

## **The Influence of Followership Styles in Organizational Strategic Flexibility: A Theoretical Integration**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*What is the influence of followers in a firm that is challenged to adapt to serendipitous strategic market opportunities due to marketplace changes? What is the function of followers who are proxy to leadership during the process of strategic flexibility at all levels of the firm? This study presents a myopic integration of two theories—followership and strategic flexibility. This study integrates these theories, attempting to envelope the role of followership and follower styles to ascertain if the consequences of followership negatively or positively impact strategic flexibility. In doing so, several of the main arteries of the theory of followership are incorporated, and a microview of flexibility is developed as a crosscurrent. Four propositions are presented for further research in this ripe theoretical vineyard.*

**Keywords:** *Followership, Strategic flexibility, Strategic leadership, High velocity markets*

## INTRODUCTION

As a starting point, the understanding of followership in the context of organizational strategic flexibility has not reached a point of maturity, and much of the literature on followership has been silent (Johnson, Lee, Saini, & Grohmann, 2003). Given the immense amount of authorship on leadership, there tends to be a forgotten element that is vital to the firm—followership. Leadership that is effective has a positive impact on firm performance; this is an axiom in much of the management and leadership publications to date. Followership theory, however, is still, for the most part, in its infancy. This might be due to the amount of emphasis on follower behaviors because of leadership. Most of the leadership literature focus on leaders' characteristics and traits and not those of followers. This should come as no surprise, based on the natural focal point on the consequences of leadership influences on followers' behaviors and output, especially within the organizational context (Yukl & Becker 2006).

This paper theoretically examines the potential influence of followership behaviors impact on the strategic flexibility of the firm. Understanding followership during strategic flexibility is timely for firms in high velocity markets and industries. High velocity markets are known to have short product cycles, frequent entry of new rivals, changing customer expectations, and rapid technological changes. Uncertainty in the market economy, globalization, and intense competition for resources and consumers calls for the firm to innovate via collaboration and to exercise flexible methods of strategy making and execution (Kim, 2018).

Much of leadership and management theory implicitly assumes the role of followers as robotic, sheepish, and passive to the whims of leadership (Collinson, 2006). Plenty of attention has focused on enterprise flexibility, the entrepreneurial nature of the firm,

entrepreneurial leadership, innovation, strategic thinking, and so forth, but none have examined the role of followership behaviors or styles as a function in strategic flexibility. It seems as if there is an invisible hand guiding firm's valuable, imperfectly imitable, rare, and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991) creating a differentiated competitive advantage (Porter, 1985) and fueling an entrepreneurial spirit to create internal strategic flexibility that otherwise would not include the roles conducted by non-leaders.

The conceptual theories of strategic flexibility, management, and leadership effects are far from new (Johnson et al., 2003). It seems only fit to infuse the notion of strategic flexibility as a consequence of high velocity markets influence followership and behaviors of followers within the context of the firm. The emergent nature of high velocity markets intensifies the relationship of cooperation needed between leaders and followers because of the chaotic nature of change—strategic or otherwise. To a large extent, creative and imaginary ideas drive future strategic options that require a degree of collaborative thinking between followers and leaders (Bhardwaj & Momaya, 2006).

However, with an objective to add to theory, this paper explores the content in a dialectic fashion to uncover the possible concatenation between these two theories while setting up a number of propositions for future research. Rather than focusing on how leaders view followers' behaviors (Meindl, 1995) or how followers view their own behaviors (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007), this study questions if proxy followership behaviors influence the firm's ability to do things unintended from its projected course of market positioning. It is with urgent concern that an inquiry into the nature of followership and follower behaviors reconcile with those of the strategic actions of the firm, especially the change effects of the firm from a behavioral perspective (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to theoretically examine the interaction between followership in strategic flexibility. The secondary purpose is to ascertain to what degree does followership styles influence the three levels of strategic flexibility (i.e., organizational direction, organizational structure, and organizational operations).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The proceeding sections of this paper start with a brief and succinct literature review followed with a conceptual framework, discussion, and conclusion. This literature review serves to cull from the most salient literature in the area of strategic flexibility and followership—the most significant work in the management, strategy, and leadership categories of authorship. As a resultant of the literature review, there will be a basis to develop a new conceptualization of the consequence of followership as it relates to strategic flexibility, *pari passu*.

### **Followership Models and Styles**

Any given firm is likely to employ flexible individuals with the capabilities to pursue the tactics involved in strategic flexibility. Followership theory is one of the least observed areas reporting the dynamic relationship between leadership and followership capabilities or, for that matter, most of the topics related to management and organizational studies. Furthermore, many of the theorists in the followership vineyard have made small connections between followership and leadership and followers' behavior as a result of the relationship with other dispositions and the climate of the firm. However, outside of the relational aspect, no theorists have postulated followership's impact on variables at

the firm level of analysis—strategic flexibility. Since the firm is more populated with followers than leaders (Collinson, 2006), it is ever more important to view followership through a contemporary lens that illuminates and disambiguates the notion of followership from a docile and sheepish disposition to one of knowledge purveyors and collaborative dispositions. Within the often-complex relationships that exist between leadership and followers during organizational transition, change, and adaptation to market changes, it is followers who acts as the source of information to leadership, supporting a vital feedback loop (Oc & Bashshur, 2013). It is often thought that followers are a secondary factor in the dynamicism of organizational leadership in that they are seemingly the passive, weak performers, and order takers without a sense of commitment and purpose. In fact, there is some evidence that followership and leadership are tightly woven together.

Followers are highly effective in maintaining working relationships, providing to leadership constructive dissent, and playing the role of support in the various functions of the firm (Yukl & Becker, 2006). While change may be perceived as difficult and flexibility perceived as expedient yet inconvenient, flexibility and change differ in the sense that flexibility is a choice. A choice to act or a choice to not act in any given external business environment. The consequences of strategic choices influence future market responses and use of flexibility on the three Firm level of analysis (i.e., direction, structure, and operation).

One of the first mentions of followership in the management literature was by Abraham Zaleznik, who some time ago developed four follower types: impulsive subordinates, compulsive subordinates, masochistic subordinates, and withdrawn subordinates. Since that time, Kelley (1992) composed a set of followership styles: those who are alienated, exemplary, passive, conformist, or pragmatist. Kelley went on to structure the styles

into four quadrants of followers who are active, passive, dependent, or independent. In the same way, Chaleff (2003) pioneered four followership styles to add to the preexisting follower models: implementer, partner, individualist, and resource. Finally, Kellerman (2008) added five followership types: isolate, bystander, participant, activists, and the diehard. Thinking about the role of followership means the understanding the behaviors of followers and their interaction with leadership. Followership is just as varied as leadership. There are styles, types, and motives that would explain why followers' interactions and roles may differ from individual to individual.

### **Followership and Organizational Leadership**

The interaction between followers and leaders is characterized by a term called *activation*. Activation starts with an initiation and a response; these responses can take on many forms and assume various patterns. Followers are at the foundation individuals who hold different beliefs, attitudes to various degrees. Leaders are known to have a special role of *activating* the exchange between themselves and followers as roles change over time (Burns, 1978). In the same way, over time followers articulate their wants and needs, which can change with increasing and continuous interaction with leadership. Kelley (1992) was one of the leading theorists in the area of followership, advocating for theory and application of followership within organizational and political contexts. Two important outputs from a stream of followership behaviors are the styles in which followers' pattern. Kelly disambiguated the thinking of followers in two distinct ways: (a) Do they think for themselves? Are they independent critical thinkers? Or do they look to the leader to do the thinking for them?

Or (b) Are they actively engaged in creating positive energy for the organization? Or is there negative energy or passive involvement?

Gardner (1990) expressed that the follower–leader dynamic, depends on the time of crisis, prosperity, or recession, on the firm’s ability to connect leaders and followers to a core purpose. Not all leaders are effective and not all leaders can be most effective in every decision made. What are those skills and characteristics of followers in decision making that result in strategic flexibility? Malakyan (2014) contended that followers influence leaders, and leaders influence followers. Followers’ influence may take on a proxy or non-proxy function, but in any regard, followership does have a function in the speed and effectiveness of proxy decision-making with leadership and strategy development (Gross, 2019).

Kelley’s archetypes of followership behaviors have been found to be related to leadership, individual performance, work output, job satisfaction, morale, and proxy entrepreneurial decision-making (Agho, 2009; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). In fact, the leader and follower role at times are presumably interchangeable, because followers have to be leaders and simultaneously leaders play the roles of followers. If leadership and followership are conceptually disentangled from one another, this creates an environment of ineffective leadership. Agho’s study showed that the expectations of leaders and followers were different in terms of who sets the overall tone, who takes the initiative, and the flow of communication between follower and leader.

Bjugstad et al. (2006) expressed that leader’s effectiveness is dependent on the consent and observation of followers. Basically, without followers, there can be no leaders and vice-versa. The relationship between followership, leadership, and the firm should be interrelated—in part because of the nature of the dynamic market competitiveness that ensue in the business landscape. Competitors pose many threats to firm’s competitive advantages

that simultaneously changes the knowledge and information that alters a strategic direction and the attainment of unforeseen market opportunities. Additionally, the basic approach to the workplace necessitates flexibility to optimize the productivity to combat the implicit forces of competitiveness (Ali & Camp, 2018). The synergies between followership and leadership develop the entrepreneurial spirit, which shape the environment of the firm to embrace the unpredicted nature of individual spontaneous collaboration. The stronger the follower and leader dynamics, the more competitive a firm can be.

### **Strategic Flexibility**

In *Toward the Next Economies and Other Essays*, Peter Drucker (2010) expressed the essence of strategic flexibility by stating:

“But equally important, what technology is likely to become important and have an impact, and what technology either will fizzle out—like the “flying Model T”—or will have minimal social or economic impacts—like “automation”—is impossible to predict” (p 54).

Strategic flexibility as a resource capability of the firm, *nota bene*, is the application of resources to an immediate short-term notice that thus is contingent on adjustable follower behaviors as opposed to nonadjustable follower behaviors, regardless if circumstance require short-term or long-run flexibility.

Strategic flexibility is certainly not a one-dimensional aspect of the firm. Rather, it is multidimensional, dynamic, and has a unique function within the firm. Strategic flexibility is dynamic because it permeates through many areas of the firm, some of which relate to strategy and innovation (Combe, Rajala, Westerlund, & Möller, 2012; Ghorban & Gholipour, 2018),

technology (Zhou & Wu, 2010), product output (Sanchez, 1995), competition, organizational capabilities (Kortmann, Gelhard, Zimmermann, & Piller, 2014), competitive advantage (Porter, 1985), and reversing ineffective decision making (Shimizu & Hitt, 2004). Flexibility is the exercise of the freedom of choice on the tactical continuum to synthesize the dynamic interplay between the use of resource and emerging opportunities executed in an innovative manner, with minimum time and efforts. That is, strategic flexibility is basically the ability to do something other than originally intended. In another sense, strategic flexibility is when a firm is able to adjust its objectives and use its acquired knowledge and capabilities toward a new emerging set of market objectives in the face of change. In the same vein, Volberda (1996) pointed to the fact that flexibility is the degree to which management has capabilities and can expeditiously activate them in the face of uncertainty. This leads to a primary research question. What, if any, is the role of followership in strategic flexibility, and the aspects of followership that enable or disable strategic flexibility within the firm? Promoting flexibility requires followers to be open for learning, creativity, and risk-taking to successfully adapt to emerging situations in the long term (Nanus, 1989).

Generally, there are three various forms of strategies a firm can assume at any one time. It is not uncommon for firms to employ different types and forms of strategies simultaneously. To determine which strategy is employed, requires the observer not to *hear* what is formally stated but to also *see* what is being done; not to examine the immediate effects of strategic position but to consider the long-term consequences on the overall activities and directions of the firm is paramount in strategic flexibility. Observations at the firm level that causes a need for change in strategy are related to the change of leadership, shifts in consumer

taste and value scales, internal performance gaps, or invisible external forces. These factors can elicit a need to change to a flexible strategic trajectory. To switch between strategies due to emerging imperatives requires a change in orientation in light of the environmental and internal circumstances and internal responses to these external stimuli (Blumentritt & Danis, 2006). Strategic management behaviors are critical to the development of and use of competitive capabilities (Schepers et al., 2005) that influence strategic choice. These behaviors (i.e., followership and leadership) capabilities and *improvisational* activities aid in strategic flexibility (Blumentritt & Danis, 2006). In many ways, Sushil (2001) is one of the major forerunners in the flexibility domain. Sushil expressed that flexibility is comprised of the following dimensions: adaptiveness, openness, responsiveness, change, freedom, agility, reliance, and customization. Generally speaking, there are six forms of flexibility: internal, external, organizational, strategic, marketing, and financial (Brozovic, 2018). Tactical execution in unrecognized complex, unarranged, and unplanned environments require strategic foresight and strategic thinking about a given reference point as a target. Gerwin (1993) agreed with Wadhwa and Rao (2002) by suggesting there are many theoretical gaps in the concept of strategic flexibility. Strategic flexibility is a multidimensional construct defined as “the ability of the firms to respond and successively adapt to environmental change” (Combe & Greenley, 2004, p. 1458). Das (1995) described strategic flexibility as the capabilities of an organization to respond to market changes in the business landscape in a timely manner to combat competitive forces in the marketplace. These definitions of strategic flexibility speak of flexibility without reference to the strategists themselves and follower types, almost as a nonfactor in strategic flexibility.

Wadhwa and Bhagwat (1998) explained that flexibility is not without a cost, because any change in resource allocation from what perhaps is operating at an optimum level to a new critical path may cause those same resources to no longer work at optimal levels. Firm flexibility is a dynamic process and is pervasive in the sense that it necessitates action in areas that can increase followers influence based on strategic effects on the firm market position. If leadership ceases to influence the flow of flexibility, mechanisms set in place will inherently decrease firm flexibility. Flexibility in every sense requires leadership in some aspect to influence response to first-order or second-order change developments and market uncertainties (Bran & Udrea, 2016). However, not all types of followers are suited for strategic flexibility and change. For example, one type of follower standing ready to accomplish a particular type of strategic action while another may not be ready to act. These differences in follower types and readiness is based on the description of the individual follower type e.g., styles of alienated, exemplary, passive, conformist, or pragmatist or styles of implementer, partner, individualist, and resource.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **The Entrepreneurial Follower and Strategic Flexibility**

Can entrepreneurial followers embody the entrepreneurial spirit that is needed to guide strategic flexibility? Many theorists have examined, tested, and hypothesized various aspects of entrepreneurial traits, the entrepreneurial leader, and corporate innovation and strategic entrepreneurial behaviors (Tseng & Tseng, 2019). Here is an attempt to connect the follower's entrepreneurial spirit as multiplier that affects the firm's strategic

flexibility, because it has yet to be discussed, measured, or even acknowledged in the extant literature as a strategic phenomenon. In the spirit of identifying the follower's role in the entrepreneurial spirit, we are mostly concerned with how followers might be more entrepreneurial than other nonentrepreneurial followers based on Kelley (1992), Chaleff (2003), and Kellerman (2008) conceptualizations of followers' styles. As such, numerous research articles have used the term *entrepreneurial spirit* without explication of the domains in which it is comprised. Internal entrepreneurship (i.e., corporate entrepreneurship) can be explained in four dimensions: new business venturing, innovations, self-renewal, and proactiveness (Bhardwaj & Momaya, 2006). Each of the corporate entrepreneurship dimensions implicitly involve the behaviors of followers and leader's interaction in an effort to accomplish entrepreneurial goals.

Leadership increases flexibility through follower empowerment, being unafraid of change, feeling responsible for work tasks, speedy response, open and honest culture, positive determined attitude, sharing values, and by continuously improving the level of customer first orientation. That is, a value framework exists between leaders and followers that must be congruent, because shared values positively impact workplace commitment and job satisfaction (Krishnan, 2003), which relate to positive impact on workplace roles and responsibilities and determines leadership influence strategies (Schepers, Wetzels, & de Ruyter, 2005).

### **Entrepreneurial Followership**

The very idea that leadership has a role as actor and as an entrepreneurial function in a market system has been proclaimed as one of the most important of any human action that can be applied in market phenomenon. Entrepreneurial leaders are, for

the most part, known to be a major performance enhancer and innovator within any given firm. The main differences between individuals are those who cannot act in the marketplace due to their inability to adjust either swiftly or flexibly to maneuver through competitive conditions in the marketplace (Salerno, 2008).

In this sense, both the entrepreneurial follower assumes a great deal of risk of capital employed to change conditions not only for one's own sake but for the sake of the satisfaction and desires of their customers and collaborators. What is dynamic here is that both entrepreneurial followers and entrepreneurial leaders seek ways to act in the market that reflect their purpose, skills, creativity, and ability to recombine resources based on external opportunities. How does entrepreneurial leadership, as a concept, work in practice with various follower types? How do these skills and market phenomenon guide a firm through strategic flexibility? This can be partially explained with three categories of entrepreneurial followers, which can be described as either heterodox, orthodox, or unorthodox based on the mode of flexibility and level of empowerment and proxy decision-making and interpretation of leadership vision and tasks in complex environments.

Three suppositions explain how the entrepreneurial spirit relates to strategic flexibility. First, the entrepreneurial spirit diffuses knowledge among the entrepreneurial group (i.e., the synergy of the entrepreneurial spirit converts from pockets of knowledge to open source knowledge). Second, proxy followers are vital to the production of entrepreneurial endeavors; they are critical to the innovative climate and they approach situations in various styles. Third, entrepreneurial followers add to the vitality (Kappel, 1960) of a firm and keep the firm supple, because, most of the time, they are *close to the action* and can implement ideas and collect data from stem to stern. That is, the spirit of innovation

(Srivastava, Sultan & Chashti (2017) and the requisite competence require changes related to the direction and differentiation of the firm, which derives from the firm's knowledge base and previous decision-making processes. These decisions are made with leadership on entrepreneurial goals and unknown market forces. Strategic flexibility is motivated by the entrepreneurial spirit between strategic followers and strategic leadership that creates a coiling and recoiling process (i.e., flexibility) between entrepreneurial strategic activities that are often directed toward unknown market options.

## **DISCUSSION**

There are several paths that future research can examine the propositions outlined in this paper. Other things being equal, there are other effects that are worth looking into. How do followership styles fit into the corporate entrepreneurship dimensions? Are there particular capabilities that inspire effective followership? Is there a followership model to explain at the deeper level a few dimensions related to competitive advantages to the firm? Mintzberg (1989) suggested that firms must merge together experts from different backgrounds and disciplines to gain effectiveness toward organizational goals. This statement is reassuring in that followership, within the context of team configurations, needs to be explored and understood relative to team goals and objective orientations yet at the individual level of analysis.

## CONCLUSION

The primary motivation of this theoretical study was to cull the relevant literature to add to theory and integrate followership with the actions and activities of strategic flexibility within high velocity markets. The following propositions emerged from a vast amount of literature and are presented:

**P<sup>1</sup>:** Followership styles (orthodox, heterodox, unorthodox, entrepreneurial) will either enable or disable strategic flexibility?

**P<sup>2</sup>:** Followership styles will positively or negatively impact the three levels of strategic flexibility (i.e., strategic direction, organizational structure, and organizational operations).

**P<sup>3</sup>:** Strategic flexibility is a positive consequence of entrepreneurial followers in high velocity markets.

**P<sup>4</sup>:** Followership styles are positively related with competitive advantages in high velocity markets.

Firms pursuing unintended strategic options, it requires that both leaders and followers engage in an entrepreneurial spirit, which reinvigorates the firm's defining paths or choice of path imitation (Chandler, 2001). Emerging or unintended strategic options require capabilities that both followers and leaders possess, which leads to innovative pursuits and changes in a firm's operating, structure, and strategy. Strategic followership behaviors are likely to be aligned with innovative approaches to

challenges firms face. For example, designing on demand new work-related goals to pursue client goals and market position, and supporting functional demands, and the subsequent recoiling that gets the firm's core capabilities back to its original position at any given time. On the other hand, there are followership behaviors that may not be conducive to strategic flexibility and what flexibility entails. Determining the followership behaviors and/or particular follower style should be the focus of future research, which is vital to understanding the operational and tactical nature of entrepreneurial followers in highly competitive markets, where competitive advantages and knowledge acquisition are paramount to firm's success.

Follower styles need to be explored more deeply and steeped in the strategic management and leadership literature as has been attempted in this brief study. Is the follower and leader dynamic, when properly linked, able to create the environment of organizational strategic flexibility at all levels of the firm? The entrepreneurial spirit is the underlying force that supports strategic flexibility (i.e., both tactical and operational) as a result of entrepreneurial followership. But there is more to ascertain relating to the mechanics of followership and the alignment between entrepreneurial followership and the willingness or unwillingness to change roles, job duties, or projects; join a different team; share knowledge; expert functional dexterity; and increase functional plasticity in competitive high velocity markets. More needs to be elucidated as to the categories of entrepreneurial followers' styles that can be categorized as either heterodox, orthodox, or unorthodox. These are questions not intended to be quixotic but applicable for firms that find inertia in the followership ranks that might otherwise negatively impact strategic flexibility.

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