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I write about Service and Selflessness: the Secret to Success.

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The 11 Leadership Secrets You've Never Heard About

The old distinctions between leaders and followers are gone. Great followers follow by leading. Here's 11 ways to make sure you do just that.

In 1982 I left a great job at MTV: Music Television for what is now the A&E Network for one reason: to work for [Jim Collins](#). A highly successful executive, Collins poured wisdom into my head by the bucket while keeping me in stitches with his big-hearted Irish sense of humor. One day he said:



“Remember Augie, everybody got a boss. The vice president reports to the president and the president reports to the CEO. The CEO reports to the chairman of the board and the chairman reports to his wife. All God’s children got a boss. If you want to be a great leader you must also be a great follower.”

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According to [Louis Mobley](#), my mentor and the director of the [IBM Executive School](#), [Albert Einstein](#) did far more than reinvent physics. Human beings are no longer just passive cogs in Newton’s mechanistic machine inexorably driven by the iron wheel of cause and effect. Instead we are all conscious agents, thinking for ourselves, just as capable of causing change as being driven by it. Einstein’s universe is a fluid place of feedback loops where cause and effect are interchangeable and often indistinguishable. Does the media lead public opinion or merely reflect it? Do parents produce children or children produce parents? Are consumers hapless victims of marketing or are marketing folks just hapless victims of a fickle consumer?

For leadership, Einstein’s revolution means that the old, neat distinction between leaders and followers no longer exists. Those bright lines between kings and subjects, nobles and serfs, bosses and “workers” are gone. We often switch between leader and follower many times in a single day, and success depends just as much on being a great follower as it does on being a great leader.

Great followers follow by leading and here are 11 ways to do just that.

- 1) *Great Followers Seize the Initiative:* The days of leaders saying “Jump!” and subordinates asking “How high?” are over. Today’s leader desperately needs followers that bring fresh ideas not passive worker bees waiting to be told what to do. Great followers say, “This is what I think we should do.” not “What do you want me to do?”
- 2) *Great Followers Create their Own Job:* Collins taught me a model for every new job I took. Moving quickly I’d identify a quantifiable goal that I could achieve in a reasonably short amount of time. I would then write up a plan for achieving that goal along with a weekly reporting process. But most importantly, I always presented my plan *before* my boss asked for it. In this way I demonstrated that I could lead myself. The side benefit of creating my own job was getting the autonomy that turns work into fun.
- 3) *Great Followers are Coachable:* One time Collins shared a “secret” with me. Rather than lug around a notebook, he folded a sheet of paper into thirds and put it into the breast pocket of his jacket for notes. I faithfully imitated him, but the first thing I did after leaving the company was stop carrying that damn sheet of paper. It may seem that I was just playing the phony to ingratiate myself, but I had a nobler objective. I wanted to demonstrate to Collins that I was coachable. I used a little thing to *signal* that I was coachable on the big ones.
- 4) *Great Followers Anticipate:*
One of the most humorous bits from the TV series *M*A*S*H* is Cpl. “Radar” O’Reilly consistently anticipating Col. Blake and later Col. Potter. They can barely open their mouths before Radar finishes their sentence by assuring them that whatever they are looking for is already done. Like Radar, great followers stay a step ahead of their boss by proactively asking: “If I were my boss what would I want next?” My 23- year -old sales assistant at MTV, Sheri Gottlieb was so good that within weeks 90% of the work that hit my in-box went straight to my out-box with only “Sheri, please handle” for instruction. Soon and without being asked, like Radar, she was intercepting most of my office work before it even hit my desk. Sheri, unsurprisingly, quickly rose from “lowly secretary” to vice president.



- 5) *Great Followers are Great Communicators:* If your boss *ever* has to ask for a status report, you are failing as a follower. Great leaders are great worriers. Great followers preempt worry by proactively communicating *in writing*. If you do not communicate your boss will naturally worry that you are hiding bad news. Besides, unbidden information is treated far more credibly than information demanded. Poor communicators consistently find themselves on the defensive and perpetually wondering why.
- 6) *Great Followers are Goal Driven:* [Leaders](#) are busy. The last thing they want to do is “supervise.” Great followers reason backwards: they use future goals to prioritize today’s “activity.” Poor followers reason forward: They react to their in-box and email in the forlorn hope that just staying busy will magically produce results somewhere “down the road.” Your boss is not paying you to “stay busy” or even to “work hard.” He is paying you to strategically *deliver* on clearly defined goals that materially impact the mission. This is true no matter where you are on the corporate ladder as my

assistant Sheri repeatedly demonstrated.

7) *Great Followers Show Don't Tell:* I am coaching a young MBA student. At our first meeting I began groping for a quote, and this young man quietly pulled out a neatly tabbed binder with everything I had ever written and quickly pulled out the quote. His preparation *demonstrated* seriousness far more convincingly than an impassioned speech ever could. I am now investing far more in him. Human beings are wired to value action and discount verbiage, use this trait to your advantage.

8) *Great Followers Earn Trust:* My number one goal upon taking a new job was getting my boss to *relax*. The sooner I earned his trust, the quicker he would spend his most valuable asset, time, worrying about something other than me. Louis Mobley said trust relies on promise and fulfillment. People who keep promises can be trusted. Those who don't cannot. Great followers keep promises. It is critical, especially early in your relationship with your boss, that you deliver on every commitment no matter how trivial.

9) *Great Followers Offer Solutions:* Any damn fool can turn his problems into problems for his boss. Great followers solve problems. If they cannot they always offer their boss solutions along with the problem.

10) *Great Followers are Compassionate:* Often referred to as "managing your boss," great followers are sympathetic to the enormous pressure that leaders must endure. For example, leaders may wait too long to make a change or fill a position. Then they spend months and many thousands of dollars recruiting while [Rome](#) burns around them. Once they fill the position they still spend sleepless nights haunted by the chance that they hired the wrong person. If they have, not only must they go through the agonizing process again, but answer to their own unsympathetic boss about their poor decision. Examples like this are the ordinary lot of leadership, and great followers not only empathize but look for ways to reassure their boss that at least one person understands his pain and can be counted on to alleviate it.

11) *Great Followers are Loyal:* If I could not, in clear conscience, back my boss to the hilt then it was time to change jobs or take an unpaid sabbatical. Great followers take pride in making their boss "look good." Even if I disagreed in private, it was still my job to present a united front once the decision had been made. I never undermined my boss to curry favor with my own people or played politics at his expense. I only went over his head to let his superiors know how great he was, and I constantly looked for reasons to do just that.

As I hope you've noticed, many of the same traits I ascribe to great followers apply to great leaders. Great leaders not only acquire these traits as followers, but model them for their own subordinates. But most importantly their interchangeable nature makes my point: Just as the distinction between noble and serf is a thing of the past so are the distinctions between leaders and followers.

Everybody got a boss and I was fortunate to have the privilege of avidly following a number of great teachers and business leaders like Jim Collins. And my efforts to become the best follower I could possibly be paid off handsomely when I finally found myself leading my own company...

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