Abstract

Despite the importance of followers for the organizations, there is still much to understand about followership. This paper presents 10 propositions and an expanded model on followership. Personality traits are presented as an antecedent to followership style, with follower schema acting as a moderating variable. As the dependent variable we have job satisfaction, which is impacted by follower style, with the moderating presence of leadership type. Three styles of followers are presented (proactive, active and passive). The model also proposes which of the big five personality traits are related to each type of follower. Finally, transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership will moderate the impact of follower style on job satisfaction. The next step is to empirically test the model and further advance the literature on followership.

Key words: Followership Style– Personality Traits – Job Satisfaction

Introduction

The traditional view of leadership focuses on how the leader generates results (leader-centered perspective). A second perspective is related to how followers perceive and influence the leader (follower-centered perspective). A third, and newer line of research, is on how followers perceive themselves and their role on the leadership process, and it is called followership (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Followers are an integral part of organizations, and as such, followership must be considered fundamental to organizational success (Baker, 2007).

The concept of followership is not new, but its importance regarding leadership has reemerged recently (Bligh & Kohles, 2012). The most recent literature in followership shows that followers are more than a consequence of leadership, and even the roles of leader and follower are beginning to blur (Bligh & Kohles, 2012). Leaders may have the task of guiding their subordinates, but the responsibility for the organizational actions is shared with followers (Baker, Mathis & Stites-Doe, 2011). Concentrating all efforts on preparing leaders and forgetting about the followers may prove to be a big mistake.

Considering the impact that followers have on the organizational outcome, more research must be done towards understanding what makes followers differ from each other, and what makes them satisfied with their jobs. Although some research exists on styles of followers, no comprehensive model of followership style, contemplating antecedents and outcomes, exists on the leadership literature.

This paper attempts to discuss and present such a model. The first part of the model aims to better understand what variables explain the existence of different styles of followers, focusing on personality and follower schemas as antecedents to followership. Crossman and Crossman (2011), for instance, identified five different typologies of followers, each detailing different possible behaviors. No study, however, discussed in depth the cause for such differences in behavior. Although there is some evidence that followership schema (Carsten et al, 2010) and personality traits (Mushonga & Torrance, 2008) can help explain the variations on followership, there is still need to better understand the antecedents of followership.

The second part of the model is related to an outcome of followership, job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is one of the most studied outcomes in organizational psychology literature, especially due to its correlation with performance (Judge et al, 2001). The main idea is that different types of followers will engage in different behaviors, and that is likely to influence their satisfaction. But the impact of such behaviors on satisfaction will also depend on the approval, or not, by the leader. For instance, purely transactional leaders may reproach overly proactive behavior by followers, while transformational ones may stimulate them.

Together, the two parts of the model present a more complete view of followership. The remainder of this paper will discuss followership and the different styles of followers, the big five and followership traits, followership schemas and leadership types. A series of propositions will be made, leading to the conceptual model.

Followership and Followership Styles

Most studies use Kelley’s (1988) work as the starting point to discuss followership (Baker, 2007, Blanchard, Welbourne & Bullock, 2009, Crossman & Crossman, 2011), mainly because he was the first to present a typology for followers. Kelley’s (1988) typology was based on two dimensions: degree of independent critical thinking and a passive/active behavior toward the task scale. The resulting matrix has five follower types.

The “sheep” are the passive and uncritical followers, they lack initiative and just do what is told. The “yes people” are also low on critical thinking, but quick to demonstrate support and dependency to the leader.
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“Alienated followers” are critical thinkers that at some point just “turned off” on work, rarely opposing the leader. In the middle of the dimensions are the “survivors”, moving with the flow and mainly concerned with keeping their jobs. The “effective follower” thinks for himself and is a risk taker, always searching for better ways to get things done. This is the group, considered by the author, as the perfect type of follower, independent of the organization or leader. Kelley’s model was found to partially predict job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Blanchard, Welbourne & Bullock, 2009)

Although Kelley’s model has been widely used as a taxonomy to differentiate followers, its construction was still made on a follower-centered view. The objective of this taxonomy is to classify good/bad type of followers. The idea is that independent of the leader or the context, the sheep will always be ineffective while the effective follower will always present the best results.

Carsten et al (2010) took a different approach. The authors conducted a qualitative research examining the cognitions and behaviors associated with followership. Their objective was to present some empirical evidence of how employees actually view their role. The authors considered the social construction that employees make about followership and what makes a good follower. This view differs from Kelley’s because it is not prescriptive, it just describes the follower role by their own view. Their results indicate that these social constructs are made along three dimensions: passive, active and proactive.

The passive group is formed by individuals with the belief that the follower must be passive, just following orders and replicating the “leader’s way” of doing things. As a consequence of just following, this group feels less responsible for the actual results of the group, placing responsibility on the leader.

The active group is different, as they acknowledge that their opinion is relevant to the leader, but only when solicited. Although they can contribute, there is still the perception that the leader is more capable than the followers. Other characteristics of this group are the loyalty to the leader and the perception that followers should use the chance to learn from leaders.

The final group represents the proactive followers. The individuals on this group believe that followers must take initiative to contribute, offering opinions before asked to do so, and even challenging the leader assumptions when believing is for a constructive reason. This type of follower can see himself as a “quiet leader”, someone with the responsibility to help his leader make better decisions.

The three styles identified by Carsten et al (2010) represent a good taxonomy to differentiate followers for at least two reasons. First, this representation was derived from the follower’s perspective, and not just theoretically developed. Second, the passive/active/proactive typology refers to the behavior of the follower regarding the leader, while Kelley’s approach is more generic and related to the task. If the intention is to develop followership in the leadership process, the passive/active/proactive approach seems to be more appropriate, and will be used in this paper do differentiate followers styles. We turn now to a possible source of difference between followers: personality traits.

The Big Five and Followers Traits

The origins of the Big-Five date back to the 40’s with the studies of Raymond B. Cattel, who developed 35 bipolar clusters of related terms (Goldber, 1990). Using Cattel’s variables, many subsequent studies on personality kept finding five factors of personality traits. With the development of measures, like the NEO Personality Inventory by McCrae and Costa (1985), the big five became the standard form of measuring personality attributes in many areas, including leadership.

Although many leadership studies focused on traits of leaders, there is very little research on follower’s traits. Bono, Hooper and Yon (2012) found that personality traits of followers where partially responsible to differences in ratings of transformational and transactional leadership. Of the big five personality traits, only neuroticism was not found to predict difference in leadership ratings. Ehrhart and Klein (2010) found that follower’s characteristics can be used to predict the leadership style of preference for the subordinate. Differences in achievement orientation, self-esteem and need for structure will influence the preferred leadership style. Although the characteristics used are not the big five personality traits, the results reinforce that individual difference in followers affect the leadership process.

Considering the consistent results that personality traits partially explains leaders behaviors (Judge et al, 2002), it is expected that personality traits help predict followership style. But what are the specific factors that help explain each style of followership?

Factor 1 is “Extraversion”, which is associated to being sociable, assertive, talkative, expressive and active (McCrae & Costa, 1987). This trait is directly related to social interactions, and individuals high on extraversion seek to exceed job expectations (Barry & Stewart, 1997) and are constantly looking for “challenges to occupy their time and mind” (Mushonga & Torrance, 2008). Individuals high on extraversion will feel more comfortable on a role where they can express themselves and make a difference.

\[ P_{1a}: \text{Extraversion is positively related to proactive followers} \]
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P1: Extraversion is negatively related to passive followers

Factor 2 is called “Neuroticism” or “Emotional Stability”, which reflects the tendency of the individual to feel anxious, defensive, insecure and emotional (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Individuals that are high on neuroticism are more passive, tend to avoid social situations (Mushonga & Torrance, 2008), and are more sensitive to punishment (Bono, Hooper & Yoon, 2012). These avoidance behaviors are more in line with passive followers.

P2: Neuroticism is positively related to passive followers

Factor 3 is generally interpreted as “Agreeableness”, and represents attributes like being courteous, flexible, trustful, good-natured, cooperative, forgiving and tolerant (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Agreeable followers will show more concern for their leader, but will not engage in disagreeable behavior (Bono, Hooper & Yoon, 2012). Showing support without questioning the leader is a strong characteristic of active followers.

P3: Agreeableness is positively related to active followers

Factor 4 is more commonly called “Conscientiousness”, which encompasses responsibility, dutifulness, achievement orientation and concern for established rules (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Individuals that are high on conscientiousness are “inclined to strive for successful task accomplishments” (Barry & Stewart, 1997).

P4: Conscientiousness is positively related to active followers

Factor 5 is the most difficult to identify (Barrick & Mount, 1991), being interpreted by some as “Intellect”, or “Culture”, but the most used name for this factor is “Openness to Experience”. This factor represents attributes like being imaginative, cultured, curious, original and intelligent. The curiosity and creativity of such individuals help them generate more ideas and contributions to be shared, which is a perfect trait for a proactive follower.

P5: Openness to Experience is positively related to proactive followers

The impact of personality traits on followership style, however, will depend on what is perceived by the individual as the appropriate behaviors for the role. This will be represented in the model as followership schemas.

Followership Schemas

According to Carsten et al (2010), the followership schemas are “generalized structures that develop over time through socialization and interaction with stimuli relative to leadership and followership”. These schemas represent the perception by the follower of what is expected of him on his role. If the individual believes that a good follower should be more participative, this will be represented in his follower schema. Bresner (1995) argued that for leaders, these schemas are constructed socially, different interactions with the environment will create different perceptions of what a leader should be. The same idea applies to followers, the interactions that a follower will have with the environment, especially with the organizational context, will mold his schemas.

A classic follower schema is that followers are “less responsible, accountable, and effectual than leaders” (Carsten et al 2010), which is generated by the traditional hierarchical structures where followers are presented beneath the leaders. In contexts where the individual is more stimulated to participate, and where the leadership encourage follower development, a more active schema may be formed in the followers mind.

In his work, Sy (2010) empirically found that a followership prototype is usually composed of characteristics like hardworking, excited, loyal and reliable, while the followership antiprototype includes easily influenced, arrogant, bad tempered, uneducated and slow. It is clear that followers construct their own perceptions of what makes a good, and bad, follower.

Although there will be a direct impact of personality on the follower style, this impact is moderated by the current follower schema held by the individual. An individual that is high on extraversion, but believes that a follower should not express himself, may express less proactive behaviors than a follower that does not hold that belief. The style of followership will, then, not only be driven by the personality, but also by the moderating effect of the followership schema held by the individual.

P6: Followership schema will moderate the impact of personal traits on follower styles.
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Follower Job Satisfaction

Although followership styles, like the ones on Kelley’s model, were conceived to identify the “best” followers on the organizational perspective, how is followership linked to follower outcomes? More specifically, is a “better” follower more satisfied with its job? There is evidence that different types of followership are directly linked to different degrees of job satisfaction. Favara (2009) found that followers that match the “effective follower” type on Kelley’s model (1988) also presented higher levels of job satisfaction. Li, Liang and Crant (2010) also found that more proactive followers are more satisfied with their jobs. The explanation presented by Favara (2009) was that this type of follower tends to get more recognition by the leadership, and that translates into more satisfaction with the job. These arguments lead to proposition 7.

P7. Proactive followers will present the highest job satisfaction, followed by the active followers and the passive being the least satisfied type of follower.

But what if the leader does not approve the follower behavior? We now examine how leadership type moderates this effect.

Leadership Types

There are many typologies to classify leadership, one of the most used is the transformational-transactional leadership theory (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). The original concept of transformational leadership is attributed to James Burns in his 1978 book about leadership, but it was Bernard Bass in 1985 that presented the transformational leadership theory as we know today (Judge & Piccolo, 2004, Bass, 1999). Bass (1999) presents transactional leadership as a relational agreement between leaders and followers, aimed to meet their own self-interests. The expected levels of performance are established and there is no motivation to go beyond. Transformational leadership “offers a purpose that transcends short-term goals and focuses on higher order intrinsic needs” (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Laissez-faire is the avoidance or absence of leadership.

According to Judge & Piccolo (2004), transformational leadership is composed by four dimensions, transactional leadership by two and laissez faire is the absence of leadership. Table 1 shows the dimensions of each leadership and behaviors associated with it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Behaviors associated with the dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformational</td>
<td>Charisma or Idealized Influence</td>
<td>Display conviction, take stands, and appeal to followers on an emotional level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inspirational Influence</td>
<td>Set high standards, communicate optimism about future, provide meaning for the task at hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intellectual Stimulation</td>
<td>Challenges assumptions, takes risks, solicits followers’ ideas, encourage creativity.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individualized Consideration</td>
<td>Attends to each follower’s needs, acts as a mentor or coach to the follower, listens to the follower’s concerns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>Contingent Reward</td>
<td>Clarifies expectations and set rewards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management by Exception – Active</td>
<td>Takes corrective actions before the behaviors of the follower create difficulties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management by Exception - Passive</td>
<td>Wait until the behavior has created problems to take action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laissez Faire</td>
<td>Nonleadership</td>
<td>Avoid making decisions, hesitate in taking action, absent when needed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Judge & Piccolo (2004)

Literature suggests that follower outcomes, like commitment, are the result of a match between followers and leaders types (Bjugstad et al, 2006). Erdogan and Bauer (2005) found that proactive followers where only satisfied with their job when they perceived that their style fits the organization. The model proposed here places the fit of leadership types and followership styles as a moderating effect, in other words, certain types of leadership will enhance or diminish the effect of followership style on job satisfaction.
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Considering that proactive followers express themselves more, and are more willing to engage at work, the presence of a transformational leader that stimulates creativity and attend more personally to their followers should increase job satisfaction for the follower. On the other hand, passive follower’s don’t want to engage in any extra effort and could be frustrate by the high expectations of the transformational leader. These arguments lead to proposition 8.

\[ P_8. \text{ Transformational leaders will enhance job satisfaction on proactive followers, but will decrease on passive followers}. \]

Transactional leaders are more concerned with achieving goals, where followers need only to perform by the established standards. These leaders don’t expect any extra involvement from followers, but they expect loyalty and responsibility, characteristics of active followers.

\[ P_9. \text{ Transactional leaders will enhance job satisfaction on active followers}. \]

A laissez faire leader is basically absent. This could lead to a greater comfort zone for the follower, who can keep doing things the same way as always. This lack of leadership will create a better environment for the passive follower, who wants the least possible involvement. On the other hand, a proactive follower tend to be frustrated with a leader that is not present and interested with his contributions

\[ P_{10}. \text{ Laissez faire leaders will enhance job satisfaction for passive followers, but will decrease this outcome on proactive followers}. \]

The final theoretical model containing all variables is presented in figure 1.

![Proposed Model](figure1.png)

**Conclusion**

This paper presented a more comprehensive model of followership, including antecedents, an outcome and moderating variables. The objective was to extend the discussion on what generate different styles of followers and how their interaction with different types of leaders will impact their job satisfaction. There is no turning back on the importance of followership (Baker, Mathis & Stites-Doe, 2011), and the more organizations and leaders understand how followers behave and interact, the more likely they can create an environment that enhance followers outcomes.

Personality traits are presented as a main factor on defining the different styles of followers, but follower schemas will moderate this effect. Followers will let their traits influence their style, but always considering what he perceive as appropriate behavior for his role. On the other hand, the type of follower one decides to be will impact his job satisfaction, but this will also depend on the leader type. A leader that promotes more involvement will generate more satisfaction on a proactive follower, where an absent leader will please a passive one.

The next natural step is to empirically test this model. There are well established scales for job satisfaction, leadership type (MLQ-5X) and personality traits (Big Five questionnaire). There is, however, a need to develop measures for the proposed followership styles (proactive, active and passive) and follower schema. The use of structured equation modeling can provide the necessary empirical analysis to test the model. Finally, other constructs may play an important role on followership, like the decision process type (Maertz Jr & Kmitta, 2012) and should be investigated as a possible antecedent to follower style.
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Reference


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