

# Followership—Part 1: What Is It and What It Is Not

Jeremy Carter, NSCA-CSCS\*D, ACSM-EP  
*True Performance Realization*

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## Abstract

Many organizations emphasize leadership. However, few organizations emphasize followership. Followership is interdependent with leadership, although followership is often not taught, emphasized, or understood. The purpose of this article is to describe: 1) what followership is not, 2) what is the opposite of a follower, 3) what followership is, and 4) what is a follower.

## Introduction

The military and business professions traditionally emphasize leadership. However, those within the human performance profession (e.g., strength coaches, nutritionists, therapists), whether they realize it or not, are leaders. Additionally, athletes are leaders within their teams and organizations, whether leadership is emphasized, taught, or acknowledged. Leaders, regardless of profession or position, lead not only down the organization, but if done correctly, they lead across the organization, and most notably,

they lead up the organization. Thus, if leaders are expected to lead up the organization, they must do so while simultaneously being a follower.

This is a critical concept for several reasons, with one undisputable fact being that how you act as a follower toward your superior will directly shape the actions of those beneath you in the organization. This article is the first part of a three-part series that describes what followership is not and what it is; why we need followership in our organizations; and how to cultivate followership in your organization. The purpose of this specific article is to describe: 1) what followership is not, 2) what is the opposite of a follower, 3) what followership is, and 4) what is a follower. The second part in this series will describe why organizations need followership, with the third and final part of this series describing how an organization can cultivate followership. Here is a simple and powerful fact, you cannot be a leader without followers.

*“Here is a simple and powerful fact, you cannot be a leader without followers.”*

## What Followership Is Not

Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*,<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that great organizations focus on who they are not equally to who they are. Accordingly, we must illustrate what is the opposite of followership, as well as what a follower is not. First, followership is not passive, timid, or quiet. As stated by Chaleff, “speaking forthrightly to an “elevated” leader is not presumptuous; it is an essential part of courageous followership.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, followership is not being a “yes” person, or engaging in group

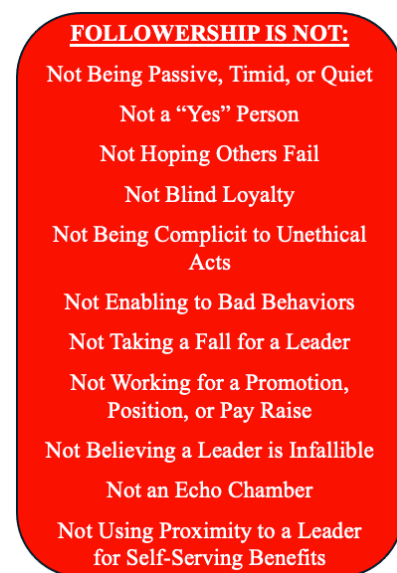


Figure 1: What Followership Is Not.

think. Followership is not wishing or letting others fail, blind loyalty, being complicit to unethical acts, or enabling bad behaviors. Followership is not taking a fall for a leader, working for a promotion, position, or pay raise, or believing a leader is infallible. Followership does not lead to an echo chamber, which ultimately limits perspectives, fuels polarization, and dilutes critical thinking. Lastly, followership is not using proximity to a leader for self-serving benefits. As shown in Figure 2 and emphasized by Kellerman, “just as there are good leaders and bad leaders... there are good followers and bad followers.”<sup>3</sup>

*“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”*

—Lord Acton

Figure 3 (described throughout this article) shows that there are levels of subordinates (e.g., “no-go” and “slow-go”), as well as levels of followers (“go”). Thus, the actions, inactions, and intentions of subordinates can range on a spectrum from immoral, unethical, and poor to moral, ethical, and good, as shown in Figure 2. Figure 2 demonstrates two aspects, with the first being that a “no-go” employee (e.g., saboteur, mutineer, opponent) is not depicted as they are actively resisting their leadership. The second and most important aspect is that as one climbs from being a “slow-go” subordinate to

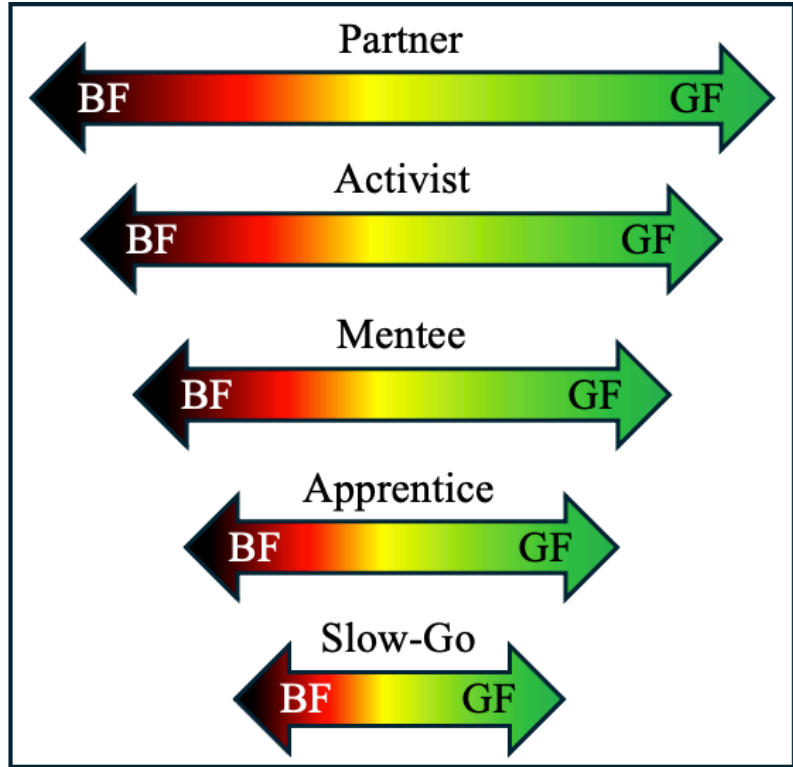


Figure 2: Range of Bad and Good that Subordinates to Partners Can Accomplish (BF = Bad Followers; GF = Good Followers).

a “partner” follower, the range of both bad and good acts increases. Meaning, a “partner” follower can do horrible acts by falsely believing they are being a good follower (e.g., cults, fanatics) by doing various actions with either perceived good or bad intentions.

Kellerman states that “bad leaders, I now understand, cannot possibly do what they do without bad followers. They depend on them absolutely.”<sup>4</sup> Kellerman goes on to emphasize the fact that Hitler did not personally murder millions of Jewish people, but rather it was Hitler’s “willing executioners,” which was the same for those who conducted Stalin’s orders of mass killings, as well as the

genocide committed in Rwanda.<sup>5</sup> As stated by Kellerman, “diehards are as their name implies—prepared to die if necessary for their cause, whether an individual, or an idea, or both... Diehards are defined by their dedication, including their willingness to risk life and limb. Being a Diehard is all-consuming. It is who you are. It determines what you do.”<sup>6</sup>

It is easy for us to view instances such as the ‘My Lai Massacre’ (war crimes committed in March, 1968 in the Vietnam War) or the ‘Stanford Prison Study’ (social-psychology experiment conducted at Stanford University in August, 1971 that was terminated after only six days as the students

behavior became dangerously unethical) as case studies of what extreme poor following can achieve. However, poor following is around us more than we appreciate. For example, in the four-part Netflix documentary, *Untold: Swamp Kings*, in Episode 1 “Go Hard or Go Home,”<sup>7</sup> after losing to South Carolina, University of Florida Head Football Coach Urban Meyer, in a fit of rage on the tarmac at the Gainesville Airport in Florida, orders all the coaches (i.e. the professionals) off the plane. After all the coaches are off the plane, Coach Meyer proceeds to yell at his players (i.e. the amateur athletes) for over an hour, unsupervised.

Let us analyze this further. Is it good leadership to use one’s positional power (Coach Meyer) to yell at players unsupervised? Is it good leadership (followership) to abandon all responsibilities as a coach by willingly getting off the plane (every single coach) so that a person of greater positional power than your own (head coach) can then yell at those who are of lower positional power than you (the players)? Additionally, what are some extremes that a head coach could do toward the players in a fit of rage, unsupervised that would forever damage his career and hurt his family; negating every good coaching act they have done previously in their career? Furthermore, what are some extremes that one or more players could have done towards the coach that would forever damage their lives?

Poor following is getting off the plane. Good followership is staying on the plane, to protect the players and Coach Meyer, despite the risk to your own position. The distinction between following and followership is critical, as following does not equal followership because followership is synonymous with leadership. Mere following is passive, timid, and not leadership (Formula 1). Could the coaches have been fired for remaining on the plane by Coach Meyer, yes. However, “the bottom line of followership is that we are responsible for our decision to continue or not to continue following a leader.”<sup>8</sup>

Following ≠ Followership

Formula 1: Following Is Not Equal to Followership.

Arguably, being fired by the head coach for trying to protect the players and head coach does not hurt one’s ability to be hired elsewhere, whereas being fired by athletic director publicly due to your inactions and lack of moral courage will hurt your future ability to be hired. Coach Meyer went on to win two National Championships with the University of Florida (2006 and 2008) and one National Championship with the University of Ohio (2014), and was inducted into the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame (2025).<sup>9</sup> However, if events

would have went differently on the night of the “Tarmac Meeting,” at the Gainesville airport, Coach Meyer could have been banned from coaching college athletics.

*“Unquestioning loyalty is, of course, fraught with moral peril.”*  
—Ira Chaleff

**What Is the Opposite of a Follower**

Ira Chaleff states that “follower is not synonymous with subordinate. A subordinate reports to an individual of higher rank... A follower shares a common purpose with the leader, believes in what the organization is trying to accomplish, and wants both the leader and the organization to succeed.”<sup>10</sup> This is a critical distinction; that a subordinate or employee does not equal a follower (Formula 2). A subordinate is usually determined by positions within the organization. However, to be a follower, one must make the intrinsic choice to follow a leader (Formula 3). As mentioned, the author classifies subordinates based off positional structure into three distinct groupings; specifically, “no-go,” “slow-go,” and “go” categories.

Subordinate ≠ Follower

Formula 2: A Subordinate Is Not Equal to a Follower.

The terms “no-go,” “slow-go,” and “go” are used to classify terrain in land navigation. “No-go” terrain is terrain that you try to avoid at all costs (e.g., marshes, thick brush, steep hills). “Slow-go” terrain is terrain you can move through (e.g., undulating hills, low-standing water), but is less preferred to “go” terrain, which is the easiest terrain to help you get from your starting position to your destination.

Similar to how one should strive to avoid “no-go” terrain at all costs, one should avoid having those beneath them be in the “no-go” subordinate category. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the author distinguishes three different types of “no-go” subordinates; specifically, the saboteur, the mutineer, and the opponent. The saboteur is the most destructive, dangerous, and deceptive, as their efforts are hidden. The saboteur is the subordinate who intentionally and covertly disrupts the efforts of the group and the leader. Notable to the saboteur is that their competence is a liability; meaning their intelligence, proficiency, and drive is dangerous to the organization and the leader, as they will use their competence to isolate, disrupt, and destroy rather than to build. Once discovered, a leader should get rid of the saboteur immediately.

The mutineer is next worst type of “no-go” subordinate. Whereas, the saboteur’s actions are covert (hidden), the mutineer’s actions are overt (in

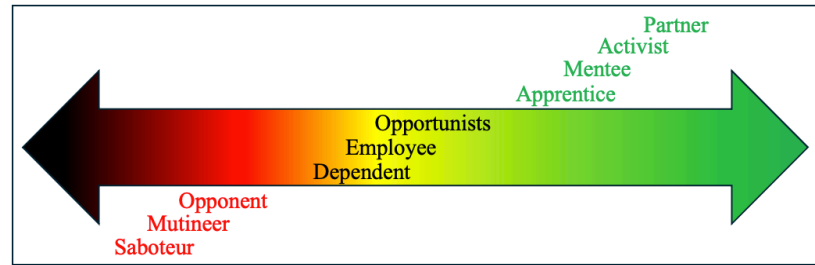


Figure 3: Subordinates to Followers—“No-Go” Subordinates (red text), “Slow-Go” Subordinates (black text), and “Go” Followers (green text).

the open). The mutineer’s destructive behaviors are readily displayed for others to see, and like the saboteur, must be immediately removed from the organization. Whereas there are a few saboteurs and mutineers in organizations, the last type of “no-go” subordinate is more prevalent, the opponent.

Likely the reader has seen the opponent subordinate, the individual who opposes (resists and rebels) the leader, regardless of the situation. The opponent subordinate is self-centered, lacks humility and self-awareness, and is both exhausting and counterproductive to the group’s overall effort. Those lower in the organization should challenge up the organization, but this needs to be done well and when needed. The opponent subordinate challenges often, poorly, and portrays themselves as the smartest person in the room. Phrases often heard from the opponent is “if I were in charge, I would do it differently,” which completely negates their own initiative, ownership, and leadership within an organization. Whereas the saboteur and mutineer need to be immediately removed from

the organization, there could be an attempt to transform the opponent subordinate into a “slow-go” or “go” employee.

Note that the opponent may or may not be aware of their behavior, and very likely, has never been held accountable for their behavior. Additionally, the opponent may have valid input, and they are simply providing relevant advice in an off-putting and unprofessional manner. Thus, the leader must ensure that their expectations and standards for the opponent are made clear. If unable to evolve the opponent subordinate into the “slow-go” or “go” categories, the opponent subordinate should be removed from the organization as their presence will erode the cohesion of the organization.

In the “slow-go” category are the dependent, the employee, and the opportunists type subordinates. Dependent subordinates on reliant on the boss’s tasking, directive, and intent. These individuals show low initiative, are responsive to the situation, and are the lowest contributor in the “slow-go” grouping. Dependent subordinates do not have

ownership in the organization, the mission, or their fellow peers or the leader. These individuals can be expected to perform to the lowest level allowed. Accordingly, dependent subordinates need to be groomed into a follower (i.e. “go” classification), as their overall contribution is limited and likely draining, with their termination within the organization to be considered.

Employee type subordinates are just that, employees. Employees have numerous countdown clocks going simultaneously (e.g., how many hours are left in the day; how many workdays are left in the week; how many workdays remain till the next holiday). Additionally, employees will do adequate work to the level clarified during working hours, or while getting paid; however, you should not expect employees to work after hours or put in discretionary effort.

Extreme cases of low productivity employees could be categorized as isolates and free riders, as described by Kellerman. Kellerman states that, “isolates are completely detached. They do not care about their leaders, or know anything about them, or respond to them in any way.”<sup>11</sup> Kellerman describes free riders as “content to let other make the groups decision and do the group’s work.”<sup>12</sup>

The last type of “slow go” subordinate is the opportunists. Notably, opportunists are more productive than dependents and employees; however, their

productivity is not for the organization, their peers, or their boss, but rather their own career and self-serving ambitions. Chaleff states that “if we serve only ourselves and not the leaders or the stakeholders, we are not followers but opportunists siphoning off the energy of the group to serve our own agendas.”<sup>13</sup> While opportunists increase productivity within their department, there are numerous downsides of the opportunists, to include unethical and self-serving actions, emphasis on short term gains over long term results, avoidance of negative facts that need to be confronted, and a culture of producing sycophants. As stated by Chaleff, “sycophants act according to what they have learned is expected of them in a situation. They do not observe or think well for themselves and often fail to take appropriate actions. This hurts the leader and the organization.”<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, both “no-go” and “slow-go” subordinates may wish for their leader’s plans to fail, especially if their leader is not following their suggestion(s), which may be as simple as remaining quiet as issues arise. This is not a trait of a follower. When a leader does not implement a suggestion of a follower, the follower still drives the leader’s vision forward.

*“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”*

—Edmund Burke

## What Followership Is

Figure 4 demonstrates what followership is. The author equates followership with leadership (Formula 3), and therefore defines followership as: *The leadership needed by a follower: to accomplish explicit and implicit tasks; to influence down, across, and up the organization; to drive the mission forward without receiving complete recognition or detailed instructions; to prevent unethical, immoral, and illegal acts despite the internal and external pressures; to influence within the organization to enable the transformation needed; to be accountable, not loyal, to all in the organization; to challenge the leader in private and support the leader in public when decisions and acts are ethical and moral; to place the mission, the team, and the leader above your own ambitions.*

Followership = Leadership

Formula 3: Followership Equals Leadership.

As stated by Coach Nick Saban, “leaders are people who are willing to follow when it is called for.”<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Coach Saban believed that “great leaders allow the team to take ownership of the rules,”<sup>16</sup> which he applied in his incredibly successful time as a head coach. As stated by Coach Saban, “great leaders know how to follow. They don’t follow the masses like sheep, certainly, but they listen and allow the

workers or player a say in how things are done.”<sup>17</sup>

As followership is nested within leadership, we see common leadership attributes associated with followership, while not typically or fully appreciated. Notably, followership is bigger than assigned positions and is relative to each situation. Followership requires the ability to lead up. It is important to note that leading up does not equate to “managing up” or “manipulating up.” Of note, Useem states that “effective mastery of leading up can also be essential for moving up . . .”<sup>18</sup>

Followership requires being passionate, engaged, and curious. Followership requires that your work is beyond reproach for the organization, not yourself. Followership requires that you keep everyone informed, avoid gossiping, operate on principle, and be both humble and ambitious at the same time. Followership is about setting up the team and your boss for success over yourself. Lastly, good followership is being accountable to all, not loyal to a few.

### What Is a Follower

As stated by Chaleff, “follower is not a term of weakness, but the condition that permits leadership to exist and gives it strength.”<sup>19</sup> Kellerman states that “great followers, exemplary followers, have an innate sense of dignity, as well as pride in what they do and in who they are.”<sup>20</sup> As

emphasized by Maxwell, “without a lot of people working together, there would be no successful people.”<sup>21</sup>



Figure 4: What Followership Requires.

Followers are thus interdependent, meaning they do not depend on their leader; rather, followers create a relationship of mutual benefits between their leaders and themselves, thus creating a win-win situation, and a reinforcing cycle of growth, challenges, and progress. Followers provide their leaders with loyal dissent, meaning respectful and challenging insight, guidance, and differing perspectives, which require communication, trust, and credibility. When providing challenges to their leaders, followers provide meaningful, feasible, and attainable options and solutions, not just problems. Accordingly, a follower does not say “if I were in charge,” as they know that they have a role to play within the organization.

Followers have courage; courage to assume responsibility,

to serve, to challenge, to participate in transformation, and to leave when and if necessary.<sup>22</sup> Whereas an employee has an obligation, a follower has passion, initiative, and ownership. Followers gain the trust of their leaders and use it for the good of the collective purpose, organization, and for their leader, not for any isolated personal gain. While an employee can be expected to maintain status-quo, a follower is a catalyst (e.g., causes change, creates opportunities, facilitates concurring actions, drives initiatives in the absence of the leader’s presence), not just an implementer of policies. Notably, “courageous followers can become both amplifiers and interpreters of the events they want a leader to pay attention to.”<sup>23</sup>



Formula 4: Follower Equals Choice.

Followers know what to bring to the boss and what to handle for the boss, thus can serve as doorkeepers. However, when serving as a doorkeeper, good followers do not abuse their power (i.e., act as a barrier), but rather serve sometimes as a filter, but mostly as a bridge, which may not lead to the leader, but connects the actions of others to the collective purpose. Lastly, followers help carry the load, and for the best followers, the load

they carry is consistently outside of their “box” or assigned responsibilities. Good followers do not say “that is not my job,” but rather live by the ethos that they are accountable to the purpose, organization, and leader, and therefore, “that is not my job” is replaced with “that is within my responsibilities.” It is critical to note that having something be “within one’s responsibilities” does not mean enabling others to not perform their job or holding them accountable but rather seeking responsibility. Lastly, while being a subordinate is explicitly stated, being a follower is an intrinsic choice (Formula 4).

The author classifies followers into four categories, specifically, the apprentice, the mentee, the activist, and the partner. John Maxwell excellently describes his concept of the five levels of leadership in his book, *The 5 Levels of Levels of Leadership: Proven Steps to Maximize Your Potential*.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, “slow-go” and “go” followers align with Maxwell’s concepts of leadership, as seen by Figure 5. While there is overlap between Maxwell’s concept of the levels of leaders and the levels of followers presented here, the reader should note that there is not a perfect correlation. Rather, the concepts presented by Maxwell allow us to appreciate the concept that followership is leadership. This alignment will be further expounded upon in Part 3 of this series.

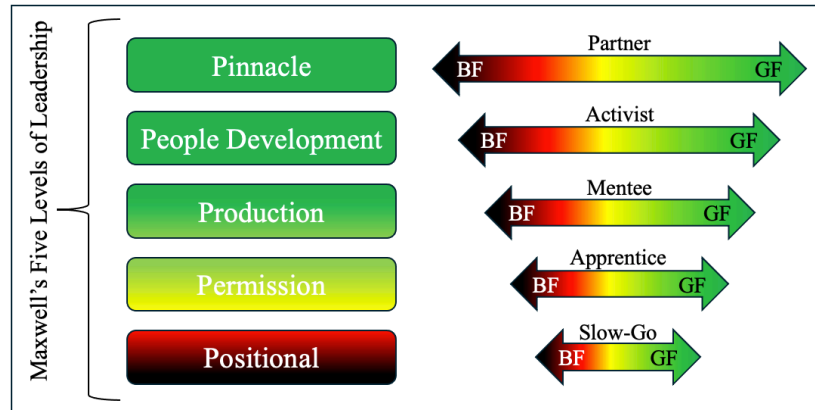


Figure 5: Alignment of the Levels of Leadership and Levels of Followership (BF represents Bad Followers; GF represents Good Followers).

As mentioned, and illustrated in Figure 2 and Figure 5, the greater good, as well as the greater bad, that a follower can accomplish increases as they climb from “slow-go” to partner, which is why we must understand the qualities of good followership (Figure 4), as well as the traits of bad followership (Figure 1). Maxwell describes the lowest level of leadership as positional leadership (i.e., “people follow you because they have to”),<sup>25</sup> which correlates to the lowest level of a subordinated depicted by Figure 2 and Figure 5 (i.e., “slow-go”). Just as one cannot expect great leadership from Maxwell’s first level of leadership, one cannot expect great followership from the first level of a subordinate.

The next stage of a follower is an apprentice. The author classifies an apprentice as someone who willingly follows you to learn from your skills, knowledge, or experience for a job; not necessarily from you as a leader. The way in which we can summarize an apprentice is that

they want to learn how to do your job not how to be you.

The next level of follower is the mentee. The biggest distinction between the apprentice and the mentee is that the mentee does want to learn from the leader’s leadership and how to become like the leader. The mentee will seek out advice from their leader that is greater than the ‘science’ of the job, as they will seek out knowledge on the ‘art’ of the job from their leader. Two things to note as a follower climbs from apprentice to mentee, with the first being that the willingness to do both good and bad increases accordingly, and the second is that the relationship between the leader and the follower becomes deeper.

Regarding the willingness to do both good and bad, we must consider that their willingness to engage in greater actions on the leader’s behalf is not necessarily isolated to unethical acts, but the willingness to work longer hours, neglect their family and friends for the mission or leader, or do

more unrecognized works on behalf of the organization or leader. Therefore, the leader must ensure that they are not abusing the mentee. Regarding the deepening relationship between the leader and the follower, at this stage of a follower, it now becomes a clear two-way relationship between the leader and the follower, with both choosing to invest in one another (i.e. one cannot be a mentee with a willing mentor). While it is a two-way relationship, the relationship can be skewed from either the leader investing greater into the relationship than the follower, or vice-versa.

The next stage of following is the activist, who greatly advocates for and supports the mission, organization, and leader, as they have significant trust and respect for the collective purpose and the leader. The activist will put a great amount of discretionary effort into their job and will not necessarily seek credit due to their conviction for the greater purpose. Thus, the leader must ensure genuine, timely, and appropriate recognition, for both good and bad actions of the activist. Like the mentee follower, the activist follower relationship can be skewed with either the leader or follower investing more into the other.

The final stage of the follower is the partner and is akin to a strong marriage. Unlike the mentee or activist relationships, the partner relationship is much more

balanced, harmonized, and symbiotic, as both the leader's and the follower's relationship are interdependent, integrated, and meaningful. In the partner relationship, both members truly and deeply want the other to succeed. However, each must hold each other accountable, as the range of bad followership to good followership is the largest in this relationship. In the partner relationship, the roles between the leader and the follower become more fluid, shifting based on the situation, as the follower has the greatest amount of influence, respect, and trust by the leader. In a great partner relationship, when the follower speaks on behalf of the leader without seeking their guidance, everyone will know that the follower's words are valid.

### Final Thoughts

Nobody is a great leader to everyone. Accordingly, nobody is a great follower to everyone. There are many reasons why a person will vary on the levels of "no-go," "slow-go," and "go" depending on the situation, with a person being a partner for one leader and an opponent for another leader. Additionally, one can go up and down the levels of "no-go," "slow-go," and "go" to a single leader based off circumstances. It must be noted that as a leader, it is considerably more difficult to facilitate the elevation of a subordinate up the levels of followers than it is to

cause the descent of a follower down the levels of followers. Simply put, credibility, trust, and influence are hard to gain, but are easy to lose.

*"Simply put, credibility, trust, and influence are hard to gain, but are easy to lose."*

### Conclusion

Kellerman provides us with five axioms for followership: (1) "to do nothing- to be in no way involved- is to be a bad follower; (2) to support a leader who is good- effective and ethical- is to be a good follower; (3) to support a leader who is bad- ineffective and/ or unethical- is to be a bad follower; (4) to oppose a leader who is good- effective and ethical- is to be a bad follower; (5) to oppose a leader who is bad- inactive and/ or unethical- is to be a good follower."<sup>26</sup> Followership is leadership, and leadership is needed within every organization. This article discussed what is not and what is followership and followers. The next article in the series will emphasize why we need followership in our organizations, with the final part providing guidance on how to install followership.

### Author Biography

Jeremy Carter (featured right; next page) is the Founder, Owner, and President of True Performance Realization (TPR), and serves as the Editor-in-Chief

for the TPR *Applied Journal*. With over eighteen years of experience in human performance, Jeremy has earned numerous certifications, including the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) Strength and Conditioning Specialist with Distinction and the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) Certified Exercise Physiologist. He is a current reviewer for the NSCA's *Strength and Conditioning Journal* (SCJ), a founding member and editor for the *Journal of Sport and Human Performance*, and a recipient of the NSCA's SCJ's 2023 Editorial Excellence Award.



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