

The “Kelley Model of Followership”

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Introduction

Organizations often explain success through leadership while treating followers as passive recipients of direction. Robert Kelley’s model challenges that assumption. It argues that effective performance depends on people who can think independently, engage actively, and support a shared purpose without surrendering judgment. Leadership and followership are roles in a relationship, not permanent personality types. The same person may lead one project, follow another, and move between the roles during a single day. (Bjugstad et al., 2006; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014)

Kelley’s framework classifies followership according to two dimensions: the degree of independent critical thinking and the level of active engagement. Combining these dimensions produces five styles—alienated, conformist, passive, pragmatic survivor, and effective or exemplary follower. The model is useful because it gives leaders a language for understanding employee behavior. It is limited if managers use the labels to blame individuals while ignoring the environment that shaped their response. (Kelley, 1992)

Followership as an Organizational Role

Followership is the process through which people contribute to a leader, team, mission, or organization from a non-dominant role. It is not obedience by definition. A follower may possess more technical knowledge than the formal leader and may need to question a decision to protect the organization.

Good followership includes responsibility for one’s work, commitment to collective goals, courage to communicate problems, and willingness to act. It also includes understanding legitimate authority. Constant opposition is not critical thinking, and unexamined compliance is not loyalty.

The Two Dimensions of Kelley’s Model

Independent Critical Thinking

This dimension concerns how a person evaluates information and authority. Independent thinkers examine assumptions, identify risks, compare evidence, and develop their own judgment. Dependent thinkers wait for the leader’s interpretation or accept it without examination.

Critical thinking must remain constructive. It is not the habit of rejecting every proposal. An effective follower can disagree clearly, explain evidence, and support the final decision when it is ethical and lawful. The follower also recognizes when new information requires reopening the decision.

Active Engagement

Engagement concerns energy, initiative, and participation. Highly engaged followers take ownership, seek needed information, volunteer solutions, and persist through difficulty. Low-engagement followers perform minimally or wait to be directed.

Engagement can be affected by workload, health, role clarity, trust, fairness, and opportunity. A leader should not assume that low visible energy proves a permanent character flaw. Organizational conditions may have taught the employee that initiative is punished or ignored.

The Alienated Follower

Alienated followers show strong independent thinking but low or negative engagement. They may be intelligent, experienced, and capable of identifying flaws. Their contribution is weakened by cynicism, emotional withdrawal, or persistent opposition.

Alienation can arise after betrayal, blocked promotion, ignored warnings, ethical conflict, or repeated organizational failure. A leader who dismisses the person as simply “negative” may lose valuable knowledge. The appropriate response is to listen for legitimate concerns while setting expectations for respectful and solution-oriented behavior.

Re-engagement may require acknowledgement of past harm, a meaningful assignment, restored autonomy, or a change in role. It may also require accountability when criticism becomes sabotage or abuse.

The Conformist

Conformists are highly active but rely heavily on the leader’s thinking. They work hard, accept assignments, and demonstrate loyalty. Their willingness makes them appear ideal, particularly to leaders who prefer agreement.

The risk is that conformists may implement a bad decision efficiently. They may suppress contrary evidence, repeat the leader’s assumptions, and create groupthink. In safety, finance, medicine, and intelligence, enthusiastic compliance can be dangerous.

Leaders can develop conformists by asking for independent analysis before revealing their own view, assigning a devil’s advocate, and rewarding respectful challenge. The employee needs proof that

disagreement will not be interpreted as disloyalty.

The Passive Follower

Passive followers display low independent thinking and low engagement. They wait for instructions, avoid responsibility, and perform within narrow boundaries. Leaders often respond by increasing control, which can make passivity worse.

Passivity may result from inadequate skill, unclear expectations, fear, burnout, or a history of micromanagement. Diagnosis should precede judgment. A new employee may need training, while an experienced employee may need autonomy and a credible invitation to contribute.

Clear goals, smaller areas of ownership, coaching, feedback, and consequences can help. Some individuals may choose not to engage despite support, in which case performance management is appropriate.

The Pragmatic Survivor

The pragmatic survivor stays near the middle of both dimensions and adjusts behavior to the political environment. This person may support one initiative, remain quiet during another, and avoid taking a strong position until the likely winner becomes clear.

Pragmatism can be a rational response to unstable leadership, restructuring, or punishment of dissent. It preserves employment and flexibility. The weakness is that excessive caution prevents the organization from receiving honest commitment when it most needs it.

Leaders reduce survival behavior by applying rules consistently, explaining decisions, and protecting employees who raise evidence-based concerns. Trust develops when people can predict how authority will be used.

The Effective or Exemplary Follower

Effective followers combine independent critical thinking with active engagement. They understand the mission, manage themselves, build competence, and work beyond the minimum. They support leaders without becoming dependent on them.

Courage is central. An exemplary follower tells a leader when a plan is unsafe, unethical, or based on incomplete information. The challenge is to do this in a way that protects the mission rather than performs personal superiority. Timing, evidence, and respect matter.

Effective followers also accept responsibility after decisions. They do not use earlier disagreement as

an excuse for poor execution. If a decision remains lawful and ethical, they help implement it and monitor results. If it crosses a serious moral or legal boundary, they may need to refuse, escalate, or use protected reporting channels.

How Leaders Shape Followership

Kelley's categories describe behavior, but leadership influences which behavior becomes safe. A manager who humiliates questions will create silence. A leader who takes credit for initiative will reduce engagement. A leader who changes priorities without explanation encourages pragmatic survival.

Effective leaders communicate purpose, define decision rights, invite challenge, and explain what happened to employee input. They distinguish disagreement from insubordination. They also provide enough information for followers to think critically; secrecy and fragmented communication make independent judgment difficult.

Matching Leadership and Followership

The model can help leaders adapt. A passive follower may need structure and coaching. A conformist may need permission and practice in dissent. An alienated expert may need restored trust and boundaries. An exemplary follower needs autonomy, information, and access to meaningful decisions.

Adaptation should not become manipulation. The objective is not to make every follower easier to control. It is to develop the capacity for responsible contribution while preserving accountability and role clarity.

Followership and Ethical Responsibility

History shows the danger of treating orders as a complete moral defence. Employees and officials retain responsibility for actions they knowingly perform. Ethical followership requires attention to law, professional standards, human consequences, and organizational values.

At the same time, organizations should not demand heroic resistance to systems they designed badly. Whistleblowing can carry financial and psychological costs. Confidential reporting, anti-retaliation protection, independent investigation, and access to advice make ethical courage more realistic.

Diversity, Culture, and Power

What appears as "active engagement" may be judged through cultural expectations about speaking,

confidence, and hierarchy. An employee who reflects before speaking may contribute differently from someone who dominates meetings. Gender, race, disability, language, and employment status also affect whether behavior is interpreted as leadership, aggression, or passivity.

Managers should therefore use multiple forms of participation: written input, one-to-one discussion, structured rounds, anonymous reporting, and rotating facilitation. The model should illuminate behavior, not reinforce stereotypes.

Remote and Hybrid Followership

Distributed work changes the visibility of engagement. Employees may contribute through documents, analysis, and asynchronous problem solving rather than frequent speaking. Leaders who equate online presence with commitment may misclassify effective followers.

Remote teams need clear outcomes, accessible information, decision records, and deliberate opportunities for challenge. Followers need to communicate progress and risks without waiting for a formal meeting. Trust depends on reliability rather than surveillance.

Limits of the Kelley Model

The model simplifies behavior into two dimensions and five types. Real people move between styles across leaders, tasks, and periods of life. The categories can become self-fulfilling when a manager labels an employee and then interprets every action through that label.

The framework also gives limited attention to structural power. A follower may understand a problem but lack access, protection, or authority to act. Modern followership research therefore examines co-production of leadership, identity, resistance, and context in addition to individual style.

Developing Effective Followers

Development begins with hiring and promotion practices that value judgment as well as compliance. Orientation should explain the mission, ethical standards, and channels for raising concerns. Employees need technical competence because confidence without knowledge is not effective followership.

Leaders can use after-action reviews, pre-mortems, scenario discussions, and peer feedback to practice critical thinking. Assignments with real ownership build engagement. Recognition should reward prevention and honest reporting, not only visible success.

Conclusion

Kelley's model makes an important contribution by showing that followers are active participants in organizational success. Independent critical thinking and active engagement produce five recognizable styles, each with strengths, risks, and developmental needs.

The effective follower is neither obedient nor oppositional by default. This person thinks, acts, supports, challenges, and accepts responsibility. Leaders help create such followership by sharing information, protecting constructive dissent, and designing work that gives people meaningful ownership. Used carefully, the model supports development; used as a set of fixed labels, it can conceal the leadership and system failures that produce disengagement.

References

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