Followership
*A Practical Guide to Aligning Leaders and Followers*

Tom Atchison

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INTRODUCTION

For the last three decades healthcare workers have been adjusting to a new work environment—one that puts profits over people. Workers are unsure about their roles in the organization, and many struggle to find meaning in their day-to-day activities. This has created a tremendous talent shortage in many healthcare sectors, putting patients across the nation at risk, but who is responsible for this change, and what can be done?

In *Followership*, Tom Atchison argues that the blame lies with the nation’s healthcare executives who have failed to create organizational cultures that reward compassion and understand the differences between employees. Drawing upon his 30 years of experience in the healthcare industry, Atchison outlines a leadership model which is based on the unique mission, values, and vision of each organization. Atchison helps healthcare leaders achieve their primary goal: to facilitate change and inspire workers in the new healthcare landscape.

THE NEW LEADERSHIP MANDATE: FOLLOWERSHIP

Changing Healthcare Organizations: The Followership Difference

In order to be a true leader, one must have followers. A powerful title, such as chief executive officer, does not make anyone a leader. Throughout the book, Atchison outlines the differences between these “titled executives” and true leaders. Leaders are able to inspire workers in spite of the growing sense of disenfranchisement among healthcare employees. While titled executives solve problems, leaders inspire others to follow a vision. They encourage their followers to live by the organization’s mission and achieve its vision.
thorough behaviors that align with the organization’s core values.

In order to achieve this inspiration, leaders focus on people first and programs second. Leaders monitor the pulse of an organization by interacting with employees on a daily basis. They make the company’s mission, values, and vision abundantly clear, so that workers understand how they fit in, feel respected, and are recognized for their achievements. The main concern of a leader is to create a positive work environment and work culture.

Today, many healthcare workers are confused about their jobs. Healthcare began as an industry based on compassion; it has since become an industry based on capitalism. Quality care is often sacrificed for greater profits, which has upset workers who became involved in order to help people. This shift “from people to profits” has evoked several common reactions, especially among older healthcare workers. These reactions include:

1. Regression – Older workers cling to tradition and reminisce about the “good old days.”
2. Aggression – Frustrated workers lash out at anything that represents this “new order;” they may refuse to cooperate and even resort to sabotage.
3. Passivity – Timid individuals may tolerate changes but remain suspicious or detached from leadership.
4. Apathy – Disenfranchised workers may stop caring about their organization altogether.
5. Symbolism – Staff may cling to symbolic gestures such as regular meetings, which may serve no purpose in the new context of the organization.
6. Grouping – Staff may turn to others for support and band together against the new leadership.
7. Leadership – In rare cases, individuals see change as an exciting challenge and step up as leaders who can communicate clear messages to the workforce.

Today’s followers need clear and consistent messages about the past, present, and future. With the help of a leader, followers will embrace the frustration and anxiety that comes with great change, since they are

### Key Concepts

True leaders are measured by their ability to gain and inspire followers. In the field of healthcare, leaders must remain focused on people rather than profit and keep the following concepts in mind:

- All decisions should be based on the organization’s mission, values, and vision.
- Whereas titled executives focus on financial capital, leaders achieve success by investing heavily in human capital.
- Mission statements are powerful tools which should be simple, concise, and easy to remember.
- All employees display some combination of the four main motivation factors: recognition, achievement, power, and affiliation.
- The process of managed change comprises three steps: assessment, analysis, and action.
- Certain cynical employees will never be good followers; these employees are extremely toxic and should be replaced immediately.
- In order to create an effective work environment, executives must create high levels of job satisfaction and commitment.
- Change is an extremely personal experience. Leaders recognize that each employee will respond to change differently.
following one who is attacking the problem with confidence and courage.

Whereas leaders deal with change by interacting with employees, titled executives dodge the issues and fall into one of many common traps. When caught in the detail trap, executives will avoid decision making by asking for more data, or postponing choices until all of the data is analyzed and understood completely. These executives aim to live in a safe, risk-free world where the blame for a problem always rests with those who pushed for a quick decision. Executives in the totality trap lie on the opposite end of the spectrum; instead of needing to understand minute details they must understand the total impact of a decision before moving forward. This leads to a sort of paralysis because the future can never be clear enough for a commitment to be made.

Executives caught in the micro/macro trap alternate between these two views when it is most convenient. When presented with comprehensive, detailed data, they will ask to see the big picture, and vice versa. Executives caught in the checklist trap measure their personal success by the number of things they have to do. To these executives, cluttered schedules and pressing deadlines are signs of importance and good leadership.

Sooner or later these titled executives’ lack of courage and decisiveness will be exposed, and most likely ridiculed by the workforce. In order to avoid these traps executives should look closely at the amount of time spent on financial capital versus human capital. Titled executives focus on financial capital, while healthcare leaders are those with the most personal investment in human capital.

Followers work most effectively in environments where tangible and intangible benefits have reached a balance. While titled executives have become adept at managing tangible elements such as salary, benefits, or vacation time, leaders know that tangible benefits such as the organization’s mission, values, and vision are far more motivating. Leaders help workers see the meaning in their duties and facilitate a caring work environment. While titled executives think that the intangibles will take care of themselves, leaders are aware that intangible success drives tangible success.

It is in the behavior and attitudes of their followers where we find the difference between titled executives and true leaders.

Bridging Myth and Reality

Followers thrive when their environment aligns personal values and skills with corporate values and requirements. In order to create an effective corporate culture, many elements must be in place, the first of which is a simple, powerful mission statement. Five myths about mission statements have hampered executives who aim to effectively communicate their organization’s purpose:

1. Missions must protect the organization’s not-for-profit status – While this is a noble goal, not-for-profit status has little to do with the reason for the organization’s existence.

2. Missions are for the community, not for the company – While a mission statement may have meaning for external audiences, it is written for employees.

3. Missions must be idealistic – Idealistic mission statements are ineffective. A mission statement should define in very specific terms why the organization exists.

4. Mission statements have little practical value – The most effective corporate cultures base all decisions on the company mission and aim to achieve its singular vision.

5. Mission statements should be eloquent and long – A mission statement should contain no more than

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**About the Author**

**Tom Atchison**, ED.D., is president and founder of The Atchison Consulting Group, Inc. Since 1984, Dr. Atchison has consulted with healthcare organizations on managed change programs, team building, and leadership development. He has also consulted to the military, healthcare vendors, and government agencies on the intangible aspects of healthcare.
three or four basic ideas. These ideas should be easy to remember.

An example of an effective, concise mission statement is that of the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Florida; the organization’s mission is “To contribute to the prevention and cure of cancer.” This mission is easy to remember and meaningful for executives and employees throughout the organization.

Titled executives often fall prey to the many myths surrounding worker motivation. These myths about how people work and function are grounded in misconceptions of followership. Some of these myths include:

1. **Most employees are motivated by money** – While all employees require adequate compensation, most employees are motivated by personal feelings of self-worth.

Leaders understand that the best way to produce followers is to create a work environment that aligns personal values and skills with corporate values and work requirements.

2. **Some people cannot be motivated** – All employees are motivated all of the time. The challenge is directing this motivation to the appropriate task.

3. **Motivation never lasts** – When employees are driven by tangible rewards, enthusiasm wanes. However, when a behavior has been internalized based on intangible rewards, followers will maintain that behavior even under the most extreme circumstances.

4. **Staff motivation takes too much time** – While lofty goals may indeed take significant amounts of time, it is easy to improve one or two small behaviors a month; this builds confidence slowly but surely.

5. **It takes longer to motivate employees in today’s work environment** – Motivation only appears to take longer today due to the increased pace of work.

6. **Fear and greed are the only real motives** – In reality, the only real motives are consistency of values and role clarity.

7. **Employees should not be treated the same as managers** – In fact, the more an employee understands about the organization and its mission, the deeper their commitment will be.

Additionally, titled executives often subscribe to myths concerning their own role in the healthcare organization. Some of these myths include:

1. **The role of an executive is to build an organization** – In reality, an organization’s greatest asset is its human capital.

2. **Loyalty cannot be created** – Leaders create loyalty by being consistent. Leaders who show care and concern will amass followers who are deeply committed to the organization.

3. **Top management does not have time to worry about people** – While titled executives focus on financial gains, leaders spend their time creating an environment that will heighten the contributions of followers.

The role of a leader is to facilitate change and build a strong culture by modeling the organization’s mission, values, and vision. The primary goal is to create an organization full of self-managed workers, each of whom understands their role in achieving the company’s vision. Executives who aim to change their organization for the better should keep the following concepts about change in mind:

- **Change is a process** – When changing management styles, quick fixes never work. Change is continuous; it is not a singular event.

- **Change is a personal experience** – Not everyone in the organization will respond to change in the same way.

- **Change is experiential** – Change cannot be communicated through memos, slide shows, or brochures. Change can only occur when people experience the process and the excitement that comes with reshaping a company.

- **Change must be expressed in practical terms** – Workers must clearly understand their roles in the past, present, and future.
• Change must be simple – The final responsibility for change rests with the individual.

In times of significant change it is not uncommon for executives to regress to past management styles. To avoid this problem it is important to create a team of “organizational spotters,” people who provide confidential feedback on when, where, and how the change process fell off track.

It is important to note that during any change process there will be individuals who will never follow. Though they may be small in number, they can be extremely noisy and toxic; these employees must be replaced as quickly as possible. There may be other employees throughout the organization whose values do not align with the new management styles; some of these individuals may be capable of making the necessary adjustments, but others will inevitably leave the organization.

Perspectives on Increasing Followership

It has never been fully explained why some executives have followers and others do not. However, specific characteristics have been widely shown to attract followers; these characteristics have been collected in a variety of leadership models.

The multidimensional model, based heavily on the work of Jim Collins’ book Good to Great, emphasizes three domains: disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action. “Disciplined people” refers to a leader’s ability to find the right people for the job. “Disciplined thought” refers to a leader’s capacity to confront the facts and see only the essential information. “Disciplined action” refers to a leader’s ability to create an environment which gives workers freedom and responsibility within a consistent system. Another powerful leadership model is that of the United States military. Colonel Dandridge M. Malone identifies the 16 leadership behaviors of the U.S. military, which include courage, bearing, decisiveness, dependability, endurance, and many more. Patrick Lencioni’s “Cohesion/Clarity Obsession Model” puts extreme emphasis on a leader’s ability to communicate workers’ roles in an organization.

One leadership model identifies the four types of motivation present in all workers. These motivation factors can be assessed quantitatively, giving the executive an accurate idea of worker strengths and weaknesses. These factors are:

1. Recognition – Workers with high recognition scores crave attention. They are motivated by service awards, perks, supplemental benefits, and salary increases.

2. Accomplishment – Workers with high accomplishment scores are eager to become involved in new ventures and achieve greatness. They emphasize productivity and doing the job right.

3. Power – Workers with high power scores are extremely competitive and are motivated by “winning.” Instead of feeling intimidated by competition, they are motivated by it.

4. Affiliation – Workers with high affiliation scores aim to create a “family” feeling among co-workers. They are motivated by a desire to care for and respect other employees.

Not everyone can create followers; leaders somehow inspire followers, whereas titled executives try to manage behavior in an effort to make followers out of subordinates.

Every worker displays each of these factors to a degree, but many workers strongly identify with one in particular. Leaders should fill the organization with diverse people, so that they can leverage the strengths of each type of worker. Having only one type of worker could be harmful; an organization comprising only workers with high affiliation scores could face low productivity due to the workforce’s tendency to socialize excessively.

Ensuring Motivated Employees: Lessons from Healthcare

The first thing a company can do to ensure productive, motivated employees is to hire the right people. Leaders should hire workers based on the mission, values, and vision of the organization and put these workers into a job where their skills and values can flourish. The leader must then continue to build an organizational culture which reinforces the mission and values.
exemplified by the employee and organization. When an employee's values are out of alignment with those of the company, problems arise. Nurses, for example, are facing shortages due to the new emphasis on profit. Most nurses choose their careers out of a strong sense of compassion, which they feel is becoming scarce in today's healthcare environment.

When you hire people, you hire their whole history—experience, skills, and knowledge. A strong leader understands that running an effective organization starts with hiring the right people.

Job satisfaction and commitment are the two most important factors in keeping an employee motivated. When an employee's values align with those of the company, high job satisfaction is the intangible result. Satisfaction measures how happy employees are with their jobs, supervisors, coworkers, and pay. Commitment is a measure of loyalty, pride, and ownership. When a worker is given freedom and responsibility in the context of a consistent system, they will experience high levels of job satisfaction and commitment.

People work for both financial income and psychological income; psychological income is the combination of job satisfaction and commitment. When a worker is deprived of psychological income, they will certainly desire, and often demand, more financial income. Additionally, workers with high job satisfaction and low commitment can pose a threat to the organization. These workers may simply leave in search of a similar job with higher pay or more appropriate company values. They are also likely to be candidates for union-organizing activities. In order to build a more effective organization, leaders must produce both high job satisfaction and high commitment.

Periodic measures of intangible factors are necessary to assess the strength of a given corporate culture. In order to do this, organizations should ask their employees the following five questions:

1. Do you share the organization's beliefs?
2. Do you display the organization's values in everything you do?
3. Do you like working here?
4. Are you proud of your work?
5. Is trust prevalent throughout the organization?

Assessing these intangible factors is critical; organizations who ignore the intangible factors will surely suffer in the tangible output sector over time. If the corporate culture is weak, market share, productivity, and profit are at risk.

Creating a more effective organization involves three steps: assessment, analysis, and action. Each of these steps requires full commitment from the organization and from the employee, and each requires careful planning and consideration.

**Measuring Followership**

**Assessment: Conducting an Inventory of the Organization and Yourself**

Followers often need feedback that answers deep questions about their role in an organization. Period assessments are a useful source for finding such answers. Leaders know that assessment of intangible factors bring the greatest benefits to a change process.

Prior to beginning an assessment, executives should determine the organization's readiness for such a review. The following questions should be asked:

- How am I planning to use this assessment?
- Does this assessment have a clear-cut context and purpose?
- Am I truly open to the results of this assessment?
- Are my expectations for the assessment realistic, specific, and attainable?
- Have I identified the recipients and users of the data?
- Have I candidly dealt with people's fears and concerns?
- Will the data be valid and reliable?

When it comes time to perform the assessment, there are several considerations to keep in mind. Satisfaction surveys should be avoided; commitment factors should be the real focus of an assessment. Spending time on these factors increases the chance that
employees will become followers. Assessment data means nothing by itself; insight must be followed by action. Executives should know the organization’s assessment history, including the workforce’s attitudes toward, and experiences with, assessment tools in the past. Assessments should place a strong emphasis on issues related to the company’s mission, values, and vision and how individuals relate to them. Executives should treat assessment as an ongoing program rather than an annual formality. Finally, followers must be reassured and allowed permission to express their beliefs with no fear of reprisal.

A critical difference exists between assessment and evaluation. While assessment involves only the collection of data, evaluation involves judgment. It is important to suspend judgment until the context is clear. There are no inherently good or bad organizational cultures; context is required to determine the effectiveness of an employee or an organization.

Leadership must also be assessed. To do so, executives must ask the following two questions in relation to every aspect of the work environment:

1. What is my standard operating procedure?
2. Does it increase or decrease followership?

These two questions should be applied to organizational features such as structure, feedback, productivity, accountability, communication, ownership, and reward. If at all possible, this type of assessment should be made by an objective third party.

Analysis: Focusing on Increasing Followership.

In order to inspire followers, assessment data must first be converted into meaningful information; this involves both interpretation and judgment. Interpretation describes raw data in specific, objective terms, while judgment describes quality in the context of the company’s mission, values, and vision. Analysis is simply judging numbers to be good or bad.

Effective healthcare organizations are characterized by five factors. These factors provide the context in which to analyze the data gathered from assessment:

1. High quality
2. High employee and physician commitment
3. High patient satisfaction
4. High market share
5. High profit

If the culture is weak and people feel no pride in the work and no commitment to the organization, market share, profit, and productivity are at risk.

Once the data is analyzed, the executive should use audits to identify weaknesses in the organization. These audits should relate to the company’s vision and should help to point out any barriers to achieving that vision. An important step in this process is creating a vision statement. Executives should imagine their company running at its most effective, and examine the impact of that vision. If certain employees, protocols, or policies appear to be barriers to the company’s vision, they should be immediately reviewed.

Action: Implementing Successful Changes

When the assessment and analysis are done, it is time to take action. Action plans specify what will be done, who will perform certain tasks, how quickly the plan will be carried out, and what metrics will be used to measure progress.

The first step of an effective plan is to deal with individuals who may be barriers to the company vision. In this situation, the executive has three options:

1. Terminate the employee or employees
2. Introduce strategies to change behavior
3. Identify new strategies to inspire productivity

In most cases good action plans require a combination of all three options. While titled executives often turn to termination first, leaders often find that their problems are not easily resolved by eliminating people. Often, the four motivation factors are at play and jobs can be restructured to better suit the needs of employees who score particularly high in recognition, achievement, power, or affiliation.
When a leader decides that the current employees are capable of fulfilling the organization’s mission, it is time to identify the major areas that need change. These may include increasing job satisfaction or commitment, creating clearly-defined roles for all workers, or building trust throughout the organization. The goal of the action plan should be to produce self-managed followers. All aspects of the plan should encourage workers to think like adults rather than children or cogs in a machine.

In looking for the critical areas of change, executives should scrutinize the following facets of the organization: recruitment, hiring, orientation, communication, recognition, rewards, compensation, incentives, re-recruitment of high performers, and termination. For each element, identify all possible barriers to the achievement of the organization’s vision. The following questions should be asked about each element of the organization.

• What is stopping us?
• What must be changed?
• What must be repaired or rectified?
• What must be eliminated?
• What must be added?

In identifying these essential change elements, leaders should consider the following advice:

1. Make sure the team understands where the organization is headed.
2. Reach consensus on the elements of change.
4. Reinforce the notion that change elements must be seen as barriers to the company vision.
5. Focus on the organization, not on departments or individuals.
6. Limit the number of change elements to between four and eight.
7. Invest at least three hours in the discussion of these change elements.

Once the change elements have been identified, they can be implemented by executives and managers throughout the organization. First, create a system which takes note of behavioral improvements. This could be as simple as a tally in a notebook. Second, create a way for followers to share their change experiences with others in the organization. Third, share experiences in relation to the organization’s mission, values, and vision. Finally, give followers the support and resources they need to make the necessary changes. A good way to begin the change process is to challenge employees to change one behavior a week over a series of weeks.

Ensuring Organizational Vitality
Successfully Managing the Dynamics of Change

In life, change is the only constant. Despite this truth, titled executives often subscribe to myths about the nature of change and think that change is uniform, cannot be managed, or can be prevented or postponed through hard work and good intentions. Leaders, however, do not subscribe to any of these myths. They are experts in facilitating managed change, which begins with the understanding of a problem and ends with achieving the desired outcome.

Managed change is a process that is supported by a leader’s ability to gain and inspire followers. Leaders first select the right team and then begin to create the shared dream—the inspirational and measurable vision. When dealing with change, leaders should keep in mind that every follower is vastly different. Though change is an extremely personal experience, true leaders create a shared sense of excitement and joy and provide workers with the confidence needed to move gracefully into the future.

Features of the Book

Reading Time: 4-6 hours, 234 pages

In Followership, Tom Atchison outlines a comprehensive leadership model intended for healthcare executives. This book differs from other leadership literature in that it focuses on the characteristics which attract “followers,” enthusiastic, committed employees who see the necessity for change and are willing to work for it. The book places heavy empha-
sis on an organization’s mission, values, and vision, and encourages companies to find employees whose values align with those of the organization.

The book uses case studies, statistics, and graphs to emphasize the problems plaguing healthcare today. For each concept, Atchison offers advice, asks critical questions, and debunks myths which may be impeding progress. The final chapter describes a way to determine one’s “followership quotient,” which can be a useful tool in quantitatively assessing a leader’s performance.

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About the Author
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