The Umwelt of Followership

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Abstract
By definition followers must be involved in order for the act of leadership to occur. In fact, “leaders can only lead when enabled by followers to do so”.¹ Despite the importance of the role of followers, much more attention has been given to the study of leadership than followership. This article examines several different views of followers. Through the use of the lens of Umwelt, how environments are seen and understood idiosyncratically by different people, I will examine four different perspectives of followership; positional, power-based, situational and as partners.² The context provided in each of these four areas will provide readers with a means to assess and identify unique views of followership and understand their practice and implications.

While boarding my flight at a bustling international airport, my eyes were drawn to yet another set of walkway advertisements. Unlike most campaigns, this one caught my attention enough to cause me to stop and read its provocative message.

The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, commonly called HSBC, created ads which use simple verbs to describe common objects (Figure 1). What makes this campaign compelling is the use of antonyms to describe the same object. The underlying message subtly challenges our point of view and encourages us to examine our assumptions. This provides an effective lesson that any given perspective is simply one way of viewing things.

This principle is applicable beyond the banking industry. You and I each possess bias which is constructed from our personal perspectives and assumptions. For example, our emotional response to words such as conservative, republican, Christian, affirmative action or leader reveal our bias toward the object or concept. When our perspective is compared with others’, responses are often varied and may be so dissimilar that they are complete opposites. As this HSBC campaign aptly states, “A different point of view is simply the view from a place where you’re not”.³
This article examines different perspectives on one of these emotion-laden words, ‘follower’, as well as its cousins: ‘follow’ and ‘followership’. To some this word conjures images of weakness, subservience or is a measure of a person’s authority. To others it may speak to a position of choice, a place to exercise leadership or even a position of power.

This article examines several different views of followers. Through the use of the lens of Umwelt, how environments are seen and understood idiosyncratically by different people, I will examine four different perspectives of followership; positional, power-based, situational and as partners. The context provided in each of these four areas will provide readers with a means to assess and identify unique views of followership and understand their practice and implications.

**Figure 1**

**Introduction to Umwelt**

The concept of similar things being viewed differently is supported academically through a concept called Umwelt, a word which literally means ‘environment’ or ‘surrounding world’. The German biologist Jakob von Euxküll originally used this word to explain how the world might look different if you were a bee, a scallop or another creature. Furthermore, Euxküll theorized that different organisms (including people) can have different Umwelten even though they share the same environment. The Umwelt concept has since come to have a broader application and now refers to how environments are seen and understood idiosyncratically by different people.

The HSBC campaign effectively uses the concept of Umwelt to demonstrate idiosyncratic differences. However, both the ad campaign and the Umwelt concept have an underlying philosophical position which can be problematic. They are based upon a root premise that any object (or by extension, any concept) can have different meaning based upon an individual’s perspective. This can lead to the conclusion that there is no ultimate truth. Commonly called subjective reality, this philosophy believes that ultimate truth is “modified or affected by personal views, experience, or background.”

However, instead of concluding that different perspectives create subjective reality, there is an alternate viewpoint. The subjective reality tenet has been countered by others who remind us that no individual’s understanding of the world is complete as each of us will conceptualize it in our own unique way. Furthermore, “differences in knowledge arise because everyone has a different set of experiences, not because there is no objective reality”. Therefore, we can embrace differing Umwelten, not because
truth is subjective, but rather, because we each possess incomplete understanding which results in differing perspectives.

We each have an inherent Umwelt towards the concept of followership. Personal experiences, nurture, nature and education have shaped this bias. This is especially true when we step outside our own cultures and discover fundamental differences in beliefs and lifestyles across the globe. The plethora of Umwelten we encounter on a daily basis reminds us that no individual’s understanding of the world is complete. Rather, we each have a limited view, which is subject to change based upon learning and exploration. Differences in theories about followers arise because of our idiosyncratic differences. Through the conceptual frame of Umwelten, this article examines differing views and perspectives about followers.

**Position Umwelt**

The first follower Umwelt is positional and holds that a follower’s role and significance is defined by their positional relationship to a leader. The positional view places preeminent focus on the importance of the leader’s role. As a result, the role of the follower is a by-product of the definition of a leader. For example, using this Umwelt, leaders and followers have been compared to a parent/child relationship or with the metaphor of a shepherd and sheep. These examples denote the need for those positioned in authority to help those without authority and reinforces the positional perspective.

Early theories of leadership often relegated followers to a positional role. Machiavelli’s treatise, The Prince, has a strong underlying premise of the King as the rightful leader. This view of leadership, commonly called The Great Man Theory, focuses on the inborn qualities and characteristics of great leaders and their important roles in many different avenues of life. Like a prince or king, positional leaders are born with the right traits and only a select few are awarded this privilege.

The process of industrialization and scientific management also tended to espouse this view. Thomas Hobbes was a supporter of strong central leadership. He argued that a greater power must exist in order to bring “order from chaos,” and that this person or body became sovereign; because it was given all rights by the governed, its powers could not be revoked. This resulted in a mindset where followers were merely subordinates to those who ruled. Followers were defined by the role of the leader and not as a result of having a legitimate role of their own.

While contemporary students of leadership view this definition of leaders and followers passé, the mindset still exists. Some would argue that the Catholic Church still practices the preeminence of positional authority. A high ranking Canadian Government official once confessed that he had never really considered the “servant” aspect of his role as a “public servant” to his constituents, reflecting his positional view of his role.

Therefore, the role of a follower in a positional Umwelt is rather simple – to serve the needs of those who govern. This perspective often treats followers as an inconsequential necessity. As a result, the positional follower Umwelt is not defined from the perspective of a follower, but rather, in respect to their need to serve the rightful leader.
Power Umwelt

The second Umwelt we will examine focuses on the distribution of power between followers and their leader(s). While this bears similarity to the positional view of followers, it extends the concept by including the aspect of power.

Advocates of this theory define followers as people who do what others want them to do. Based upon rank, “they are low in hierarchy and have less power, authority, and influence than their superiors.” They generally go along to get along, particularly with those in higher positions. While positional leaders hold to their right to lead by appointment, power leaders do so by careful use of authority and hierarchy. The power perspective towards followers “advocates simple subordination and obedience to organizational tasks.”

Viewing leaders and followers through the lens of organizational theory reveals that this Umwelt is alive and well. Many modern organizational charts still use a hierarchical model to display the corporate structure (see Figure 2 for an example). While some would argue that this is simply a pragmatic way to illustrate positional assignments, others believe that their design symbolizes the root belief that “power rests at the top”. This argument is validated by the emergence of different styles of organizational charts which seek to remove the leader as the hierarchical power figure. Figure 3 demonstrates Walt Disney’s attempt to replace the power relationships of traditional organizational charts (though some would argue that the Director/Leader is still central in their model).

A 20th century example of the role of the power Umwelt is provided by Henry Ford. In light of a tight labor market and high employee turnover, the Ford Motor Company created a Sociological Department to improve employee standards of living. To do so it raised the minimum wage from $2.50 to $5.00 per day but stipulated that $2.66 of this wage was to be paid only “if employees led a moral life”. Advisors visited employee homes to ensure they were neat and tidy, that employees did not drink too much, that...
they used leisure time wisely and had sex lives without tarnish. A novelized account of this practice illustrates the affects of this leader/follower power relationship:

“"We’re from the Ford Sociological Department," the tall one said. ‘Is Mr. Stephanides at home?’

“Yes”

“Mr. Stephanides, let me tell you why we are here. Management has foreseen…that five dollars a day in the hands of some men might work a tremendous handicap along the paths of rectitude and right living and might make of them a menace to society in general. So it was established by Mr. Ford that no man is to receive the money who cannot use it advisedly and conservatively. Also, that where a man seems to qualify under the plan and later develops weaknesses, that it is within the province of the company to take away his share of the profits until such time as he can rehabilitate himself. May we come in?”

“Yes”

“I am going to ask you a few questions if you don’t mind. Do you drink Mr. Stephanides?”...

“How often do you bath Mr. Stephanides?”...

“How often do you brush your teeth?”... Here we see a rather extreme example of the power role which is both intrusive and arrogant. However, this can help us understand that power distribution can occur on a spectrum. This Umwelt could be applied resulting in followers having more or less power. However, while leader/follower power distribution is on a continuum, the authority to award power still lies with the leader.

Therefore, the role of a follower in a power Umwelt is defined in relationship to those who lead them. As with the positional Umwelt, the power Umwelt also defines followers as a derivative of the leader’s role and function. However, it differs in the sense that it lies within the leaders’ purview to grant followers less or more authority. This idea forms the basis for our next perspective.

Situational Umwelt

A third follower Umwelt begins to move us away from a hierarchical view and toward one which views followers and leaders in a more cooperative relationship. This approach is based upon the well known situational leadership model developed by Hersey and Blanchard. While this model was developed from the perspective of how to effectively lead followers, it begins to address the distinct characteristics, skills and needs which individual followers have. By focusing on differing characteristics of followers, leaders are taught to utilize a leadership style, which fits the needs of the follower. Situations dictate whether followers need leaders to use directive, coaching, supportive or delegating styles as their modus operandi.

This model is based on the assumption that followers’ skills and motivations will vary. As a result, this Umwelt begins to consider the needs of followers, most specifically in regards to their competence and commitment. Thus, by considering the developmental level of subordinates, this model begins to give followers legitimacy through consideration of their contribution potential.

Therefore, the role of a follower in a situational Umwelt is based upon their competence and commitment. While this model provides followers with a level of control, they are still dependent upon leaders to recognize and adapt their leadership style in order to fully utilize their skills and maximize their potential. Alternately, the follower will achieve success by matching their skills with those of their...
work situation. Though the model provides followers with more significance than either the positional or power Umwelten, it still requires a match to occur between leaders and followers in order to fully maximize their potential. Similar to the first two Umwelten we examined, it still places the leader in the key role of determining a followers’ role and effectiveness.

Partner Umwelt

The last follower Umwelt we will examine moves us further down the continuum to that of the follower as a partner. This perspective includes several related Umwelten which view followers as participants, partners, collaborators and team members. The key to this Umwelt is the move away from “leadership as something a leader does to a follower.” Rather, the follower becomes actively engaged as a valued and essential participant.

Many believe that this followership model is growing in prominence as a result of a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of business and globalization. While a centralized organizational structure once worked well, changes in the global environment and an emerging social contract is leveling traditional roles between leaders, followers, organizations and employees. This is leading to increasing importance in the role of followers.

There are three distinct keys to this Umwelt, which we will explore. The first is the view of the follower as a participant.

**Follower as Participant**

While it is not realistic to erase all definitional differences between leaders and followers, the participant aspect of this model advocates moving away from the extremes of passive followers and powerful leaders. By shifting the locus to the common goal leaders and followers share rather than positional differences, a new paradigm is created (Figure 4). This ameliorates the tension surrounding where the balance of power lies between leaders and followers. Instead, this Umwelt’s premise is that power is inherent in both positions and the organizational purpose dictates the distribution of power.

![Figure 4](image-url)
This perspective on followership advocates that creating change, a key definitional component of leadership, is in fact brought about by the efforts of both parties. This common purpose has the potential to be the catalyst which unites leaders and followers and enables the whole to accomplish more than the sum of its parts.34

_Follower as Partner_

The second key to this Umwelt is that followers are partners; the term “follower is not synonymous with subordinate.”35 This idea embraces the premise that leaders can only lead when enabled by followers to do so.36 The partner concept acknowledges that roles shift. In this reality, most of us are leaders and followers at different times. There is a fluid relationship between the two. While we commonly understand that leaders influence followers, this perspective reminds us that followers also influence leaders.37

Another aspect of the partnership key is the interconnectedness between followers and leaders. In this model, the roles of followers and leaders are not as clearly demarcated as they used to be.38 “Emphasizing leadership to the exclusion of followership breeds a single-minded conformism.”39 As we learned above, this shifts the focus away from the importance of the leader and their skills by focusing on the mutual goal both strive for.40

_Follower as Collaborator_

The third key is the follower as a collaborator or team member. “Teams are organizational groups composed of members who are interdependent, who share common goals, and who must coordinate their activities to accomplish these goals.”41 While roles of leadership are often still assigned in teams, this model places value on the need for every team member to contribute. The follower as a team member embraces the intricate interplay between leading and following and the need to move with ease between these two roles.42

The leadership theory called Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) also provides support to the concept of collaboration. This theory focuses on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers.43 Dyadic means being a group of two, therefore this theory places significance on the follower/leader relationship and the need for both parties to find common ground from which to work.44

Together, these three keys place an expectation on the follower which previous Umwelten have not. By moving the follower into an active role, that of partner, participant or team member, accountability is introduced. Leader/follower “parity is approached when we recognize that leaders rarely use their power wisely or effectively over long periods unless they are supported by followers who have the stature to help them do so.”45 By extension, this enabling role of followers has the potential to foster or hinder good or bad leadership thereby creating culpability for followers.

The idea that followers must accept responsibility for both their own roles and the roles of their leaders means followers have choices to make in how they follow.46 For example, subordinates can choose whether their followership will be that of a supporter, an antagonist or an indifferent participant. A follower’s response to this choice lies in the degree to which they support their leader and the degree to which they are willing to challenge a leader’s behavior or policies when they conflict with organizational purpose.47
This makes followers co-stewards along with leaders. Stewardship occurs when a follower shares a common purpose with the leader, believes in what the organization is trying to accomplish, wants both the leader and organization to succeed, and works to make this happen. When stewardship occurs, loyalty is directed to the organization’s purpose, not to leaders or followers.

Another important aspect of the partner concept is the idea that people choose to follow for different reasons. Robert Kelley posits that there are different ways to follow and each has different root motivations. Kelley’s seven paths are as follows:

1. **Apprentice** – Learns the ropes and pays their dues in order to equip themselves to be a leader.
2. **Disciple** – Bonds with and emulates a leader in order to become like that leaders.
3. **Mentee** – Involves themselves in an intensive one-to-one relationship with a mentor in order to mature and/or transform themselves.
4. **Comrade** – Becomes part of a group for the benefit of the intimacy which comes from belonging.
5. **Loyalist** – A deep emotional commitment to another which is rooted in personal loyalty to a leader.
6. **Dreamer** – Following because your goals are the same as the individual’s or the organization’s goals.
7. **Lifeway** – A deep interest in helping others and a feeling that following is your called way of serving.

Understanding why we or others choose to follow helps us ascertain motives.

The role of a follower in a partner Umwelt is not defined by role, position or situation as with previous Umwelten. Rather, it is defined by the intent to partner with leaders to accomplish a common purpose and embrace the personal accountability needed to make this happen. In this model, followership is not a term of weakness or position, but the condition that permits leadership to exist and gives it strength. In the partner Umwelt, “followers participate with enthusiasm, intelligence, and self reliance…in the pursuit of organizational goals.”

**Conclusion**

Leaders have had, and will continue to have, an important role in society and business. However, we must remember that leadership is enabled by followers. The role of followers is an important and worthwhile study. Through this article we have viewed four different perspectives of followership; positional, power-based, situational and as partners. Each of these Umwelten have provided a glimpse into roles that followers can have. It is my hope that the study of leadership from the other side, the perspective of followership, will continue to shape and define perspectives on leadership in the decades ahead.

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