The relationship between followers’ perceived quality of relationship with the leaders and followership style

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ABSTRACT

In the literature on leadership there are as many definitions as there are people who have tried to define it. Traditionally, a follower was assessed as unable to lead because of the assumption that a leader’s engagement is active and a follower’s engagement is passive.

The research is aimed to determinate the relationship between followership styles and followers’ perceived quality of relationship with the leader. Exemplary, pragmatic, passive, conformist and alienated followers are identified, and in relation to perceived quality of relationship between leader and follower.

Personal Style Questionnaire for followership styles (Kelley, 1992) was used to identify followership styles, and LMX 7 (Grean & Uhl-Bien, 1995) was used to measure the quality of working relationships between leaders and followers. Data were collected from 190 employees from different organizations in The Republic of Macedonia. On the basis of the obtained results, a statistically significant difference was found between the following followers, conformists, pragmatic followers and alienated followers for the variable quality of the leader-follower relationship. The ANOVA results indicated that there are differences in followers’ perceived quality of relationship with their leader among different followership style and those are statistically significant $F (3,186) = 7.48 \ (p<0.01)$. The results showed that the exemplary, pragmatic followers and conformists perceived a more qualitative relationship with the leader in relation to passive and alienated followers.

The findings of the study contribute to theory of followership and leadership, offering empirical data that will encourage further research. The results indicate a need for changing the structure of the organization and there is a need to make efforts to improve the quality of the relationship between the follower and the leader. These frameworks provided guidelines for implementation in practice of how leaders and followers can best work together.

Keywords: followership, followership styles, leadership, leader, leader-follower relationship
INTRODUCTION

Employees in organizations are identified as obedient, dependent and loyal to the leader or organization. Contrary to the traditional view of employees as passive and docile people, modern theories describe a completely opposite aspect to employees, determining them as active members in the leader-follower relationship.

Within the academic and professional literature, much more is being said about the phenomenon of leadership. Although only a few individuals are actually absolute leaders (Hackman & Wageman, 2007, according to Crosmman & Crosmman, 2011), while the others, the majority of their working lives are in the role of followers rather than in the role of leaders (Ciulla, 2003; Gronn, 1998; Rost, 1993; according to Crosmman & Crosmman, 2011).

It is very important to determine how followers perceive the relationship between the leader and the follower, if they feel better, the employees achieve more, and the organization is progressing. Leaders recognizing the different styles of followers can motivate employees, thereby increasing the performance of the overall organization. Gilbert & Hyde (1988, according to Baker, 2007) noted the obsession with leadership romance and the dependence on the ability to motivate, as two main reasons for the lack of research on the followership process by the followers.

The role of the follower drastically changes according to the modifications in the contemporary industry. Chaleff (2003) confirms that changes in the global economy allow fertile ground to sprout new patterns of followership. It also explains that in the past, strong leadership was needed to achieve something, such as building a pyramid or setting up a line, but organizations today act in the information age, there are so many interconnected units that work for the organization's success, all respond to a long line of leaders and need to effectively coordinate the business of many people with clear information.

Starting from the fact that there is a lack of research directed to followers and followership, any attempt to investigate followers is a major challenge for research.

Little is known about the social construct of followership, as well as its connection to contextual variables, the relationship with the leader, and the style of leadership. Also, the researchers are very little focused on perceiving the relationship of followers with their leader and the style of leadership they prefer, which is based on the conclusion of Vecchio & Boatwright (2002) that points to an insignificant number of researches aimed at the follower, more specifically research that reveals them preferences to followers' leadership styles.

In order to respond to the need for complementing the knowledge and understanding of the followership in the organizational context, the aim of this research is to determine the relationship between the different styles of followership and the perceived quality of the relationship with the leader.

Followership Styles

Kelley (1992) constructed a questionnaire in order to determine the style of followership and reveal the strengths of each follower, as well as identifying the followership skills that need to be developed. Asking the employees about the styles of followers, he received two types of answers, one that the followers are a herd of sheep who do not know where they are going, and the other that followers are obedient flock of sheep who cannot say no to their leaders. Examining employees with more detailed information, describing themselves, doing their jobs, making them the best or worst team workers, what distinguishes them from others, making them happy or unhappy summed up the results, and identifying several styles of followers. He discovers a map on how to be a better apprentice, a student, a follower under mentoring, a colleague, and a part of the team. The style of followership is based on both dimensions: active engagement, ranging from activity to passivity and independent thinking, which ranks from an independent, critical view to an independent, uncritical view. The styles of follower categories do not represent the personality traits, but how the individual plays the role of follower. In different circumstances, different styles of followership can be used. Kelley set up five styles of followers: alienated followers, conformist, passive, pragmatic and exemplary followers.
Alienated followers think with their own heads, have a positive image for themselves, possess a certain amount of skepticism, and see things as they are. Often they take the role of a devil's lawyer for the group and represent the organization's awareness. When necessary, they support and stand on the side of the weaker. Leaders regard these followers as cynical, negative, stubborn and rebel without a reason.

Conformist is the type of follower who easily accepts tasks, a good team player, believes in his leader, is fully committed to the organization, he always tries to reduce the conflict, does not pose a threat to the leader. Obedient and submissive, he often changes his attitude to avoid conflict, trying to make a compromise, no matter that it can disrupt the satisfaction of his needs and needs of his family.

A pragmatic follower is a type of follower who changes his attitudes as the organization's policy changes. They always know what is happening in the organization and how they should react in order to reach their goals. Other people most often explain the behavior of the pragmatist as a good player in political games for personal gain.

Passive followers rely on leaders, their court and opinion, to take action only when the leader instructs them. They work under the supervision of the leader. Passive followers are part of a table that agrees with the boss's opinion without thinking about why.

Exemplary followers are different from other followers in that they think independently and critically, without the influence of the group or leader. They think with their own head, they are innovative and creative, give constructive criticism, they are ready to confront the leader. They actively engage in work and use their skills for the well-being of the organization.

**Leader-Follower Relationship**

Leaders adopt different patterns of behavior with each of the followers, which over time evolve and are to a large extent dependent on the quality of the leader-follower relationship. Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995; according to Matkin & Barbuto, 2012) indicated that the research of the concept of leadership is not complete if it focuses only on the characteristics of the leaders. According to them, the concept of leadership consists of three components: the leader, the follower, and the leader-follower relationship.

Quality of leader-member exchange has been found to be positively related to follower’s satisfaction, organizational commitment, role clarity, performance ratings given by leaders, and objective performance, and negatively related to role conflict and turnover intentions (Bauer & Green, 1996; Deluga, 1998; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999; according to Krishnan, 2005).

Overall, results of studies suggest that having a high-quality relationship with one’s leader can affect the entire work experience in a positive manner, including performance and affective outcomes (Gerstner & Day, 1997).

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research participants**

The total sample included 190 employees from different organizations in The Republic of North Macedonia. The respondents were with an average age of 34.7 (SD=8.93) ranging from 21 to 65 years, while 52.6% were female and 47.4% were male.

**Instrument**

Followership style questionnaire (FSQ) was used to determine the followership styles of the employees. It was created by Robert E. Kelley in 1992 and published in The Power of Followership (1992) the KFSQ was developed to identify specific followership styles by measuring the participant along two dimensions: independent critical thinking as a follower or group member and active engagement or involvement in the organization (Kelley, 1992, 2008). The KFSQ has 10 statements about critical thinking skills and 10 statements specific about working in a group or organization. Individual statements are answered using a Likert-type scale (0 = Rarely, 3 = Occasionally, 6 = Almost Always), with the statements for each dimension summed to determine the participant’s perception of followership.
style. Using a scoring key developed by Kelley (1992), possible score results range from 0 to 60 for each of the dimensions: Independent Thinking and Active Engagement. Scores are plotted on a matrix to identify the participant’s style as one of the five styles: exemplary followers, pragmatist, alienated followers, conformist and passive followers. The questionnaire LMX 7 (Grean & Uhl-Bien, 1995), which contains seven credits, was used to evaluate the quality of the leader-follower relationship. The answers were given on a 5-degree scale of the Likert type, where 1 means frequently, 2 means occasionally, 3 means sometimes, 4 often and 5 very often. A higher score indicates a higher quality of the leader-follower relationship, while a lower score indicates a lower quality of the leader-follower relationship. The lowest possible score is 7, and the highest possible score is 35.

Procedure

The questionnaires were completed individually by the respondents, at their workplace, during the working hours given by the researcher herself. Responses from the completed instruments by the respondents included in the survey were entered and statistically processed with the statistical software package SPSS 20 for the Windows operating system.

RESULTS

The categorization of 190 survey respondents displayed in Table 1 surprisingly revealed that 81.1 percent of the respondents (N = 154) were categorized as exemplary followers. The results are according to a combination of the responses of the participants into the study achieving scores on active engagement and critical thinking items from Kelley’s (1992) followership style survey instrument. Only 13.2 percent of the respondents were categorized as pragmatist followers (N = 25), and 4.2 percent (N =8) of the respondents were categorized as conformist. There were 1.6 percent of the followers (N=3) categorized as alienated, and none of the followers were categorized as passive follower. It is obvious that most of the participants are decelerating themselves as exemplary followers and second most frequent follower style are pragmatic followers.

| Followership style | Frequency (N=190) | Percent |
|--------------------|-------------------|---------|
| Exemplary          | 154               | 81.1%   |
| Pragmatist         | 25                | 13.2%   |
| Conformist         | 8                 | 4.2%    |
| Alienated          | 3                 | 1.6%    |
| Passive            | 0                 | 0%      |

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the variable quality of the leader-follower relationship among the exemplary followers, pragmatic, conformists, and devoted followers. From the data in Table 2, it is obvious that followers with different styles of followership differently perceive the quality of leader-follower relationship. Moreover, the highest scores on the quality scale of the leader-follower relationship are observed in conformist followers (M = 27.38). Then lower scores have exemplary followers (M = 25.80) in relation to conformists, but both perceived a high-quality relationship between the leader and the follower. The pragmatic followers perceive the average quality of the leader-follower relationship (M = 23.64). As expected, alienated followers perceive a very low quality of the leader-follower relationship (M = 13.33).
Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the variable quality of the leader-follower relationship among the exemplary followers, pragmatic, conformists, and devoted followers

| Followership style | N   | M   | SD  | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | Min | Max |
|-------------------|-----|-----|-----|------------|--------------------------|-----|-----|
|                   |     |     |     |            | Lower Bound | Upper Bound   |     |     |
| Exemplary         | 154 | 25.80 | 4.88 | 0.39       | 25.02       | 26.58       | 14  | 35  |
| Pragmatic         | 25  | 23.64 | 6.15 | 1.23       | 21.10       | 26.18       | 12  | 35  |
| Conformist        | 8   | 27.38 | 4.8  | 1.70       | 23.35       | 31.40       | 19  | 33  |
| Alienated         | 3   | 13.33 | 1.16 | 0.67       | 10.46       | 16.20       | 12  | 14  |
| Total             | 190 | 2538 | 5.29 | 0.38       | 24.63       | 26.14       | 12  | 35  |

For the statistical data analysis, one-way ANOVA is used to determine the statistical significance between the different styles of followership in relation to the quality of the leader-follower relationship. Below are the results of a one-way variance analysis to determine if there are significant differences between the mean values of the quality of the leader-follower relationship among the four styles of followership: exemplary, pragmatic, alienated followers and conformists.

The value of the significance of the Leven’s Test of Homogeneity of the leader-follower variance among the four styles of followership is 0.07, which is greater than 0.05, which means that the assumption about the homogeneity of the variance is not broken.

Table 3 shows the results of the variance analysis, the possible sources of variation, the number of degrees of freedom for analysis between the different groups and in the groups themselves, then the value of the variance, the value of F and significance.

On the basis of the obtained results, a statistically significant difference was found between the exemplary followers, conformists, pragmatic followers, and alienated followers for the variable perceived quality of the leader-follower relationship. The result of F is F (3,186) = 7.48, which means that the difference is statistically significant at p <0.01. So it can be said that among the followers with different styles of followership there are differences in relation to the perceptions of the quality of the leader-follower relationship, that is, the exemplary, pragmatic followers and conformists perceive a more qualitative relationship between follower and leader in relation to passive and alienated followers.

Table 3. Summary ANOVA

| Source          | Sum of Squares | Df | Mean square | F     | Significance |
|-----------------|---------------|----|-------------|-------|--------------|
| Between groups  | 569.89        | 3  | 189.96      | 7.48  | 0.00         |
| Within          | 4721.06       | 186| 25.38       |       |              |
| Total           | 5290.95       | 189|             |       |              |

DISCUSSION

There are a very small number of studies that analyze the concept of followership, so this study, apart from pointing to the relationship of the style of followership with the perceptions of quality of the leader-follower relationship, provides another perspective of the followers in organizational psychology. Data from the research could be used to increase organizational efficiency. The findings of this research can be used to form an organizational structure that will strengthen followers, develop exemplary followers, and improve the quality of the relationship between the leader and the follower.

Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995) offer additional guidance for explaining the score of the questionnaire for assessment of the quality of the leader-follower relationship. Taking into account these guidelines and linking them to each style of followership, it is found that alienated followers perceive a very low quality
of the leader-follower relationship. Conformists and exemplary followers perceive a high-quality relationship, while pragmatic followers perceive the average quality of the leader-follower relationship.

Based on the results, it becomes clear that the organization should not only aim for exemplary followers, but to consider the integration of the styles of followers and leader-follower relationship. Theorists clearly identify the qualities of the exemplary followers, but when connecting other styles of followers with appropriate relationship with the leader, one can get a better performance than to tackle only the development and retention of exemplary followers.

These findings are in line with the literature that addresses these concepts. Alienated followers are dissatisfied because the organization's leader does not recognize and exploit of their potential (Kelley, 1992). The answer given by Adair (2008) to the question of why some leaders and followers continue together, and not some, is the psychological distance initiated and maintained by the follower. The social exchange practiced by the alienated followers in their relationship with the leader is based on the defined relationship prescribed by the employment contract. In this way, alienated followers are designated as members outside the group or as leased hands (Dansereau et al., 1975; Diennesch & Liden, 1986; Scandura, 1999; Vecchio, 1986, according to Bolino & Turnley, 2009). According to Bolino & Turnley (2009), employees who previously perceived high-quality relationships with the leader are expected to experience greater deprivation, according to the theory of deprivation, if one has experienced some past experience, they often think it can be repeated in the future.

Relative deprivation is defined as a state of tension that occurs in one who perceives discrepancy between how things stand and how they should be (Crosby, 1976; according to Bolino & Turnley, 2009). Which means that the relationship between the perceptions of the followers of the quality of the follower-leader relationship and the sense of relative deprivation is moderated by the previous experience of a high-quality relationship between the leader and the follower. The relationship will be more pronounced if employees in the past perceived a high-quality lead-follower relationship.

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