Follower-centred Perspectives on Leadership

‘New insights into the processes of leadership can be gained by focusing attention squarely on processes connected to followers and their contexts, independently of what leaders are actually doing’.

Meindl, Postor and Mayo (2004: 1347)

Introducing the follower

In Chapter 1, we introduced Joseph Rost’s definition of leadership as an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes. In Chapter 2 we focused our attention on the leader’s role in this relationship. In this chapter we turn to the role of the follower.

At the beginning of the presentation on leadership that Brad gives to undergraduate students he conducts a quick poll. He asks how many of them aspire to be a ‘good leader’. Invariably, between 10 and 15 of the class of 200 put up their hands. When he asks how many of them aspire to be good followers, either none or one lone maverick student will put up a hand. This does not change even when Brad puts up his hand – such is the level of influence that he exerts on the class.

Setting aside the concern that the vast majority of undergraduates aspire to be neither a good leader nor a good follower – or at least are not willing to publicly declare their intentions, good or bad – the almost non-existent desire to be a good follower is striking and potentially unsettling. We all know instinctively that we will spend most of our life as a follower and only a small proportion of it as a leader, but it is not something that we are generally proud to admit, let alone celebrate. Even the most powerful world leaders, whether it’s the President of the United States, the Pope, or even Bono, will spend most of their lives as followers too. In fact, the public is quite amused when it catches prominent leaders acting as followers, whether it’s being cajoled by an adviser or a protester...
or being gently reprimanded by their spouse or children. We all have to follow: as Bob Dylan wryly observes, ‘You Gotta Serve Somebody’.

Being reticent or reluctant to follow is not something that is peculiar to undergraduate students but, as we will see in Chapter 4 on culture and leadership, is a strong feature of individualistically oriented Western societies, especially those that are characterized by low power distance values. Part of the problem is the word ‘follower’ itself. Being a follower implies that you are second best, you are not good enough to lead. Clearly, there is a pejorative tone to it. For some, the notion of following has strong religious overtones, suggesting blind devotion, which further serves to undermine the currency of the term.

The uneasiness or lack of interest in either talking about or understanding followership, is reflected in how much less the term crops up on the Internet. Karl Weick notes from a Google search that he found 57 items relating to the word ‘leader’ for every one regarding a ‘follower’ (Weick, 2007). Three years later, Bligh (2011: 431) discovered that this ratio had plummeted to 22:1. This fundamental imbalance and the recent readjustment in favour of followers is reflected in the number of books that are published on the subject. While just over 5,000 non-fiction books can be ordered through Amazon.com with the word ‘leadership’ in their title, only 37 books can be ordered with the word ‘followership’ in their title. The figure for leadership has changed little, but the figure for ‘followership’ titles is up from only six three years ago when we wrote the first edition of this book. Most notable of these is the edited volume entitled The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations (Riggio, Chaleff and Lipman-Blumen, 2008).

Clearly, the interest in followership is increasing to the point that it has prompted Michelle Bligh, in her recent review of follower-centred research, to conclude that ‘there is evidence that followership is entering the second stage of conceptual development, one of evaluation and conceptual development’ (2011: 431). Baker (2007) has further aided us in this regard by pointing to the rich theoretical foundation of work on followership that has been conducted by non-leadership scholars since the 1950s but has been largely ignored by contemporary leadership researchers. One of the pioneers of followership, Edwin Hollander, soberly suggests that we might profitably look back much further, observing that ‘followership is periodically rediscovered as important to leadership, despite a long tradition of usage’ that has emerged and re-emerged since at least the sixth century BC (Hollander, 1995: 56).

One response to the reluctance to acknowledge the term ‘follower’ has been to look for alternative terms. Various replacements have been proposed from ‘team member’ to ‘collaborator’, ‘associate’, ‘colleague’, ‘partner’, or even ‘peer’, but none of them has caught
The word ‘follower’ persists, albeit with grudging and somewhat embarrassed acceptance, in our leadership lexicon. We will, however, be using the term in this chapter with unbridled enthusiasm as we strive to show that it is not the act of following that is necessarily problematic – indeed it is vital to leadership – but, as with leading, there are more and less effective ways in which to follow.

The undue primacy that is placed on leaders over followers has been reinforced by leadership scholars. A major exception to this has been Jim Meindl, the Director of the Center for Leadership Studies at the State University of New York, at Buffalo, who sadly passed away at the peak of his career in 2004. Meindl's major contribution to leadership studies was to lead a ‘follower-centric’ approach to leadership studies offered by way of a much-needed counterweight to an almost exclusive preoccupation with leader-centric approaches. Consolidating earlier arguments made by Pfeffer (1977), Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) and Calder (1977), he observed that while most leadership scholars would have little difficulty in recognizing that leadership is fundamentally predicated on the relationship between leaders and followers, the follower almost invariably took a minor supporting role in the analysis of leadership.

Reading Meindl’s work, one is struck by his deep-seated discomfort in the tendency for his peers and his fellow citizens to place such great stock in the role of leaders, especially those at the apex of the organization. This misplaced faith was held despite the overwhelming weight of evidence showing that external forces and a myriad of alternative internal factors are considerably more influential in determining organizational performance. He concluded with more than a hint of resignation that, ‘the concept of leadership is a permanently entrenched part of the socially constructed reality that we bring to bear in our analysis of organizations. And there is every sign that the obsessions and celebrations of it will persist’ (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985: 78). The twenty or so years since he made this observation would have only served further to reinforce his conviction.

Another notable addition to the growing followership canon, Follower-Centered Perspectives on Leadership (Shamir et al., 2007), collects together in a tribute to the memory of James Meindl a number of researchers who are actively working on the development of new follower-centric approaches to leadership. In the book’s introduction, Boas Shamir provides a helpful overview of this work and identifies five roles that followers have traditionally played in leadership theories: ‘followers as recipients of leader influence’, ‘followers as moderators of leader impact’, ‘followers as substitutes for leadership’, ‘followers as constructors of leadership’ and ‘followers as leaders’
We have used these categories to organize our discussion. We will close the chapter by considering a sixth role that Boas and his colleagues have advocated for followers: ‘followers as co-producers of leadership’. This perspective has been developed as a critical alternative to the five ways in which followers have been traditionally conceptualized. This is a conceptualization which is very much in tune with our own thinking and is ripe for further study and investigation.

followers as recipients of leadership

The passive conception of the follower’s role in leadership has been the traditionally dominant view. As such it has done little to challenge the popular stereotypes about followers and followership. As we saw in Chapter 1, traditional leadership theories posit the leader’s traits and behaviour as the independent variables and the followers’ perceptions, attitudes and behaviours to be explained as the dependent variables in the leadership equation.

Even with the more recent theories of transformational, transactional and charismatic leadership discussed in Chapter 2, the onus is still firmly placed on the leader to create one or a blend of these forms of leadership for the followers to respond to. If the leader follows the correct procedures, he or she will succeed in creating transactional or charismatic or transformational leadership, irrespective of the followers.

The way these theories perceive the leadership process, it does not really matter who you are trying to lead. Followers do not play an active role in the leadership process. It is an essentially linear, one-way relationship between leaders and followers. The follower is, in effect, a blank slate upon which the leader writes the script.

followers as moderators of leadership

As we saw in the first chapter, contingency theories of leadership acknowledge that the leader’s influence on followers’ attitudes and performance depends on the individual follower’s characteristics. This view of followers still thinks of them as primarily passive recipients of influence, but acknowledges that the leader’s influence may have to be moderated by the characteristics of the follower.

Brad recalls from the first leadership training course he took, which was on ‘situational leadership’ (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977), that he had to learn to change his leadership style depending on the level of
‘maturity’ of the follower. This was determined by the ability and the motivation of the follower. With an immature follower, he should take on a ‘telling style’ of leadership, in which he would tell the employees what needed to be done but not be too interested in them as people. ‘Relationship behaviour’ would come later. As the follower became more capable and motivated, Brad could then move to a ‘selling style’, in which he would keep up the task pressure but could also begin to cultivate a good relationship with the employee.

Moving around the compass, he could then progress to a ‘participatory style’, in which he could cease to give direction and allow the followers to direct themselves and devote his attention to relationship-building activities. In the final stage, presumably some form of leadership nirvana, Brad could take on a ‘delegating leadership style’ (sometimes derogatively referred to as ‘laissez-faire’ leadership), by which he could leave the employees to their own devices and let them lead themselves. This all sounded so enticing in theory, but in practice the followers rarely stuck to the same script. They had obviously been on a different course! They kept throwing up all kinds of complications, such as having different opinions, not sharing the same motives and plunging various spanners into the works.

Perhaps they had attended a course inspired by Kelley (1988, 1992), whose provocative explanation of follower communication styles did much to popularize the notion of ‘followership’. Based on his own 2 × 2 matrix, which used the twin axes of independent thinking and active engagement, followers could be classified as being either being ‘the sheep’, ‘the yes-people’, ‘the alienated’, ‘the pragmatic’ or ‘the star followers’. Now which one of these are you?

Contingency theorists have pointed to a number of other aspects of followers that leaders need to take into account when leading. These include: the follower’s initial attitude towards the leader and their acceptance of the leader (Fiedler, 1967); the follower’s needs for either technical or emotional support (House, 1971); and the follower’s knowledge and the congruence of their values with their leaders’ (Vroom and Yetton, 1973). While each of the theories tries to point to another aspect of the follower that the leader must take into account when determining how to behave, the overriding expectation is for the leader to be the active partner in the leadership process.

Followers as substitutes for leadership

From time to time the careers section in the newspaper runs articles publicizing the latest HR consultancy survey, highlighting the finding that the number one reason why most people leave their jobs is because
of a bad boss. Money, conditions, benefits and prospects pale into insignificance compared to an abusive or inconsiderate boss, it would seem. Leaving is, of course, one way to deal with a bad boss. Another way is to find ways to avoid him or her and minimize the damage.

The ‘substitutes for leadership’ theory originated by Steven Kerr and John Jermier provides some encouragement in this regard (Kerr and Jermier, 1978). It argues that, under certain conditions, the influence of a leader over a follower may actually be neutralized or even substituted. If it is neutralized, it means that it is impossible for either the task-oriented or the relationship-oriented activities of a leader to make a difference to a follower’s attitudes or behaviour. If leadership is substituted, it means that the leader’s activities are not only impossible, but they are also largely unnecessary.

Returning to the problem of avoiding a bad boss, those followers who have high levels of ability, experience, training and knowledge – as well as a high need for independence and a strongly ‘professional’ orientation – are usually quite self-aware and have self-efficacy and therefore little need for a boss’s feedback. Moreover, when the task at hand is relatively straightforward and routine, you have little need for a boss. Alternatively, if you can get into a job that is intrinsically satisfying or like a tradesperson, you can see directly what you have achieved. You do not need a boss to explain to you how important your work is or how you are doing. Finally, you might consider joining an organization which is highly bureaucratic in that the work and the rewards are highly formalized and little is left to the boss’s discretion. Best of all, try taking a job in which there is considerable spatial distance between you and your boss, but beware of the remarkable reach of the Blackberry or iPhone.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the substitutes for leadership theory has strong intuitive appeal for those who do not subscribe to the importance of leadership in organizational processes. It serves quite effectively to take the wind out of the sails of leadership scholars who trumpet the central importance of leadership in organizational success and failure. It has, however, failed to lead to much in the way of subsequent research, serving primarily as an act of protest. A series of exchanges published in *Leadership Quarterly* did, however, try to generate further theoretical and methodological refinements to the substitutes for leadership, particularly as it applies to strategic leadership at senior levels within organizations (Dionne et al., 2005).

Boas Shamir (2007) characterizes the way in which the substitutes for leadership theory perceives the followers’ role as an extreme version of seeing followers as moderators of leadership. In common with this perspective, the specific activities of followers in substituting for leadership
are not actively theorized. The theory has been developed primarily to de-emphasize the significance of the leader, but it does not do a lot to explicate the role of followers in creating leadership. As we shall see in the following section, the next group of theories have made this task their central concern.

followers as constructors of leadership

In this section we will talk about research that has examined the way in which followers make or construct leadership. These researchers are preoccupied with the thoughts of followers, most especially how they construct and represent leaders in their thought systems. They make the fundamental point that leadership is essentially in the eye of the follower. Unless followers recognize it as leadership, it isn’t leadership. We will distinguish between three groups of theories that have identified a different aspect of this construction process: the romance of leadership theory, the psychoanalytic theory of leadership, and the social identity theory of leadership.

the romance of leadership

At the beginning of this chapter we noted that the follower-centric view of leadership emanated from a concern that most leadership scholars had become overly preoccupied with the role of the leader in creating leadership, while virtually ignoring the role of the follower. Essentially, leadership scholars were mirroring, and indeed perpetuating, the hype and unrealistic expectations that are routinely placed on leaders in all spheres of human endeavour, but most especially in the world of business and politics. Rather than turn their back on leadership studies, Jim Meindl and his colleagues decided to make this tendency to overestimate the significance of leadership their central concern.

At the heart of their analysis lies the notion of the ‘romance of leadership’, which they suggest ‘denotes a strong belief – a faith – in the importance of leadership factors to the functioning and dysfunctioning of organized systems’ (Meindl and Ehrlich, 1987: 91). A series of empirical studies conducted in laboratory settings – through the development of a survey instrument, the Romance of Leadership Scale (RLS) – and the analyses of media reports revealed a consistent pattern of follower behaviour (Meindl and Ehrlich, 1988). In the absence of direct, unambiguous information about an organization, respondents would tend to
ascribe control and responsibility to leaders, with events and outcomes to which they could be plausibly linked (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985). In effect, leadership acted as a simplified, biased and attractive way to make sense of organizational performance. Moreover, this romantic tendency seemed to have the greatest sway in extreme cases – when things were going either extremely well or extremely badly observers tended to lay the credit or blame at the foot of the leader.

Meindl did not advance the follower-centric approach in an effort either to compete or to replace the dominant leader-centric approach. As Meindl noted: ‘Rather than being anti-leadership, the romance of leadership, and the perspective it provides, is more accurately portrayed as an alternative to theories and perspectives that place great weight on “leaders” and on the substantive significance to their actions and activities’ (1995: 330). Looked at through the romance of leadership lens, you could see that perhaps superior performance was, in fact, the cause and not the consequence of charismatic leadership (Awamleh and Gardner, 1999: 346). Put succinctly, leaders keep on winning largely because their followers perceive them to be winners. They therefore do everything they can to ensure this continues to be the case. For example, Manchester United players would do everything they could to keep Sir Alex Ferguson in his winning ways.

Meindl described the romance of leadership as a social construction. Followers construct their opinion about the leader by interacting with other followers. Central to this process is something he called social contagion, which he described as ‘a phenomenon of the spontaneous spread of affective and/or behavioral reactions among the members of a group or social collective’ (Meindl, 1993: 101). As its name suggests, we can think of a leader’s reputation (good or bad) as being something akin to influenza that can be passed on from follower to follower until everyone becomes infected. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly where the contagion originated. Suddenly it sweeps through a community, and often disappears just as unexpectedly. Social contagion highlights the interpersonal processes and group dynamics that underpin the widespread dissemination of charismatic effects among followers and subordinates.

The media are important contributors to these social construction and social contagion processes. Media accounts influence and shape the attributions that followers might give to a particular leader. They can also shape our general beliefs about what constitutes effective and ineffective, ethical and unethical leadership. These processes are illustrated to good effect in an empirical study, based on media accounts, conducted by Chen and Meindl (1991) of the career of People Express founder and chief executive Donald Burr. Burr’s airline enjoyed a brief but highly celebrated heyday before encountering insurmountable
financial problems and folding into Texas Air just five short years after it made its inaugural flight in 1981 in a blaze of publicity. The study shows how the press collectively constructed Donald Burr as an idealized representation of the American entrepreneurial spirit, infused with vision and inspiration in the manner of a pioneering evangelical preacher. They stuck with this image of the leader throughout the life of the company but made a marked switch – in the face of sustained poor company performance – from celebrating the positive connotations associated with this image to revealing its negative connotations.

Chen and Meindl conclude that, contrary to popular wisdom, leaders do not control their own destiny despite the best efforts of public relations professionals. Brad knows this only too well from his time as a ‘spin doctor’. The identity and influence of leaders depends to a large extent on the manner in which their followers perceive them. Both leaders and followers are subject to a range of forces beyond their direct control; prominent among them are the dynamics of the news industries that disseminate information about leaders to their followers and the wider society. The business media, in turn, are subject to a variety of internal and external pressures. They have to sell newspapers and advertising space and, therefore, have to influence their readers and various other stakeholders. Consequently, they play to our hunger for personalized news in the belief that individual leaders control the fate of organizations rather than relational or structural forces. In constructing leader images, they match the leader’s characteristics with the performance of the firm. Consequently, the CEO of a successful firm will tend to be depicted with positive personal qualities, and vice versa.

The ‘celebrity CEO’ phenomenon takes full advantage of our tendencies to romanticize leadership (Guthey, Clark and Jackson, 2009). In an increasingly complicated and impersonal world, the public face of a charismatic and appealing CEO can prove to be a highly effective means for a company to build a symbolic link or brand with its various stakeholders, such as its shareholders, its customers or its suppliers. A ‘real’ person provides the human touch that cannot be provided by a mere logo. It is almost impossible to not think about Richard Branson without thinking about the Virgin brand and vice versa. Having a celebrity CEO at the helm can act as a double-edged sword, however. It is difficult to maintain confidence in an organization once the influential founder moves on, as The Body Shop found when Anita Roddick gave up control of the company. It’s even more of a challenge when your founder goes to jail, as was demonstrated in spectacular fashion with the imprisonment of Martha Stewart. Redemption can be a powerful motivator, as witnessed by the impressive turnaround in Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Inc. since her release.
The romance of leadership theory is particularly strong in describing a tendency for followers to exaggerate the importance and influence of the leader in determining a group or organization’s performance. If things are going well, it’s the leader’s doing; if things are going badly, that is also the leader’s doing. The theory also provides some useful insights into how this takes place, with its exposition of social construction and social contagion processes. Where the theory is not as strong is in explaining why this happens. The following two theories – psychoanalytic theory and social identity theory – provide pointers as to why followers might choose to construct leadership in the way they have been observed to do.

### the psychoanalytic theories of leadership

When we addressed the question regarding leaders being born or made in the opening chapter, we pointed to the importance of our early years in shaping and defining our individual philosophies of leadership. Psychoanalytic theories of leadership take this observation several steps further.

Rooted in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis and Carl Jung’s psychopathology, the psychodynamic approach highlights the centrality of our family of origin if we wish to understand our behaviour, whether as a leader or as a follower (Stech, 2004). A leader’s style is heavily influenced by the models of leadership exhibited by parents, teachers, coaches and other adults during the maturation process from childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood. Most potent of these is the style of parenting, particularly very early in the impressionable years (Keller, 2003). An adult might choose to copy that parent’s style or may choose a diametrically opposite style. We often see someone who was raised in an authoritarian way consciously reject this approach in favour of a more *laissez-faire* approach. One is, however, struck when confronted with the actual challenge of raising a child, how those familiar patterns emerge – despite our best intentions.

The way in which we are raised also influences the way in which we choose to follow. If adults find themselves in a relationship with either an authoritarian leader or a leader with a more participative style, the reaction of the adult may be influenced by the way their authority figures – parents in particular – behaved and dealt with authority figures in the past.

Psychodynamically, we may react to a leader in either a dependent, a counter-dependent or an independent manner (Stech, 2004). We might become totally dependent on the leader for our livelihood and our emotional support. When we react in a counter-dependent way...
we react rebelliously, rejecting the directives of the leader. As an independent follower we look at the leader’s directive objectively, assessing whether or not it is reasonable and ethical, before choosing to act. It is this type of followership behaviour that responsible leaders actively try to encourage in their followers. Dealing with chronically dependent and counter-dependent followers presents two different sets of challenges that can prove to be gruelling and very painful to address for both parties.

In explaining why followers construct leaders in a dependent way, psychoanalytic theories of leadership point to two psychodynamic processes: projection and transference (Shamir, 2007). Projection is the process by which we attribute to another person our ideals, wishes, desires and fantasies. We see this tendency being demonstrated by diehard fans of pop stars, actors and models. Transference, on the other hand, is the process of responding to another person as if that person was one’s mother, father or another significant person from early childhood.

Psychoanalytic theories suggest that these processes are particularly salient during periods of crisis or threat. When people are confused, unsafe or helpless, followers can regress to early childhood patterns and behaviour. They become attached to leaders and idealize and obey them, not because of the leader’s special characteristics but because the leader symbolizes a father, a mother or some omnipotent figure. Citing Freud’s writings on leadership (Freud, 1921), George Goethals (2005) suggests that strong male leaders, such as George Washington, have the ability to reawaken unconscious archaic images of the powerful male (‘The Big Man’) who ruled despotically over primitive human societies. Taking up Darwin’s notion of the ‘primal horde’, Freud argued that the father or chief was a strong and independent figure who imposed his will on all other members of the group. Followers had the illusion that their leader loved each of them equally.

Drawing on accounts provided by undergraduate students of their experiences during a crucial meeting with the ‘supreme’ leaders of the organizations in which they worked during their six-month internships, Gabriel (1997) identifies four core fantasies about the leaders that emerge from their narratives: (1) the leader as someone who cares for his or her followers; (2) the leader as someone who is accessible; (3) the leader as someone who is omnipotent and omniscient; and (4) the leader who has a legitimate claim to lead others. Against the backdrop of a predominant culture of narcissism, narcissistic personalities, expressed most acutely during adolescence, ‘both claim to long for “strong leaders”, and yet are unwilling to accept authority for any period of time’ (1997: 339).

Leaders can also provide a means by which the followers can reduce their level of anxiety and provide them with a measure of psychological
safety. In order to meet these psychological needs followers, through the processes of transference or projection, will sometimes knowingly tolerate – sometimes prefer and even create – ‘toxic leaders’. Jean Lipman-Blumen notes that ‘toxic leaders manipulate their followers’ ordinary human needs and exploit their existential circumstances. They do this by creating illusions designed to allay the fears and address the human condition to which we all are heir’ (2007: 3). By the same token, Lynn Offerman (2004) alerts us to the various ways in which ‘toxic followers’ might similarly lead their leaders astray.

Cult leaders such as Charles Manson, Jim Jones and David Koresh are held up as infamous prime exemplars of this form of deleterious leadership, which Micha Popper likens to a process of mass hypnosis in which followers lose their self and the ability to reason autonomously (Popper, 2001). We can also see elements of this process in more conventional leader–follower relationships. Brad’s doctoral research, for example, examined why so many managers chose to follow such management gurus as Stephen Covey, Michael Hammer and Peter Senge. Lindholm (2002) extends this point to the general process of charismatic leadership, noting that if the charismatic leader is able to compel, then the follower must have a matching capacity for being compelled. We therefore need to consider what makes up the personality configuration of the follower, as well as that of the leader, if we are to understand charisma.

The psychodynamic approach to leadership is by no means a mainstream approach within the study of leadership. Leadership scholars share the same general discomfort and reticence about working with the unconscious mind that psychologists tend to have. Critics point to the approach’s origins in the clinical observation and treatment of people with serious difficulties, not those whom we tend to find in typical workplaces. The theory is also based on the subjective findings of clinical psychologists collected from individual case studies; it is not based on conventional scientific principles. In defence, Manfred Kets de Vries observes with typical irony, ‘it’s something of a paradox that, while at a conscious level we might deny the presence of unconscious processes, at the level of behaviour and action we live out such processes everyday all over the world’ (2006: 4).

On the positive side of the ledger, psychodynamic theory does encourage an analysis of the affective relationship between the leader and follower. It encourages us to look to our past to identify deeply ingrained and recurrent patterns that might undermine our ability to become a fully effective and responsible leader and follower. It also asks the awkward questions about leadership that might provoke discomfort but nonetheless should not be left unasked. Goethals (2005) approvingly
notes that it dares to suggest that perhaps people have a fundamental instinct to follow that is bolstered by a deep-seated ‘thirst for obedience’. Taking this idea further, Cluley posits that ‘the psychological distinction between leader and follower is an illusion, albeit a necessary illusion for the longevity of groups’ (2008: 210–11). It gives the reassuring impression to groups of followers that leaders are more individual than they are in reality. Perhaps, then, another reason for the spectacular growth in leadership studies that we discussed in Chapter 1 could be attributed to our collective need to identify with a leader who is above the group and separate from its social psychology, someone to look up to and to believe in? How should leaders respond? Drawing upon James McGregor Burns, Gabriel (1997) helpfully reminds us that a key task of the leaders, therefore, is to ‘make conscious what lies unconscious among followers’ (Burns, 1978: 40), using power to achieve the ultimate test of leadership – the realization of collective purpose is in unleashing real and intended change (Burns, 1978: 251).

The third and final theory that emphasizes the process by which followers construct leaders is called the social identity theory of leadership. It proposes that the extent to which a leader is either selected or accepted by a particular group will depend on how ‘prototypical’ (i.e. representative) she or he is to that group (Van Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003). Hogg defines prototypicality as ‘a fuzzy set of features that captures ingroup similarities and intergroup differences regarding beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and feelings’ (2005: 56).

It draws upon the popular saying that ‘like attracts like’. However, instead of the leader being attracted to a follower who shares a similar background and beliefs, and consequently brings a follower into his or her group, social identity theory highlights the reverse process, through which the leader is picked by followers or is chosen to be supported by followers precisely because he or she is most like them. When we talk about ‘like’ here, we mean how closely the leader represents the group’s characteristics as well as its aspirations, values and norms. In a sense, leadership identity construction is a process through which the leader identity and follower identity are claimed and granted by both parties on an iterative and repetitive basis.

Prototypicality is not the only basis for leadership, however. People also rely on general and more task-specific schemas or stereotypes of leadership behaviours which have been dubbed by Robert Lord and his colleagues as ‘leader categories’ or ‘leader schemas’ (Lord, 1985). These
will become particularly significant when we move our discussion on to the influence of culture on leadership in Chapter 4.

The importance of these stereotypes we hold about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour diminishes as group prototypicality becomes more important. That is, group membership becomes psychologically more salient. A group is psychologically salient if being part of it is important for someone as a basis for defining who they are, what they believe in, and how they function as an individual. This could be a gang, an Internet discussion group, a sports team, a fan club or a service club. While you might have a general view of what constitutes good or bad leadership, you will put up with leadership behaviour that is at odds with your ideals if belonging to the group is very important to you.

The way social identity theory is set up, the study of leadership begins with the group and not the leader. Assume you are observing a group of people, how does that group go about selecting and supporting an appropriate leader — nominal or otherwise? Social identity theorists suggest that this takes place in three broad phases (Hogg, 2005). First, a group member who is the most prototypical will appear to exercise influence over other group members. Second, because the most prototypical member is consensually liked by the group members (i.e. he or she is socially attractive), this will empower that person and enable him or her to influence other members. Eventually, that person will begin to be imbued with prestige and status. In the final phase of the process, group members begin to attribute the success of their leader to that person’s special personality and not because of their prototypicality. In this way a charismatic personality of the leader is constructed (Shamir, 2007).

By the same token, when the leader begins to fail to fully represent the group, to ‘sell out’ to other interests, what Krantz (2006) calls ‘virtuous betrayal’, followers might decide that this is due to personality defects of the leader. Consequently, they may decide to withdraw their support. In politics this is often the fate of populist leaders who come to power as a result of grassroots movements but, without the support of a political machine, lose the support of their original followers as they attempt to build a broader coalition of support with other groups in order to stand a chance of gaining or maintaining wider power. The spurned in-group may respond by selecting a leader who is more prototypical.

Social identity theory has been empirically tested in both laboratory and naturalistic field settings. For example, one laboratory study asked students to anticipate joining a group in order to discuss university resource allocation for undergraduate classes (Hogg et al., 2001). The salience of belonging to a particular group was manipulated in
such a way as to make membership seem more or less important to the students. Participants were informed that their group was to have either an ‘agentic/instrumental’ (i.e. male stereotypical) norm or a ‘communal/expressive’ (i.e. female stereotypical) norm for how the discussion was to be conducted within their groups. Participants were also told that a leader had been randomly appointed – they discovered that the leader was either a male or female. The study found that group salience would increase the perceived effectiveness of male leaders for those groups who had been assigned an agentic/instrumental norm and female leaders of groups with a communal/expressive norm. It would also reduce the perceived effectiveness of male leaders of groups with communal/expressive norms and female leaders of groups with agentic/instrumental norms. In other words, the study found that when dealing with matters that count, leadership effectiveness depends more heavily on the match of the leader to the group prototype.

Social identity theory can be helpful in making sense of a number of contemporary leadership issues. For example, research has shown that in Western societies, demographic minorities (e.g. women and ethnic minorities women) can find it difficult to attain top leadership positions because of what is widely described as a ‘glass ceiling’ (Stafsudd, 2004). As an aside, the glass ceiling has spawned a large number of problematic metaphors – brass ceiling, bamboo ceiling, concrete ceiling, glass closet and sticky floor to name a few – all of which could validly justify further research. If organizational prototypes (e.g. of speech, dress, attitude, interaction styles) are societally cast so that minorities do not match them well, then minorities are unlikely to be endorsed as leaders under conditions when organizational prototypicality is more important – that is when organizational identification and cohesion are high. This might arise under conditions of uncertainty, such as when a company is under threat from a competitor or a potential takeover. This is an unfortunate tendency for a number of reasons, not least because it is often the case that, when a company is in most in need of change, an outsider’s perspective is what is most needed to lead the company out of its difficulties.

Towards a general model

Each of these three follower-centric theories – the romance of leadership, and psychoanalytic and social identity theories – provides a useful insight into the process by which followers construct leadership. Boas Shamir suggests that if they are intertwined, we can begin to develop a
general model of the construction of leadership by followers. Beginning with the individual, drawing on a number of motivational theories, we need to understand that the follower has several unmet needs which a potential leader may or may not be able to fulfil. These are the need for clarity (e.g. what should we be doing? where are we going?), the need for meaning (e.g. what are we doing this for?) and the need for safety (e.g. will we be OK if we do this?).

Leaders are constructed in light of these unmet needs at the level of the individual and at the social level. Individuals construct leaders through the processes of attribution (e.g. they believe they are responsible for causing certain things); projection (e.g. attributing our ideals, wishes and desires to the leader), transference (e.g. responding to a leader as if they were a significant person from childhood) and idealization (e.g. they can do no wrong). At the societal level, leaders are constructed through the twin processes of social information processing and social contagion.

Based on these constructions, leaders are selected, supported and their influence is accepted. This is by no means a static process. Construction is work that is always in progress. Leaders are constantly being assessed and compared to other leaders, real or imagined. Likewise, as Mary Uhl-Bien and Rajnandini Pillai (2007) have intriguingly argued, followers and leaders also construct notions of followership. Followers either reinforce or refine their constructions as new information comes to light, via direct or indirect interaction, either with themselves or influential others who report on these interactions. Sometimes, when leaders are seen to fail in a major way, followers become so disenchanted and angry that they are forced to demolish their constructions and seek an alternative leader. Because most of these theories have been preoccupied with explicating how leaders are created, the processes by which leaders are deconstructed, or if you like ‘de-created’, are relatively unexplored.

Follower-centric theories have sought to turn a lot of the conventional leader-centric research that was discussed in Chapter 2 on its head. They have shown that there is indeed much to be gained by starting our study of leadership with the follower and not the leader. In this regard they have provided a much-needed correction and counterbalance to the dominant preoccupations of leadership scholars. In fact we might even go so far as to ask, given the influence that followers can exert over leaders, why we might not consider the possibility of followers acting as leaders. Indeed, why not get rid of the leader–follower dichotomy altogether? It is to this possibility that we now briefly turn.
followers as leaders: shared leadership

This approach is technically neither leader-centred nor follower-centred because it rejects the distinction between leaders and followers. Leadership is seen not as a role, but as a function or an activity that can be shared among members of a group or organization. Fundamentally, at the core of this approach is a belief that followers can and should be given their chance to lead, as it is not only the right thing to do but also the smartest thing to do. Traditional command-and-control, hierarchically-based organizations are seen as being no match for the flat, laterally-integrated network organizations in the context of a rapidly changing competitive global economy. People, as leaders or followers or whatever label one pins on them, are doing the flattening (Rost, 2008). Bligh (2011: 431) cites Visa founder Dee Hock as being emblematic in capturing the essence of this view when he remarks that ‘in the deepest sense, distinction between leaders and followers is meaningless. In every moment of life we are simultaneously leading and following’ (Hock, 1999: 72).

We can think of the various theories which advocate that followers should act as leaders along a continuum. At the more conservative end of the continuum is the notion of ‘co-leadership’, which recognizes that leadership is rarely the preserve of one individual but frequently is exercised by a pair of individuals, a ‘Number One’/‘Number Two’ combination such as a CEO and a CFO or a group of individuals such as a top management team (Alvarez and Svejenova, 2005). A good example of this type of leadership would be the triumvirate that collectively led Google.

Further along the continuum is ‘shared leadership’: the notion that the responsibility for guiding a group can rotate among its members, depending on the demands of the situation and the particular skills and resources required at that moment. Any member can lead the group for a certain period, during a key phase in a project, and then leadership can be passed on to someone else. For example, Joseph Raelin (2003: xi), in his book Creating Leaderful Organizations, argues with infectious passion that ‘in the twenty-first century organization, we need to establish communities where everyone shares the experience of serving as a leader, not sequentially, but concurrently and collectively’. The principal task of senior management in this kind of organizational milieu is to produce the environment and the climate where followers can feel genuinely empowered to lead within and beyond the organization.

Even further along the continuum is the notion of ‘distributed leadership’ in which the team leads its work collectively by creating norms
of behaviour, contribution and performance, and by supporting each other and maintaining the morale of the group (Day, Gronn and Salas, 2004; Gronn, 2002). This perspective complements, but does not replace, the perspective of leadership as an input to team processes and performance. However, a singularly zealous advocate of this approach, Jeffrey Nielsen, in his book *The Myth of Leadership*, ‘makes the case for the end of leadership as we commonly know it – that is, rank-based management – and introduces a method for developing an organization into a true society of peers. I call this model the peer-based organization’ (2004: x).

These theories tend to be more normative than descriptive. They talk about how things should be rather than how they necessarily are. However, case studies of exemplary practice are enthusiastically presented from companies as diverse as law firms, car manufacturers and IT service providers as evidence that shared and dispersed leadership are more than a gleam in the organizational theorist’s eye. Though still a rarity, these forms of leadership do exist and can succeed.

At the more radical end of the continuum is the notion that the term leadership might be profitably dropped as a useful means of understanding organizational behaviour. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b), for example, have shown through their empirical study of a research and development company that although senior and middle managers used the term ‘leadership’ freely to describe all manner of activities that were taking place within their organization, when pressed to expand upon and explain how leadership actually works, they were generally at a loss to do so. In light of this finding, and the general concerns they have about the inconsistency of definitions of leadership, coupled with our tendency to romanticize leadership, the authors concluded that perhaps we should seriously question the existence of leadership and, by association, followership as a distinct phenomenon. Instead we might probably be better to think of leadership as a hypothetical construct that has no empirical reality.

Because notions of shared and distributed leadership are attracting so much interest among leadership and organizational scholars as well as practitioners and consultants, we will devote a significant part of Chapter 5 to the topic. In that chapter we will also pick up on and expand upon the critically-oriented poststructuralist approaches to leadership that question many of the fundamental assumptions that leadership researchers have made about the existence of leadership as a distinct phenomenon. For now we want to close this chapter with an approach that recognizes the contributions of the follower-centric theories discussed above and seeks to integrate these with considerations of the
role of the leader in constructing leadership. Indeed, it sees leadership as something that is essentially co-produced by followers and leaders.

followers as co-producers of leadership

The idea that leadership is a relationship based on a mutual exchange between leaders and followers is not new. Hollander (1958), for example, suggested that leadership is a two-way influence and social exchange relationship between leaders and followers. Messick (2005) describes leadership as a mutually beneficial relationship predicated on psychological exchange, in which leaders ideally strive to provide their followers with the following: vision and direction, protection and security, achievement and effectiveness, inclusion and belongingness, and pride and self-respect. Inspired by reading Herman Hesse's novel *Journey to the East*, Robert Greenleaf (1977) has famously encapsulated the leader's ultimate obligation to her or his followers with the idea that leaders should strive to become 'servant leaders'. He is not alone here. Along with 'guardian leader' and 'righteous leader', servant leader is one of the hallmarks of Islamic leadership, and has been for 1400 years. In return, followers ideally provide servant-leaders with: focus and self-direction, gratitude and loyalty, commitment and effort, cooperation and sacrifice, and respect and obedience. Of course, it is very rare that all of these needs are either met or even required by both leaders and followers.

It is unusual for there to be an explicit contract between leaders and followers but there may well be some form of an implicit contract. While equilibrium is achieved between followers and leaders, leadership will be sustained. When it begins to become unbalanced, that is, leaders and followers are providing too little and/or taking too much, then the relationship ultimately has to be renegotiated. One of the most celebrated examples of leadership illustrates this principle in dramatic fashion. The leadership produced by Ernest Shackleton and the 28 crew members of the *Endurance* expedition, when their ship was crushed in the ice floes off the coast of Antarctica is held up by many as the apothecis of leadership and its lessons have been widely imparted through out boardrooms. At various points in the epic and perilous journey back to civilization, the leadership relationship became strained and occasionally challenged, but the numerous accounts of the voyage have shown how both Shackleton and his followers acted to preserve and strengthen the leadership relationship in the knowledge that this was vital to the survival of the group (Shackleton, 1999).

The best effort to date to model the co-production of leadership in a dynamic way is Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory which, based on
repeated empirical observation, argues that leader–follower relationships evolve through three distinct phases (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). At the initial 'stranger phase', interactions are largely formal, rule-bound and driven by self-interest rather than the good of the group. Some relationships never evolve from this stage. However, others may progress to a second phase, the 'acquaintance' phase – a testing phase in which the leader gives the follower the opportunity to take on more responsibility in return for inside information, and friendship and support. Assuming both the leader and the follower pass the test, the relationship becomes based more on mutual trust and respect and less on formal contractual obligations. At the final 'mature' phase, there is a high degree of reciprocity between leaders and followers; each affects and is affected by the other. Leaders and followers become tied together in productive ways that go well beyond the traditional hierarchically-defined work relationship towards a transformational leadership relationship.

LMX theory is intuitively appealing. Not only that, but research into LMX is proceeding with unrelenting vigour. Consistently for the past decade, in excess of 30 references appear each year in scholarly publications with LMX in the title. It accords with the experiences we have had both as follower and as leader. It brings into relief the fact that differences exist in the quality of relationships that leaders have with individual followers. There are times when we have really got on with a boss and there are times when we haven’t, and yet others seem to get on famously with that boss. It also issues a cautionary note in warning leaders of the dangers of being selective in whom they choose to favour as this fosters divisible in-groups and out-groups within the larger group. Leaders are therefore encouraged to cultivate high-quality exchanges with all of their followers, recognizing that ultimately it always ‘takes two to tango’.

Echoing the pioneering management thinker, Mary Parker Follett (1924), Keith Grint has noted that leaders can learn a lot about how to lead from their followers. He draws an intriguing parallel between the challenge of learning how to lead for the first time and the challenge of learning how to become a good parent, noting that ‘in both cases, and counter-intuitively, it is the junior that teach their superordinates how to lead’ (2005a: 104). In order to do this, open, honest and continual feedback is essential. Looking back on how we learned to become parents, we probably should have devoted more time and effort to trying to learn from our children instead of relying on more traditional sources, such as our parents, our friends or child-rearing books.

The parent–child metaphor, especially in light of our discussion of psychoanalytic theories of leadership, is potentially fraught with
complications, not least because of its implicitly paternalistic or mater-nalistic view of leadership, which all leadership scholars worth their salt are trying to rid the world of. However, we think it’s helpful here because it addresses the joint responsibility that leaders and followers have to open up lines of communication with each other. We need to create leadership relationships that are based on ‘constructive dissent’ rather than ‘destructive consent’ (Bratton, Grint and Nelson, 2004). This is a relationship in which followers are willing and capable of questioning and suggesting alternative courses of action in a way that does not undermine or personally attack the leader, and leaders are open and actively supportive of such efforts.

The movie, The Queen, provides a striking example of a highly celebrated moment when the roles between leader and followers were reversed. It is a fictional depiction of the behind-the-scenes turmoil within the Royal Family in the aftermath of Princess Diana’s death. The Queen is stoically determined to follow protocol and to mourn the death privately and not bow to her subjects’ desire, fanned by the media, for her to publicly acknowledge the death. In the end the Queen acquiesces, making a public statement via television and by ordering the Royal Ensign to be flown at half-mast above Buckingham Palace. In dramatically compelling fashion, we witness a liminal moment in which the followers are seen to lead the leader. A sub-plot in the film is, of course, the newly-elected Tony Blair’s role in influencing the Queen to change her stance in the interests of preserving the monarchy’s leadership in the longer term. One, of course, can’t help musing at the end of the film whether Tony Blair himself may have lost sight of the principle of follower-led leadership when he made the decision to take the United Kingdom into the war in Iraq.

Perhaps Tony Blair and other besieged leaders might have derived some form of comfort from the lessons that Keith Grint distils in his book, The Arts of Leadership (2001). On the surface, this book appears to be yet another conventional celebration of the heroic pursuits of well-known historical figures such as Horatio Nelson and Florence Nightingale, as well as business leaders Freddie Laker and Richard Branson. From these accounts, Grint provides evidence not of their cumulative successes but of the propensity regularly and routinely to fail and make mistakes. What distinguishes them from leaders whom we have long since forgotten is the preponderance of their followers to consistently support and cover up for them. He poignantly concludes, ‘the trick of the leader is to develop followers who privately resolve the problems leaders have caused or cannot resolve, but publicly deny their intervention’ (2001: 420).

To date we have developed a reasonably robust understanding of the different types of leader, but we still tend to treat followers as a
homogeneous entity. Collinson (2006) has noted that studies of leadership need to develop a broader and deeper understanding of followers’ identities and the complex ways in which these selves may interact with those of leaders. His poststructuralist approach to studying leadership highlights that followers’ identities may be more differentiated and contested within the workplace than is generally assumed. Collinson’s own empirical research has shown that leaders are often surprised by the unanticipated way followers react to their plans (Collinson, 2005a). Followers are smarter and more cunning than they tend to be given credit for, whether it is in the way they appear to support, conform or resist.

Followers can play an equally active role in co-creating and promoting either good or bad leadership. In accounting for destructive leadership, Padilla Hogan and Kaiser (2007) indicate the pre-requisite of the three points of a ‘toxic triangle’ of ‘destructive leaders, susceptible followers and conducive environments’. With respect to the ‘susceptible followers’ apex in this triangle, the authors distinguish between ‘conformers’, who comply with destructive leaders out of fear, and ‘colluders’, who actively participate in the destructive leader’s agenda. Both types are motivated by self-interest, but their concerns are different. The distinction between these two types of follower and their motives is graphically displayed week-in week-out in the TV Series *The Sopranos*, the revisionist contemporary mafia drama that makes the psychodynamic struggles of its central protagonist, Tony Soprana, a compelling feature of its drama. Those wishing to pursue this line of inquiry should look to the book, *The Leadership Tony Soprana on Management* (Schneider, 2004) (yes, it does exist!).

There is a well-worn saying that ‘we get the leaders we deserve’. This is a statement that infuriates many of those we lecture to as it runs counter to the prevailing leader-centric wisdom. We believe, however, that there is much to be said for this statement as it encourages everybody to take an interest in and play an active role in producing the highest form of leadership we can. The follower-centred perspectives of leadership are helpful in this regard because, as Shamir notes, they enable us to ‘reverse the lens’ of leadership; they encourage us, as followers, to look not only at leaders, but also at ourselves and others as followers. In reversing the lens, however, ‘it is important to examine not only how followers contribute to the construction of a leadership relationship, but also how they empower the leader and influence his or her behaviour and what is their contribution to determining the consequence of the leadership relationship’ (Shamir, 2007: xxi).

Education needs to play a central role in promoting follower-centred development. To this end, Dennis Tourish and his colleagues propose
that business schools should abandon their obsessive promises to produce transformational leaders and begin presenting an alternative and more realistic prospectus based on enlightened followership and the promotion of effective upward communication within organizations in order to create healthier and ethical organizations (Tourish, Craig and Amernic, 2010). What price a competing volume to this book entitled *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Followership* appearing within the next three years?!

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we surveyed wide-ranging work done by those who have been curious about that other generally unheralded group of people when it comes to leadership, namely the followers. We looked at various theories that have conceptualized followers to varying levels of significance, either as moderators or constructors, substitutes, or co-producers of leadership. This work has sought to provide a much needed counterbalance to the predominant lopsided focus on leaders held not only by academics but by the general populace. We believe that this work creates a more holistic and complete picture of how leadership works or fails. Given its youthful and partially formed nature, follower-centred perspectives also provide plenty of scope for producing fresh and exciting new research. Finally, and most importantly, it encourages us to reflect and actively think about what we might change in our much rehearsed role as followers to co-create better and higher forms of leadership.