

# **Leadership and Followership: The Yin & Yang to Building Professional Capacity**

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## **Abstract**

Structured organizational groups are composed of two primary groups, leaders and followers. Of the two groups, the success or failure of organizations, such as schools, are dependent on the leader and his or her leadership abilities. Effective leadership and followership in the educational setting is essential to improving and sustaining academic success. With the ever-increasing pressures in education from national, state, and district accountability standards, school organizations should also focus on fostering relationships between the leaders and followers. Leadership and followership roles are similar to the Chinese principles Yin and Yang, representing duality, yet harmonious relationships. Organizations should keep in mind that future leaders will come from the pool of individuals currently serving as followers; however, it is equally important to recognize leadership and followership as an undeniable symbiotic relationship between those who lead and those who choose to follow.

*Keywords:* Leadership, followership, relationships, capacity, yin-yang

The success or failure of an organization, whether it is business or educational in nature, is dependent upon the actions of two groups of individuals, leaders and followers. Setting and maintaining the trajectory outlined of focus is guided by the leader as well as his or her leadership abilities. However, in education, exhibiting and executing successful leadership abilities is more important than ever with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), flexibility and innovative requirements to ensure school accountability practices and equitable opportunities for all students. Accountability measures and high stakes testing require a capable leader in the piloting seats at both school and district levels. In addition to excellent leadership, schools must have great followers to carry out their missions and visions of success. Followers at their finest participate with independence, aptitude, and eagerness in the daily quest of their organizational goals. Currie (2014) emphasized that some of the finest follows will ensure their own personal and profession goals are aligned with those set forth by the organization and make it a priority to accomplish them.

In many circumstances, the leader and follower relationship has been viewed as two separate entities. However, they are two resilient, yet connected, active roles that are required and exist on every organizational level. Leadership and followership have been described as the being two of the same coin (Rogers & Bligh, 2014; Wishon, 2015). Researchers have referenced the roles of leadership and followership to a two-sided coin due to the symbiotic relationship each role possesses. If we were to physically examine a coin, one side would represent leadership, while the flip side would represent followership. Each side of the coin, when abilities are abundant, will produce outcomes that are advantageous to the organization. Leadership is exceptionally important to a school or organization performance, on the other hand, followership must have a role in the performance as well. Inquisitively, followership receives only a small portion of the spotlight that leadership does. The role of followers, in an organization, is significant at all levels. Followers may consist of stakeholders, executives, employees, or individuals who are in support of or trust the cause. It was the work of Kelley (1992) that prompted significant dialogue and research about followership. Kelley (1992) emphasized the need to pay attention to followers and that followership is worthy of its own distinct research. According to Kelley (1992), conversations about leadership should include followership because leaders neither exist nor act in a vacuum without followers. Specifically, leaders have followership ability and followers have leadership ability (Northouse, 2019). Everyone, whether in the leader or the follower role will depend on each other, which requires some giving and taking in the relationship. Leaders cannot exist without individuals following, and individuals cannot follow without a leader for guidance.

### **Leadership and Followership Relationship**

Leadership is often associated with images of individuals with vast influence over followers working towards completion of a specific cause or goal. On the other hand, the role of the follower has a derogatory connotation and usually receives less praise. Without followers, there would be no leaders (Wishon, 2015). In organizations, followers represent the majority. Followers contribute approximately 80% to an organization's success, while leaders contribute approximately 20% (Kelley, 1992).

Examining the leadership and followership relationship, it is also important that the definitions for both roles are defined. Cox, Plagens, and Sylla (2010) defined leadership and followership as the following:

*Leadership as the capacity to exercise influence over the actions of others such as others behave in the manner the leader desires. Followership represents the conscious and unconscious behaviors of individuals in support of the goals of a leader that has been expressed via words or conduct. (p. 38)*

For many, followers have considered themselves undervalued and considered describing oneself as a follower, utilizing the term itself invokes unfavorable images Blair and Bligh (2018). This stereotype has caused people to avoid being categorized as followers, in some instances referencing followers as those who lack the ability to lead (Hoption, Christie, & Barling, 2012). Chaleff (2009) believed that the term follower is not identical to the term subordinate. Chaleff (2009) described a follower as one who shares a goal with the leader, has faith in what the organization is trying to achieve, and wants both the leader and the organization to be successful. Lapiere and Carsten (2014) suggests additional research on the hierarchy of roles as well as who is and is not considered a follower in organizational roles to differentiate between followers and subordinates. Followership is an integral component of the leadership role because not everyone can serve as a leader. American singer and songwriter Bob Dylan stated, “you are going to have to serve somebody.” Additionally, the late famous American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein has been quoted as saying, “the most difficult instrument to play in an orchestra is the second fiddle.” As a result, no matter what followers may be called or how their roles are described, followers are just as essential to the leadership equation as leaders; followers just serve a different purpose (Wishon, 2015).

Research in organizational management have identified followers as being key players in assisting and supporting successful organizations through the utilization of their strengths as well as complementing and enhancing their leader’s leadership (Currie, 2014). Kelley (1992) posits followership and leadership are two separate but complementary roles. They are not competitive and the greatest successes in an organization require that people in both roles perform maximally. Additionally, Hurwitz and Koonce (2017) stated “leadership and followership are complementary, and equally necessary for individual and group environmental fitness” (p. 42). Followership is present in the collective leadership process. It is essential that the follower understands the value of the leader and knows how to assist the leader in providing service to the overall goals of the organization. Nonetheless, the follower can be an active participant in the leadership process, contributing to the common good or purpose of the organization.

### **The Yin-Yang of Leadership and Followership**

The leadership and followership relationship have been described as complementary, symbiotic in nature, as well as referred to as two sides of a coin. The descriptions used in referencing the leadership and followership relationship are similar in nature to the characteristics found in the Taoism philosophy, specifically the principles of Yin-Yang. The Taoism philosophy accentuates a holistic study of the universe as well as mankind, which includes a macro and micro approach and a dialectic inquiry of all subjects covered (Bai & Morris, 2014). Yin-Yang principles were created as dual cosmic energies with opposite yet complementary values and principles. In addition to complementary values, Yin and Yang consists of two forces; passive and active. Each force is composed of an opposite force that allows growth, then ceases, which allows its complement to grow (Bai & Morris, 2014). Bai and Morris (2014) expressed, “yin and yang forces depend on each other for existence-neither of them can exist without the other” (p.175). The

dependent forces Yin and Yang share are cyclic in nature highlighting their coexistence in the universe, each alternating at a high and low dimension exemplifying duality, change, unity, harmony, and diversity (Lee & Reade, 2018). All who adhere to the principles of Yin and Yang, according to Taoism believers, in addition to the five key elements have been guided successfully in areas such as politics, arts, and military practices (Bai & Morris, 2014).

The principles of Yin and Yang outlined five fundamental energies that regulate the functioning of the universe. The five energies paired with spiritual virtues are: 1) wood (benevolence), 2) fire (propriety), 3) metal (justice), 4) water (wisdom) and 5) earth (faithfulness). Each of the virtues were considered guiding principles in selecting suitable Leaders in the Chinese society; furthermore, leaders were required to exhibit the five virtues in an amicable way (Bai & Roberts, 2011). Although the Taoism philosophy is grounded in helping others understand nature and mankind, it is also built on the premise that “phenomena are composed of two interdependent, yet competing forces” (Bai & Morris, 2014, p. 176).

Similarly, to leadership and followership, the Yin and Yang principles are opposing yet balanced dynamics interconnected, allowing one force to be more salient at times. Yin-Yang leadership behaviors are developed around creating meaningful relationships with others. Additionally, creating a balance between leadership actions and the needs of others could increase commitment from personnel (Lee & Reade, 2018). In the case of examining the Tao principles of Yin-Yang and cross-cultural leadership, there has been a considerable amount of discussion on leadership when compared to followership. It is important to note that there is growing awareness in the leadership literature about the follower’s role and characteristics are critical, but under-investigated, in the leadership process (Kelley, 2008). Bai and Roberts (2011) declared, “from a Taoist perspective, leaders and followers are interchangeable, not just because leaders are followers of their superiors and followers might be leaders of their subordinates, but also their positions are changeable over the time” (p. 730).

### **Leadership-Followership and Building Capacity**

Leadership, a topic of study for a variety of fields, over the years has seen a shift in the roles and how it is defined. Traditionally, leadership was viewed as authoritarian in nature, characterized by giving orders to followers. Next, leadership was viewed as a counterpart role by acting as a facilitator involving reciprocal relationships between leaders and followers characterized by integrative activities. And now leadership can be seen as a group based role, leaders working more side by side with followers. When leaders began taking on a group led approach, the human component of the leadership and followership relationship became an important factor toward increasing an organization’s success.

Malakyan (2014) noted the continuous surge of focus on developing more leaders than followers, when “nearly 80% of individuals working in organizations are followers” (p.6).

It is essential to understand, that both roles work together in order to advance the organizations performance. Additionally, Baker (2007) explained leadership will materialize as a result of being flexible yet adaptable, fostering trust from their followers, and willingness to work through unavoidable changes, which establishes a partnership relationship instead of hierarchical relationships.

In most educational settings, the relationships observed between principals, assistant principals, teachers, and staff are organized in a conventional hierarchical structure. Through this structure, it is represented that building administrator (principals) are the only leaders in the school,

which should not be taking into account the demands from state and national level accountability components. In a study of constantly high performing schools, Lambert (2005) noticed the schools studied had great leadership capacity, in which she characterized as being, “broad-based and skillful participation in the work of leadership” (p. 63). Even more, she noted that “schools were building leadership capacity, principals and the teacher leaders were becoming more alike than different, each taking on more responsibility for the schools effectiveness, framing problems, and seeking solutions” (Greenlee, 2007, p. 48).

Building capacity in educational organization will require a closer look at the roles and relationships between leaders (principals) and followers (assistant principals, teachers, etc.). Leaders are still considered vital positions in the top of the hierarchy structure; most importantly, leaders can create a more productive relationships between the followers in their school who depend on them for guidance as well as creating opportunities for increasing capacity. Likewise, leadership programs are charged with developing future leaders and teacher leaders with the training on how to build capacity within schools.

Bennett, Ylimaki, Dugan, and Brunderman (2014) determined leaders (principals) are in control of uncovering the talent and potential found within teachers and other future leaders under their leadership. Each leader will display their own leadership abilities and styles, and there is no right or wrong approach to leading a successful school, but there is a collective set of actions carried out by competent leaders. Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010) categorized effective leadership practices into four categories:

1. Setting directions: focus is developing vision, goals, communication of the direction;
2. Developing people: relates to increasing the knowledge and skills of faculty;
3. Redesigning the organization: focuses on establishing positive relationships and supporting collaboration
4. Managing the instructional program relates to teaching and learning, such as staffing, providing instructional support, and aligning resources.

In a study conducted on sustaining school improvement through capacity building, Clark (2017) realized building capacity is a collective, yet interconnected process that is created by: establishing direction with input from teachers; nurturing a learner-centered community; providing professional development relative to staff needs; fostering reflection and cultivating collaboration and shared responsibility. Even though the results for building capacity was inclusive, it was noted there was a focus on collaboration, working together, and alternating between leader and follower roles for constant growth. As a result of the study, additional findings by Clark (2017) revealed principals’ (leaders) own experiences aided in building capacity of their staff (followers) by: situating themselves as a learner; maintaining a focus on goals; establishing trust and honored relationship; and reflecting on input.

## **Conclusion**

Successful school principals exhibit leadership skills such as being the instructional leader of their building, putting others before themselves, accepting responsibility for the outcomes of their school, and most important, being a visionary. In addition to leaders, schools must have great followers to carry out the missions and visions in the quest of being successful. Followers at their finest participate with independence, aptitude, and eagerness in the daily pursuit of their

organizational goals. Effective and competent followers are just as important to the organization's success as the leaders. The relationship between leaders and followers are also found in the Taoism principles of yin and yang. Both represent symbiotic relationships where each exhibit duality providing each role a chance to develop and maximize their potential with the help of the each other. The roles found within the leader and follower relationship, as well as with Yin and Yang principles, create a level of balance, trust, and commitment which all are important in creating positive culture, employee development, and organizational success. Even though educational leaders are responsible for making final decisions, maintaining a balance of the leader and follower relationship, could increase building capacity by allowing assistant principals, teachers, and staff members the chance to be involved in the decision making processes, providing staff members choices, and displaying acts of inclusivity and collaboration.

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