

# What Followers Want from Their Leaders: An Analytical Perspectives

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LO QUE LOS SEGUIDORES ESPERAN DE SUS LÍDERES: UNA PERSPECTIVA ANALÍTICA

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## ABSTRACT

Many researchers and others interested in the field of leadership have written about the characteristics and styles of leadership; however, few have written about what followers want from their leaders. This paper addresses the issue of what followers desire in those they follow, it will assert that the basic characteristics followers want from their leaders are Honesty, Forward-Looking, Inspiring, and Competency. Also, followers want to trust in their leaders and they want leaders who care about them, which is shown in the leaders seeing the followers as partners. This paper also compares what international studies found about this leader-follower dynamic with a study made by *Colegio de Estudios Superiores de Administracion - CESA* where leaders were asked about the main characteristics of an organizational leader.

The analysis shows that followers want to commit to their leaders. They want to know that there is a relationship between them. As mentioned by Winston (2002), the relationship between leader and follower has to have the same commitment that exists between husband and wife.

In addition, this paper presents the conceptual framework of the analysis and the leadership models that fit more with what followers want from their leaders which are Transformational and Charismatic leadership.

**Key words:** followership, leadership, follower's wants.

# Lo que los seguidores esperan de sus líderes: Una perspectiva analítica

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## WHAT FOLLOWERS WANT FROM THEIR LEADERS: AN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

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### RESUMEN

Muchos investigadores y otros interesados en el campo del liderazgo han escrito acerca de las características y estilos de liderazgo; no obstante, pocos han tratado sobre aquello que los seguidores quieren de sus líderes. El presente artículo aborda esta cuestión y afirma que las características básicas que los seguidores quieren de sus líderes son: Honestidad, visión progresista, inspiración y competencia. Además, los seguidores quieren confiar en sus líderes y que estos se preocupen de ellos, aspecto que se evidencia cuando los líderes ven a sus seguidores como socios. El documento también compara los resultados de estudios internacionales sobre la dinámica de líderes y seguidores con un estudio adelantado por el Colegio de Estudios Superiores de Administración – CESA, en el que los líderes fueron preguntados sobre las principales características de un líder organizacional.

El análisis muestra que los seguidores quieren comprometerse con sus líderes y quieren saber que existe una relación mutua. Como lo mencionó Winston (2002), en una relación entre líder y seguidor estos deben tener el mismo compromiso que existe entre marido y mujer.

Adicionalmente, se presenta el marco conceptual del análisis y los modelos de liderazgo que encajan mejor con aquello que los seguidores quieren de sus líderes, a saber, los modelos de Liderazgo Transformacional y Carismático.

**Palabras claves:** seguidores, liderazgo, deseos de los seguidores.

## INTRODUCTION

Kouzes and Posner (1993) note that “Leadership is a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow” (p.35). According to Kouzes and Posner, becoming a follower is a decision. However, when people choose to follow, that decision is made with certain expectations. These expectations are based on what leaders are offering to the followers and how leaders can fulfill the needs and wants of the followers. Moreover, just as important as the needs of the followers are, so are their wants as essential in leadership.

Many authors have written about leadership, but few about followership. Many talk about what the needs of the followers are, but it is still difficult to find out what the followers want, what they are expecting from their leaders.

Abraham Zaleznik (1965) mentions that the leaders who know more about the motivations of their followers put themselves, their followers, and their organizations in a competitive advantage. It can be added that not only motivation is crucial but also understanding the wants of the followers. Today it is imperative to know what motivates followers, and a great way to accomplish this is understanding what followers want from their leaders.

This document and the findings mentioned in it are based on Lord’s leadership categorization theory (Lord, Foti and De Vader, 1984; lord Foti and Phillips, 1982; Lord and Maher, 1990, 1991). This theory explains that the effectiveness of a leader is determined in great part by the perceptions

of what others have about him or her. To determine what perceptions people have about the effective or admired leaders, Kouzes and Posner (1993, p.50) in 1987 presented a result of asking more than 1,500 managers what qualities they look for or admire in a leader they are willing to follow. Kouzes and Posner found (1993, p.52) that, “Honesty was selected more often than any other characteristic.” In their study, they discovered that out of 20 characteristics of admired leaders four scored particularly highly: Honesty, Forward-Looking, Inspiration, and Competency.

According to Kelley (1992, p.194), followers “want leaders who view them as partners in shaping the enterprise.” Followers do not want leaders who decide for them what they have to do; according to Kelley, exemplary followers want to be part of the shaping of the company.

One more characteristic that the followers want from their leaders is trust. According to *Conger, Kanungo, and Menon (2000)*, “followers are willing to be influenced by a leader based on the trust they have in the leader. Followers must trust leaders in order to let leaders lead them.”

“Transformational and Charismatic leadership are the models that can fulfill the followers expectations expressed by the studies of Kouzes and Posner and CESA.”

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Little has been written about what followers want from their leaders. One of the reasons why there is a lack of review on this topic is the negative connotations

that are associated with followership (Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson and Morris, 2006). This connotation is false. Mushonga and Torrance (2008, p. 185) mention that "Howell and Costley (2001) define followership as being: an interactive role individuals play that complements the leadership role and is equivalent to it in importance for achieving group and organizational performance." Followership completes and complements leadership.

On the other hand, the studies of leadership have been conducted and focused in developed countries. Not much has been done in the developing world. Colombia is one of those countries where little to nothing has been written about leadership or followership. According to Matviuk (2005) citing Romero (2004, p.25), "researchers 'do not know very much about the unique aspects of Latin American leadership.'" Also, Matviuk mentions that "research efforts have been focused on identifying dominant leadership styles and corresponding leadership traits." There are no profound studies on the leadership style of Colombians. Moreover, there are no studies about what Colombian followers want from their leaders. This document presents an introductory and reflexive analysis of what followers want from their leaders according to the study made by Kouzes and Posner interviewing more than 1,500 managers compared to what successful Colombian organizational leaders think are the main characteristics of a leader.

This analysis will provide understanding not only on what followers want from their leaders, but will also go beyond to determining the leadership models

used in Latin America. Consequently, anybody interested in this topic will have more information as to the expectations followers have about their leaders in Colombia.

Lord's leadership categorization theory (Lord, Foti and De Vader, 1984; lord Foti and Phillips, 1982; Lord and Maher, 1990, 1991) that was derived from cognitive theories of categorization (Rosch, 1978) explains that the effectiveness of a leader is determined in great part by the perceptions of what others have about him or her. This means that the leader's success "depends on the ability of leaders to embody their followers' expectations" (Haslam, 2004, p. 44). It follows then that those who can fulfill the expectations of the followers will be considered leaders. And, his or her effectiveness as a leader depends on how much he or she can fulfill those expectations. Hickman (1998, p. 345) proposes that "a leader earns influence [over his followers] by adjusting to the expectations of followers"

According to Berger, Wagner, & Zelditch (1985, p. 32) expectations are "self-other relational structures that organize behaviors among interactants." Matviuk (2005) explains this argument mentioning that "expectations involve people's anticipations and predictions of other's behaviors."

Matviuk (2005) citing Gudykunts & Kim (1997) summarize the research of Wagner, et al. stating that "behavioral expectations are a result of cultural factors such as social norms and communication rules that have been learned from an individual's childhood, experiences with

others, observations of individual's own behavior, the mass media, and in-group interactions."

### **The Kouzes and Posner and CESA studies**

Kouzes and Posner (1993, p. 48) started their study at the beginning of the 80's asking more than 1,500 managers the following question: "What values or personal characteristics do you look for in your leaders?" The answer to this question resulted in 225 values, characteristics and attitudes that they considered essential in leadership.

After that first study, Kouzes and Posner and a group of researchers divided those 225 values they found into 15 categories. Later, Kouzes and Posner created an instrument of study that included the main 20 items they found in their analysis of the results of the previous studies. To validate this study, in a research that took 8 years, Kouzes and Posner applied the instrument they developed to more than 1,500 managers asking them to choose among the 20 characteristics mentioned in the instrument the main seven characteristics that they look for or admire in somebody they were willing to follow. The result was the discovery of the four main characteristics: Honesty, forward-looking, inspiring, and competence. These four exceeded the other characteristics mentioned in the instrument.

During the first semester of 2008, the *Colegio de Estudios Superiores de Administración (CESA, p.2)* developed a research called *Investigación sobre los líderes empresariales de Colombia* that

translates as "Research on Colombian Business leaders." In the CESA study (p. 2) 252 presidents and managers of the biggest companies in Colombia were asked among other questions, to choose the main 5 characteristics of an organizational leader (p. 6); surprisingly the main four characteristics were that a leader must be ethical, must have strategic thinking, must have vision, and must be oriented to results. What this research project found is that the characteristics mentioned by this group of leaders in Colombia are very similar to what Kouzes and Posner found in their study.

### **DISCUSSION**

Comparing the study of Kouzes and Posner with the study developed by CESA, the two of them established that the first characteristic of a leader is honesty. Kouzes and Posner (1993, p.52) mention that, "Employees must know where they stand as they only can with someone who is honest with them." According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1992), "honesty implies truthfulness, fairness in dealing with others, and refusal to engage in fraud, deceit, or dissembling." Hackman and Johnson (2000) suggest that, "leaders are faced with a variety of moral and ethical dilemmas as they exercise influence over others." Followers do not want to follow a leader who is not honest with them or expresses honesty in every action he or she does. They just want an honest leader to follow. According to Ciulla, (1998, p. 80), "Honesty entails a set of specific practical and moral obligations and it is a necessary condition for empowerment."

Hasmal (2004, p. 44) citing Weber and Hollander's work mention that "the leadership categorization approach recognizes that leadership is something that followers confers on leaders rather than something leaders exhibit in the abstract." Basically, followers empower leaders and honesty is needed for a leader to be considered as a leader.

Even though the CESA study mentioned that the main characteristic of a leader is that he or she must be ethical, being ethical implies honesty. According to Gini (1998, p. 31), John Rawls mentions that the "study of ethics has to do with developing standards for judging the conduct of one party whose behavior affects another." Also, Gini (1998, p. 32) citing Norman Bowie, mentions that ethics "requires that an actor take into account the impact of his/her actions on others", Gini continues mentioning that ethics "requires that on occasion we 'ought to act' contrary to our own self-interest and that on occasion a person 'ought to' act actively on behalf of the interests of others." These concepts imply truthfulness and fairness in dealing with others, in other words, ethics implies honesty.

The other characteristic that appears in both studies even under different words is forward-looking, which is synonymous of the term visionary. A leader who exercises forward-looking is someone who is capable of carrying a vision, someone who can guide and have a sense of direction, a person who knows where to go. This is not just having a vision, but having a passion for the vision. According to Nanus (1998, p. 231), "as the main person setting

direction, the leader points the way." Nanus also mentions that the leader "champions a particular image of what is possible, desirable, and intended for the future of the enterprise."

According to Nanus vision creates a meaning for everyone in the organization, a worthwhile challenge, it energizes, and it creates a common identity. All these are motivator factors for followers. Not in vain followers want leaders who have a vision, who are forward-looking to provide to them the benefits of it. In other words, followers want meaning, a challenge, energy, and identity.

In the study made by CESA, vision is the third main characteristic of a leader, while in the study of Kouzes and Posner forward-looking is the second main characteristic of what followers want in a leader.

The third characteristic in the study of Kouzes and Posner is inspiring. This means transmitting the vision in a way so that followers will feel motivated to continue and achieve it. Inspiring is more than motivating, it is showing by example that the leader is ready to do whatever it takes to achieve the vision. There are two ways to inspire, with words and with deeds. Leaders have to exercise both. Followers want to see leaders practicing what they preach.

Inspiring is not one of the main characteristics found by the CESA study. Nevertheless, there are two characteristics that can be matched with inspiring. The first characteristic is passion which is in sixth place and according to Caballero, Carrera, Sanchez, Muñoz, and Blanco

(1993), emotion is a fountain of attitude. Passion is an emotion that can inspire others. The second characteristic is effective communication which is in eighth place. It can be said that these two characteristics in some way inspire followers, the passion of a leader is an inspiration, and knowing how to communicate the vision also inspire followers.

Finally, Kouzes and Posner (1993), argue about competence that “the universal expectation is that the person be able to get things done for the business unit. In this sense, having a winning track record is the surest way to be considered competent.” A leader can show competence when he knows about the issues he is taking care of. According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1992) and the Webster’s II Dictionary (1994), a competent person is somebody capable and sufficient to get things done. As Kouzes and Posner postulate, to be competent is to “be able to get things done for the business unit”, in other words, it is to be able to get results. Being a competent leader is to get the results the company is expecting to get from the leader.

The CESA study revealed that the fourth of the main characteristics of a leader is results’ orientation. This characteristic can be matched with competence because someone competent achieves results.

According to the above discussion, it can be said that the results of the study made by CESA concord very much with the results of the study made by Kouzes and Posner. Even though there are some differences in the questions utilized in

the two studies and in the terminology used to express the results, both studies conclude that ethics are very important not only from the followers’ point of view, but from the leader’s point of view also.

The study of Kouzes and Posner (1993) is very complete, nonetheless other researchers’ studies show that there are other important characteristics followers want from a leader. Even, Kouzes and Posner have written about other characteristics of a leader that are wanted by followers. Trust is one of them.

Unfortunately, trust is a word that is losing its meaning and it has to be explained every time it is presented. Kouzes and Posner (1993, p. 67) asked themselves how important is credibility in a leader. They say that we hear very often about leaders who have achieved success even though they lacked of credibility. Kouzes and Posner mention that credibility is very important in a leader. They say that although some people can succeed for a period of time being dishonest, credibility has positive effects over personal and organizational performance. Followers cannot trust a leader if the leader has not credibility.

For followers, trust is one of the values that motivate them to accomplish the mission. In their article, *Conger, Kanungo, and Menon (2000) mention* “The willingness of followers to be influenced by the charismatic leader is in part based upon their trust in the leader.” Also, they mention that, “followers trust is essential to goal accomplishment and, as such, to the long-term viability of the mission.” To be able to trust in their leaders is

essential for followers. Winston (2002) says, "Loyalty and devotion to task and company growth come out of trust. The knowledge of protection comes from the employment relationship. Employees, who know that the leader has their interests at heart, are willing to commit themselves to corporate tasks. This is the same condition that [Christian] Scripture says must exist between husband and wife." Based on trust, followers will follow their leaders and help them to accomplish the mission. Trust always involves relationship. It is interesting how Winston compares the trust between leaders and followers to the trust implied in a marriage relationship.

The importance of relationship between leader and follower is emphasized by several leadership researchers. Weymes (2003) in his article, Relationships not leadership sustain successful organizations, mentions, "The work of Kouzes and Posner (2000) suggests ... Credibility is the foundation of all leadership." When leaders are working to gain credibility, they must build the trust and confidence others look for in them. *Conger, Kanungo, and Menon (2000)* say, "Since the leader is seen as the primary source of the vision, he or she is attributed by followers as bringing meaning into their lives and as providing [followers] with goals that transcend their own limited existence ... and which permit them to achieve higher order rewards. This heightened sense of meaningfulness and reward is greatly satisfying for followers."

A practical way in which leaders can generate trust in their followers is by demonstrating sincere care for them. Weymes (2003) mentions that "The work

of Kouzes and Posner (2000) suggests ... Caring is the heart of leadership. When people work with leaders who care about them, and encourage their hearts, they feel better about themselves." *Conger, Kanungo, and Menon (2000)* echo these words noting that "specifically, leaders will be perceived as trustworthy when they advocate their position in a disinterested manner and demonstrate a concern for followers' needs rather than their own self-interest."

Followers want to know that the leader cares about them. Followers want to hear from leaders that they are interested in them as persons, not only as followers or employees. Leaders should take time to ask followers about their personal lives; their families, their health, etc.; by doing this they will show that they are trying to know them better. In return, according to the studies of Kouzes and Posner and other researchers, followers will improve their performance.

The last characteristic to be analyzed in this document as something that followers desire in their leaders is a sense of partnership. About feeling as a partner, Kelley (1998, p.201) mentions that, "leaders are partners who simply do different things than followers. But both add value and both contributions are necessary for success." Leaders and followers are needed in organizations, and Kelley asserts that they are equal in value but they perform different activities or roles. Kelley also mentions that partnership means sharing information, co-create the vision and mission, and share the risks and the rewards. Kelley also proposes that the leader must demonstrate the value he or she adds to followers' productivity and

create environments where exemplary followers can flourish.

Kouzes y Posner (2003, p.3) agree with Kelly in that the leader cannot create the vision by himself or herself, the leader needs to share a common vision with his or her followers. Leaders must look for the participation of the followers in the creation of the vision of the organization. This is a premise on participative leadership. Followers will not follow until they accept a vision as their own vision. Kouzes and Posner (2003, p. 3) add that leaders cannot ask for commitment, they can only inspire it.

All the characteristics mentioned up to this point are demonstrated in some leadership styles and are absent in others.

### **Leadership Models and their inclusion of what followers want**

Leaders should demonstrate concern for followers' needs, but not all leadership styles allow the leader to exercise this. According to Yukl (2002, p. 253) one of the leadership styles that allow and encourage leaders to demonstrate concern is transformational leadership, he notes that "with transformational leadership, the followers feel trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect toward the leader, and they are motivated to do more than they originally expected to do."

Bass and Avolio (1998, p.136) concord with Yukl mentioning that "transformational leadership is seen when leaders: [1] stimulate interest among colleagues and followers to view their work from new perspectives, [2] generate awareness of the mission or

vision of the team and organization, [3] develop colleagues and followers to higher levels of ability and potential, and [4] motivate colleagues and followers to look beyond their own interests toward those that will benefit the group." Transformational leadership articulates most of the characteristics that the followers want to see in their leaders.

Another model of leadership that can express most of the characteristics followers want in a leader is the Charismatic leadership. According to Yukl (2002, pp. 242-246), charismatic leadership articulates an appealing vision, inspires, appeals to share values, and also appeals to self-efficacy which is competency among other characteristics. Charismatic leadership can be a model to give followers what they want in their leaders. However, Yukl also warns that Charismatic leaders could be either positive or negative. Positive charismatic leaders give their followers what they want for the followers' sake and negative charismatic leaders only have their own interest in mind (2002).

According to Yukl (2002, p. 242) "trust appears to be an important component of charisma, and followers have more trust in a leader who seems less motivated by self-interest than by concern for followers." Trust is one of the additional characteristics followers want in their leaders, and charismatic leaders have it.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

According to Lord's leadership categorization theory, which was derived from cognitive theories of categorization (Rosch, 1978), effectiveness of a leader is determined in great part by the

perceptions of what others have about him or her (Lord, Foti & De Vader, 1984; lord, Foti & Phillips, 1982; Lord & Maher, 1990, 1991). This means that the leaders' success "depends on the ability of leaders to embody their followers' expectations" (Haslam, 2004, p. 44).

The results of the studies of Kouzes and Posner and *CESA* illustrate the expectations or perceptions followers and leaders have about an effective or admired leader. According to Kouzes and Posner, the main four characteristics of an admired leader are honesty, forward looking, inspiring, and competence. On the other hand, the four main characteristics of a Colombian effective leader according to the *CESA* study are ethics, strategic thinking, vision, and orientation to results. Depending on how much a leader fulfills these characteristics, the leader will be considered an effective leader (Haslam, 2004).

According to the results of the *CESA* study, an effective Colombian leader must be ethical, must think strategically, must be visionary, and must be oriented to results. Compared to leaders from other countries, it can be said that an effective Colombian leader can be also effective in other countries by making some adjustments. In other countries, mostly developed countries (Kouzes and Posner, 1993, p. 53), included in the four main characteristics of an admired leader is inspiring. By adding this characteristic, Colombian leaders can be effective leaders in developed countries.

Other characteristics that followers want in their leaders are trust, caring, and partnership. Followers must trust in their leaders to be able to follow them. Leaders have to develop credibility among their followers, and then followers can trust them. Also, followers are looking for leaders who care about them, who can forget about their own interests and show some care about the followers.

According to Kelly (1998), partnership means sharing information, co-create the vision and mission, and share the risks and the rewards. Kelley also proposes that the leader must demonstrate the value he or she adds to followers' productivity and create environments where exemplary followers can flourish.

Followers want environments where they can be productive, they want to participate in the creation of the organization's vision and mission, and they also want to share the risks and rewards of making decisions in the organization. As mentioned before, the effectiveness of a leader depends on how much the leader can fulfill the expectations of the followers.

The impact of the results of the present study can affect the way an effective leader is perceived. According to the results of the *CESA* study and the Kouzes and Posner study, the main characteristics of an effective leader are exposed. This can have a positive impact on how multinational companies are training their leaders when sending them to work in Colombia and how leaders of other countries relate to

Colombian leaders.

Even though the present article shows results of great impact, further analysis is needed to deeply understand what Colombian followers want from their leaders and to compare it to international studies.

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