

Are Great Leaders Also Great Followers?¹

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Following is not a popular idea in our culture. “Never Follow is our philosophy at Audi,” says Mary Ann Wilson, Audi Media Connections Manager. “It’s how we approach everything from design to production, and even includes our communications efforts.”³ A motorcycle ad notes that unless you’re the lead dog on the sled, the scenery never changes. And yet, as this path-breaking conference reminds us, following well is crucial for each of us, for our institutions, and for our society.

One definition of “follower” is “one who subscribes to the teachings or methods of another; an adherent: as, a follower of Gandhi.” We might begin our thinking about followership by pausing for a moment, each of us, and asking ourselves, of what or whom am I a follower? Perhaps you might write down one or two answers to that question for yourself, right now. [Pause]

Then let’s consider for a moment this question. If I were a better follower, would I be a better person? [Pause.]

And now a third question. If I were a better follower, would I also be a better leader?

Jim Collins distinguishes five levels of leadership. “Level one is about individual capabilities; level two is about being a great team player; level three is about managerial capabilities; level four is about effective leadership. And finally, there’s level-five leadership. We found that leaders of great companies tend to be level fives, and companies that are good or mediocre are run by level-four leaders.”⁴

¹ Introductory remarks for the 16th annual Kravis-de Roulet Leadership Conference, “Rethinking Followership: New paradigms, Perspectives, and Practices,” sponsored by Claremont Graduate University and Claremont McKenna College, February 24, 2006.

² President and University Professor, Claremont Graduate University.

³ “Audi and Conde Nast Renew ‘Never Follow’ Marketing Campaign Honoring Innovators in Music, Film, Literature, and Sports,” April 14, 2004. <http://www.audiworld.com/news/04/041404/content.shtml>

⁴ “The Narrow Path To Leadership: What The Great Have Over The Good,” an interview with Jim Collins, *Optimize Magazine*, No. 34, August 2004. Available online at <http://www.optimize.com/article/showArticle.jhtml;jsessionid=55WMYWXKOENBYQSNDBOCKHSCJUMEKJVN?articleId=25600243&pgno=1>

Level-five leaders possess two characteristics: humility and will.

Level fives are characterized by a special brand of humility and, paradoxically, a ferocious will to do whatever needs to be done... One myth is that a great leader should have charisma. Level-four leaders tend to have great charisma. But we found a negative correlation between having charisma and being a leader who can build an enduringly great company. It's completely contrary to the common view that you need the Lone Ranger, the charismatic figure.

I pose this hypothesis for your consideration: Humility and will are the classic characteristics of great followers. If this is so, then followership and leadership intersect at the highest levels of both. Becoming better leaders may entail our becoming better followers.

Thus the importance of this conference. Through your research and your deliberations, I hope you invite each of us to consider two crucial but often forgotten questions for aspiring leaders:

Of what or whom should I be a follower?

What does it mean, what does it require, for me to become a great follower?