



KIMBERLY YOST

COURAGEOUS COMPANIONS

FOLLOWERSHIP
IN DOCTOR WHO

EXPLORING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP
PRACTICES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

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EXPLORING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

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COURAGEOUS COMPANIONS

Followership in Doctor Who

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This book is dedicated to everyone who strives for the courage to laugh hard,
run fast, and be kind.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Yost writes about the intersection of popular culture and leadership to discover how popular culture influences our understanding of leaders and the practice of leadership. She is the author of *From Starship Captains to Galactic Rebels: Leaders in Science Fiction Television*, co-editor of *Leadership, Popular Culture, and Social Change* with Kristin M.S. Bezio, and contributed to various edited volumes, including *Gender, Media, and Organization: Mis(s)Representations of Women Leaders and Managers*, *Leadership, Populism, and Resistance*, *The Embodiment of Leadership*, *The Routledge Companion to Leadership*, and *The Sage Encyclopedia of Leadership Studies*. Dr Yost is an Assistant Professor at Pennsylvania Western University, California Campus, USA teaching management, organizational behavior, teamwork, and leadership courses.

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PREFACE

As a scholar who uses popular culture narratives – and particularly science fiction narratives – to explore concepts about leadership and organizations, I have always wanted to write about the *Doctor Who* series. While I'm not the ultimate Whovian, I enjoy the show very much. But for many years I just couldn't seem to find my way into the connection between The Doctor and leadership.

In the Fall of 2022, as I was preparing my syllabus for a class on teamwork and leadership, I had a moment of clarity when developing a module on followership. I had been thinking about the chronicles of The Doctor from the wrong perspective. I discovered the series is properly examined from the perspective of the Companions. The lessons to be learned come from Rose Tyler, Martha Jones, Donna Noble, Amy Pond, Rory Williams, Clara Oswald, Bill Potts, Yasmin Khan, Ryan Sinclair, River Song, Wilfred Mott, Harriet Jones, Captain Jack Harkness, The Osgoods, and so many more. Without the wisdom and strength of the Companions, The Doctor would inflict even greater chaos and vengeance across the universe. There would be no one to rein in the excesses or offer alternative solutions and crucial assistance. There would be no one to balance the wrath with compassion. There would be no one who could courageously stand up to The Doctor. Followership was the key to understanding *Doctor Who*.

While learning about leadership through popular culture is relatively commonplace now, I knew there would be a challenge in finding anyone who may be interested in the connection between followership and popular culture beyond the idea of the hero's sidekick. Happily, a colleague recommended *A Manager's Guide to Using the Force: Leadership Lessons from a Galaxy Far Far Away* by Michael J. Urick and I discovered Emerald Publishing's series on Exploring Effective Leadership Practices Through Popular Culture. I knew this could be a great vehicle to share my ideas and enthusiasm for the series and connect it to followership theory.

I am fortunate Michael Urick and Fiona Allison at Emerald Publishing agreed with me, and I hope you do, too. Enjoy!

Kimberly Yost
Spring 2023

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WHAT IS FOLLOWERSHIP AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Followership as a separate concept within leadership studies gained prominence in the 1990s and has evolved over the past few decades into an indispensable component of the discipline. Nevertheless, misunderstandings about followers and their relationship to leaders continue to flourish. Often when people think about followership, they consider the role of a follower as one of subservience or compliance and less significant or worthy than the role of a leader. There can be many other misconceptions, such as followers should strive to become leaders, followers are too cowardly to be leaders, and followers lack authority, dignity, or value (Hamlin, 2016). This is particularly true in the United States which has a cultural expectation of leaders being heroic individuals and followers passively carrying out orders or waiting for deliverance. But what we are learning is that followers are crucial for the success of leaders and their organizations. I endeavor to help you understand the critical role followers play in the process of leadership by examining followership through the popular BBC television series *Doctor Who* (1963–present).

But why *Doctor Who*?

Well, because it's much more fun to explore wonky academic theories and concepts through a television show, but it's also an opportunity to open our minds to the ways in which popular culture can influence how we think about followers and leaders. Works of fiction can have a wide audience and, in that way, become more influential than traditional academic research (Lewis et al., 2008). Moreover, popular culture narratives “shape and constitute our understanding of social and organizational life ... [and are] a powerful tool for illustrating topics and concepts and for demonstrating the application of theory” (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004, p. 708). In using an internationally known and beloved television series that has been produced for 60 years, we have an opportunity to explore these concepts and apply the theories by

means of the shared experience of watching the show regardless of the time or place we occupy.

There is an added value of using visual narratives to explore followers and leaders because of the human element. The relationship between followers and leaders can be messy. There can be misunderstandings, hurt feelings, frustrations, annoyance, anger, and fear. These emotional conditions are more aptly depicted through visual stories. Students may be familiar with analyzing a written case study about a real-world situation so they can apply it to the concepts or theories within a course. Rarely is there any mention of the dreadfully difficult interpersonal challenges the protagonists experienced in resolving their conflict or overcoming their obstacles. If these difficulties are included, unpleasant or awkward moments may be toned-down as the successful resolution of the organizational problem is known and interpersonal conflicts can be largely dismissed in favor of celebrating the accomplishments of those involved. People are hardly ever acrimonious toward each other in written case studies. As we know, history is written by the privileged victors and those who dissent or are bad-tempered are seldom given a part in the narrative.

In a long-form visual narrative, such as a television series, we get to witness unpleasant or awkward moments. We see how the followers and leader navigate the highs and lows of their relationship as they seek to resolve problems. The ways in which followers challenge their leaders are given voice. We become aware of how their relationship grows and changes, as well as the doubts and fear every follower and leader experiences. Our empathetic capacities and moral imagination are activated through the immediacy of viewing the visual narrative. Importantly, in these narratives there can be failure to achieve a goal, which increases our understanding of how followers and leaders cope with loss, disappointment, and defeat.

There is also an advantage to using narratives specifically in the science fiction genre for an exploration of followers and leaders. As Sontag (1976) correctly noted, science fiction stories aren't about science – they're about disasters. Aliens invade. Planets are whisked away to another part of the universe. There are rifts in the time-space continuum threatening all existence. Through these disasters, science fiction stories clearly demonstrate crisis management and adaptive leadership behaviors. While The Doctor may use science and technology to solve a problem, they use those tools because there's a crisis and impending disaster.

Additionally, Roberts (2007) explains, science fiction allows us to contemplate our own world more fully through the stories of the fantastic. Protagonists in science fiction stories role model positive social behaviors that may be lacking in the real world. In *Doctor Who*, we encounter differences among companions and other-worldly species and can be motivated to accept and celebrate differences in our own circumstances. We are shown injustices across space and time and relate the experiences of the persecuted and exploited to the injustice we see in our contemporary world and can be inspired to act against those injustices. We witness problem-solving in creative and innovative ways that can lead us to consider our own abilities to meet challenges with determination and imagination and seek novel solutions to the issues that face our organizations and societies.

Most importantly, science fiction narratives reconcile the tensions between our rational and spiritual selves. They are a projection of our fears and our desires for the future. Do we envision a dystopian society based on oppression and authoritarianism as seen in *The Handmaid's Tale*, or a cooperative, inclusive democratic society such as the Federation in *Star Trek*?

The competing values of rational decision-making through logic and hard data against spiritual self-actualization and duty of care for others drives the greatest challenges that confront leaders and followers. This can be exemplified with the dilemma facing organizational leaders when they look at their poor financial data and are pressured into cutting their workforce which competes with their organizational culture of valuing their employees and caring about their well-being. Or perhaps an organization is dedicated to sustainability and green technology, but their data show they are failing in their efforts, or the processes are too costly to maintain in the long term. The Ninth Doctor puts a weary angry voice to this dilemma when he says, "This is my life. It's not fun. It's not smart. It's just me standing up making decisions because nobody else will" (*World War Three*, 2005).

What choices can we make now to bring about the future we desire? How can we find the balance between rationality and spirituality and integrate both into our daily lives and decision-making? Indeed, I maintain the competing values of adhering to logic and rationality versus adhering to what is morally right and serves others is the primary dilemma The Doctor faces in the series and the area where the Companions are most effective as courageous followers.

DESCRIBING FOLLOWERSHIP

To adequately describe followership, we need to also describe leadership. As with misconceptions about followership, there are also misconceptions about leadership. Northouse (2019) defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals toward a common goal” (p. 5). Yukl (2006) defines leadership as “the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (p. 8). Most leadership theorists repeat the same key understanding that leadership is a process of exerting influence to reach a shared goal.

Keep in mind a process of influence takes effort over time and shouldn't be confused with the idea of just telling people what to do, nor involve a goal that only serves the leader's interests. It's also distinct from management in that leaders are tasked with developing a vision of the future – a projection of fears and desires that requires action and change – and gaining support for that change, while managers must deal with the day-to-day complexity of making the vision a reality (Kotter, 2001). Neither of the above definitions state a leader must be the boss, or male, or wealthy, or an extrovert, or any other misguided notion we may have about what constitutes a leader. The main consideration is for a leader to be able to hold some type of power that allows them to influence others toward achieving a goal.

The power to influence others can take several forms. What can be called “formal” or “legitimate” power stems from a leader having a title and the official authority to make decisions that affect others and their organizations or societies, such as a CEO, Archbishop, Prime Minister, Divisional Manager, or US Senator. Other power can be identified as “expert” or “referent”. An expert can influence others due to their knowledge or experience, such as a climatologist speaking about the dangers of global climate change or a professional footballer explaining defensive strategies. Someone who holds referent power has influence because people admire them or hold them in esteem and are willing to listen to their wisdom and opinions, such as a tribal elder or a social media personality. In organizations, leaders often emerge through expert or referent power though they may hold a lower status position in the hierarchy, such as a technical specialist or administrative assistant.

Even those who do not hold a formal position of power in an organization or social system can develop visions for changes and gain support for those changes through the exercise of expert or referent power. This is the history of social justice initiatives from women's suffrage to civil rights to climate justice. From British suffragette Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst to US civil rights leader Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr to Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, we have seen how those with expert or referent power are able to influence others by sharing their vision which advocates for social justice and speaks to the desires we have for the future and not the fears.

What has often been missing in the definition of leadership as a process is the role that followership plays. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) identify "leadership as a process that is co-created in social and relational interactions between people" (p. 83). In other words, leaders should not take on the function of leadership and insist they are solely responsible for identifying goals and implementing the process of influencing others, but understand their position is granted to them and the process of influence is shaped in tandem with their followers. There is a deference of authority and power given to leaders by followers, which can be taken back, whether they are in a formal position of power or are exercising expert or referent power. CEOs can be fired for not meeting the needs of shareholders. Politicians can be voted out for immoral or unethical behaviors. Social media influencers can lose their followers and their power in an instant by posting a socially or politically unacceptable tweet or TikTok video.

Leaders do require their followers to help them shape the leadership process. As Hamlin (2016) points out, followers are not the opposite of a leader, but complement the leader. Leaders must acknowledge their interdependent relationship with their followers and create opportunities for their followers in developing and implementing the leadership process of influence by employing the skills, qualities, and sensibilities followers possess. For leaders to be successful beyond the strictures of the hierarchy and compliant subordinates, followers must be willing to behave in ways that combine with the behaviors of leaders to create the leadership process and reach the desired objectives (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

This understanding gives us a foundation to identify that just as effective and successful leaders cannot singularly be defined by the place they inhabit in a hierarchy, neither can followers. Both roles are shaped by individual behaviors and the ways in which they interact in the process of achieving their

objectives. Effective followers may be subordinates on an organizational chart but behave in supportive and self-directed ways that blend with the leader's behaviors to reach shared goals more efficiently and successfully.

But not all followers behave in equal or similar manners. Just as contingency theory suggests leaders alter their leadership style to fit a specific circumstance or the needs of an individual follower (Fiedler, 1964), followers can change their behaviors according to their interest in reaching a goal or the stage of their relationship with their leader. The dyadic relationship between leaders and followers is essential for shaping the leadership process and can be regarded as phases of development.

In the mid-1970s, the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory described the way in which leaders can build their relationships with followers through using their influence, with and without authority, and categorized those relationships as being an in-group, where the interpersonal relationship is strong and followers are engaged, and the out-group, where the interpersonal relationship is weaker and followers give minimal effort (Dansereau et al., 1975). This theory has been further developed over the decades and is connected to levels of communication between leaders and followers, job satisfaction, follower empowerment, and positive organizational behaviors (Northouse, 2019).

In the 1990s, LMX research focused on how the theory can be used for leadership making, where a leader endeavors to build strong in-group relationships with all followers and attempts to break the stigma of being in an out-group, which helps to engage all followers and increase the successful achievement of organizational goals. As advanced by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), leadership making has three phases where the relationship between leaders and followers moves from Stranger to Acquaintance to Partner. In the Stranger Phase, the relationship is low quality where the focus is on self-interest and depends on following formal roles and abiding by organizational rules. It is similar to the previous concept of being in an out-group, but there is an implicit understanding that followers are not stuck in the out-group and are able to move away from this phase. In the Acquaintance Phase, the relationship between leader and follower improves as they begin to know each other a little more through testing a leader's willingness to develop the follower and a follower's interest in new challenges. If successful, the focus for each is a mix of self-interest but moving toward the needs of the organization. In the Partner Phase, the relationship has matured, and they

experience high-quality exchanges. This phase is characterized by mutual trust, respect, and reciprocal influence. Leaders and followers feel an obligation to each other, though their primary focus is on the interests of the organization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As seen through the three phases of relationship building in LMX theory, we begin to understand how interpersonal relationships grounded in the benefit of mutual influence and the knowledge that followers complement leaders connects to the ability of leaders and followers to co-construct the leadership process.

TYPES OF FOLLOWERS

In addition to describing the function of followers and their relationship to leaders, it's also important to describe the different types of followers. Just as leaders can reflect upon their strengths to shape their leadership style, followers engage in the same kinds of reflections to determine how they view themselves as followers and their followership style. "Different followers affect leaders in different ways" (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022, para. 9), and several theorists have developed typologies for the kinds of followers present in an organization. Notably, there is a common thread among the theories advocating for active, engaged, independent followers to give leaders and organizations the greatest advantage.

In 1965, Abraham Zaleznik described followers in terms of dominance/submission and active/passive. His thesis discussed followers as those who want to control their boss or be controlled by them, and those who want to participate or do nothing. He grouped followers into categories of impulsive, compulsive, masochistic, and withdrawn (Zaleznik, 1965). Clearly, his thinking is influenced by the psychologist Sigmund Freud, but his base argument of encouraging leaders to know deeply about their followers from a psychoanalytical viewpoint was a practical early theory for increasing an organization's competitive advantage.

In the early 1990s, Robert Kelley was at the vanguard of followership theory in the face of prevailing leader-centric thought for developing organizational capacities for competitive advantages. He identified five different types of followers based on their level of engagement and their inclination for independent critical thought. Kelley's description of follower styles was

alienated, sheep, yes-people, survivors, and exemplary followers. His basic argument was to encourage people to not follow blindly, but to use their critical thinking skills and examine their self-motivation skills to determine the behaviors and level of engagement they should demonstrate as followers (Kelley, 1992).

Barbara Kellerman (2007) uses the single attribute of a follower's level of engagement in developing her typology. Her categories include isolates, bystanders, participants, activists, and die hards. Kellerman (2007) recognizes that within our contemporary knowledge worker economy, followers view themselves "as free agents, not as dependent underlings" (p. 86). Followers are willing to support good leaders and withhold their support from bad leaders, furthering the understanding of leadership as a co-constructed process of influence. Leaders can quickly determine the potential for fostering a strong interpersonal relationship to advance organizational goals by identifying the level of engagement a follower exhibits (Kellerman, 2007).

The followership typology we are primarily concerned with in this book is that of Ira Chaleff (2009) and his considerations of courageous followers. Chaleff groups followers into four quadrants based on their support for the leader and how likely they are to challenge the leader. These quadrants are Resource, Individualist, Implementer, and Partner.

The fourth quadrant is for the Resource, who demonstrates low support and low challenge. These followers can be likened to isolates or alienated types, but they don't necessarily display overt negativity. They are present but do no more than the minimum expectations and try to avoid attention. There could be external reasons for their behavior, such as someone with increased family obligations or interests outside of work like community volunteerism or pursuing higher education. It's possible for this type of follower to re-engage and move to another quadrant when their other obligations or interests decrease (Chaleff, 2009).

The next type of follower per Chaleff (2009) is the Individualist. This follower gives low support to the leader and frequently challenges them. They can be described as confrontational and self-assured in their beliefs. While these people may balance the tendency of a group to fall into groupthink, where too much harmony or like-minded thinking can impair the decision-making process, they can be annoying and are often marginalized by the leader and fellow group members.