the relatively new Airman Comprehensive Assessment feedback process begins with a self-assessment as the Air Force has started to recognize its value. Many other forward-thinking companies and businesses are also adopting this inverted approach, not only because it helps develop more accountable subordinates but also because it fosters a much more productive feedback session for both parties.

## **7. Don't Pass the Buck**

President Harry Truman famously had a sign on his desk saying, "The buck stops here!" In doing so, he acknowledged his responsibility to make the hard decisions that rose to his level, and that—particularly in his case—he didn't have anyone else to pass the decision on to. The rest of us clearly have more opportunities to pass the buck and avoid making the hard decisions. I know I've certainly done that on occasion. Great followers are especially good at knowing when to stop the buck at their level and just make the hard call and when to elevate the decision to their boss.

Subordinates who pass the buck tend to do so for three primary reasons. They are uncomfortable with shouldering responsibility in general, they are not confident in their ability to make a particular decision, or they want to avoid blame for an unpopular or incorrect decision. While the easier path may be to push hard decisions up to higher levels in the organization, it is probably not the best path for the organization. Great followers are attuned to their own tendency to avoid the hard choices, and before every single decision they pass to their boss to make, they deliberately check themselves to ensure they are not just passing the buck. The great follower appreciates the importance of protecting the leader's time and



not bothering his boss with decisions that he can (and should) make at his level. Additionally, he understands that making decisions at the lowest practical level fosters an organizational culture that values agility, responsiveness, buy-in, and accountability.

So, what are some rules of thumb to help triage whether the decision is best made by the subordinate or more appropriately passed up the chain of command?

Get to know which kinds of decisions your boss wants to make and which ones she is willing to have made at lower levels. Continue to fine-tune this over time. If you need additional resources (money, time, personnel, policy approval, and so forth) to execute the decision, then it might be appropriate to take it further up the chain. But if you don't need those, and you can make a decision that is aligned with your boss's intent, then you should probably make the call at your level.

It's entirely appropriate to go to your boss occasionally to ask for advice or mentoring on how they might go about making particular decisions. This is a subtle, but important, difference than taking the decision to your boss. If you find yourself quietly wanting "top cover" for a decision but don't want to readily admit that out loud, then you might just be passing the buck.

## **8. Demonstrate Professional Loyalty**

Over the years, I have informally polled many different audiences on variations of this question: "Should you give your new boss your loyalty immediately when he steps in, or does he have to earn it?" My unscientific survey results show a couple of stable trends. First, the general majority has leaned in the direction that "they have to earn it." The second trend has been that the more senior the audience, the more responses tilt toward "give it immediately." A room full of Airmen first class or lieutenants typically leans far harder toward "earn it" while a room full of chief master sergeants or colonels are either more balanced or poll a bit more toward "give it immediately." Clearly, the question is a bit unfair in that it demands a binary answer that oversimplifies a complicated and nuanced subject. However, it has jump-started many terrific conversations about how we perceive the concept of loyalty and our obligations and duties as a military member.

Great followers give their immediate loyalty to their new boss, and they continue to demonstrate that loyalty day in and day out. They understand that a hierarchical organization cannot work effectively if subordinates do not demonstrate loyalty up the chain of command. When a new boss comes in, the organization cannot go on pause while the new boss earns enough credibility to be worthy of the followers' loyalty. The underlying basis of that loyalty is not a personal loyalty to the new boss, but rather a professional loyalty to the role that the new leader serves within the organization. Importantly, that professional loyalty also has to

nest upward through the chain of command to the unit commander, to echelons above the unit, eventually to the Air Force, and finally to the nation. Great followers recognize that if something is good for their immediate boss but is not good for the unit or good for the Air Force, then their overriding loyalty has to be to the unit and the Air Force. Notably, when I would recast the discussion through the lens of professional versus personal loyalty, the vast majority of the people I surveyed would then be willing to “give it immediately.”

In discussions on demonstrating loyalty, people often talk about the importance of not talking poorly about your boss in public. That is certainly sage advice, and the *good* follower never gets sucked into a game of Bash the Boss or allows others to play that game. But I would contend that the *great* follower goes the extra mile to find ways to proactively support her boss’s policies, priorities, and areas of emphasis. Consider the subtle difference in loyalty a follower demonstrates between, “The boss says this has to be done tonight, so we’re all going to have to stay late. Sorry.” Versus, “It’s really important to the mission that we finish this project tonight. Not only is the boss counting on us, but this is also about the reputation of our unit. So, we are going to stay late to get this finished tonight.” In the first context, the follower is not speaking poorly of the boss in any direct manner, but she’s subtly casting the boss as the bad guy. In the second scenario, she demonstrates much better loyalty by actually lending support to the decision that has already been made.

The great followers demonstrate outstanding loyalty well beyond just how they talk about their bosses. They ensure their body language communicates that they are supportive and engaged—in other words, they fly in good formation. They prioritize supporting social events where the boss is trying to develop relationships and foster esprit de corps. They sit toward the front of the room (especially if it is half empty) because they recognize that sitting in the back tends to express a lack of buy-in and support. If the boss wears the unit T-shirt on Fridays, so do they. When talking to their own people, they echo the boss’s key themes and messages so that those messages penetrate more fully across the organization. They generally check the boss’s six and look for ways to make him successful.

## **9. Excel at Your Job**

Admittedly, this last rule of great followership is arguably even more common sense than all the rest. But its importance demands that it not go unsaid. Great followers are great at their jobs. Your leaders are counting on you to play your position and to play it extremely well. You can’t get from good to great if you don’t have the fundamentals covered so excelling at your assigned job should always stay in the forefront of your mind as a follower.

Over the years many Airmen have sought my advice about what more they can be doing to make themselves valuable to their organization or what the next move should be in their development. Their motives are typically well-intentioned as they look to be successful and stand out among their peers. Frequently, my advice has been short and direct—be better at your primary job. Be the best flight commander or flight chief, the best aviator, the best maintainer, the best engineer, or the best nurse in your unit. Avoid the pitfall of thinking too much about the next job at the expense of the one you already have. Excel at your job, and you will be more valuable to your boss and the organization.

## **Conclusion**

I have been a follower every day of the 35 years I have spent as an Airman. As I reflect on my experience across multiple commands and staffs in the Air Force and in the joint, international and interagency environments, I believe that practicing these nine behaviors will make you a better follower and consequently a more valuable part of the team. Success for any organization is a team sport requiring significant parts of both leadership and followership. We ignore the followership side of the equation to our peril. So, ask yourself if you are a great follower and commit to building your own followership skills. Invest time with the people you lead to clarify your expectations of what it means to be a great follower and coach them along the way. I also encourage you to write these nine rules on the inside cover of your notebook (Hint: Professionals keep a notebook handy.) and refer to them occasionally to remind yourself of areas to continue to improve upon. We will be a better Air Force if we reclaim the dignity and the art of followership: if all of us must follow, let's strive to follow well. ✪

### **Maj Gen Michael D. Rothstein, USAF**

General Rothstein (MSS, Air War College; MMAS, Command and General Staff College; BA, USAFA) is the commander, Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education and the vice commander of Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

Distribution A: Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.

<http://www.airuniversity.af.mil/ASPJ/>