

Follow the Leader:

Leadership in businesses tends to focus greatly on the performance and role of the individual leader with a lot of emphasis on developing employees' skills in this area. Clearly, leadership is not confined to those candidates at the top of the corporate tree but is an important component in the armoury of any manager throughout the business structure. Leading project teams, driving forward new initiatives, making change happen, pushing forward different ideas or ways of operating all require some form of leadership in order to help businesses progress.

But how important is the individual leader themselves in this whole agenda? Certainly, Meredith Belbin back in the late 1980s recognised the importance in having a mix of skills and working styles to create optimum team performance and rather than relying on one charismatic individual to effect positive change and improved performance, identifying and selecting teams with complementary skills became the way forward.

However, thinking on a more granular level, how do new ideas start to see the light of day in organisations, how do projects move to the next stage, how does change begin to happen in businesses? Is it all down to the mercurial individual responsible for the new ground breaking idea, or indeed the action oriented leader of change, for example?

When you think about it, it is not actually the Leader, per se, who is the most important component in any form of change or innovation happening in businesses. Sure, you need individuals with new ideas, with vision, with the guts to challenge the status quo. In truth, in order to make lasting change or create initiatives that are sustainable and endure longer than the tenure of the leader who originally started the ball rolling, there is another important individual required in the mix, and that is the First Follower. This is the individual who recognises a good idea, becomes the first to offer support to the originator in meetings and effectively helps recruit others to the cause. Without these individuals many good ideas would get lost in meeting mayhem and struggle to get a fair hearing.

So, think about it: if you are looking to make change of any sort in your organisation, or you feel you are likely to struggle to capture your fair share of colleagues' hearts and minds when sponsoring a new initiative, then consider who you could encourage to become your first (and second) followers. Pre sell your ideas outside of more public business forums, persuade and influence others in advance, to optimise your chances of success.

On the other hand, you may just get to where you want to go by becoming a first follower yourself, supporting and giving life to someone else's vision. Look around the business for individuals with similar corporate aims and see where you could positively exert the most influence and help someone to drive their initiative to the next stage. First followers can be powerful. First followers can create Leaders.

(Glenn Steward is a professional business coach and Director of The Trading Edge Co. and author of the Ebook 16 Rules for Jobseekers)