

## Followership Crises: The Role of Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Leadership Management

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*Abstract— The study explores the critical issues surrounding followership crises in Africa, focusing on the roles of forgiveness and reconciliation in enhancing leadership management. Leadership crisis is a critical issue that faced the African society and the dearth of effective leadership across different sphere of influence has been described as the pivot of African economic, political and religious misery. Leadership and followership are inseparable concepts which significantly influence organizational, social, economic, political and religious success. The relationship that subsists between leadership and followership is bedeviled with betrayal, pain, disloyalty and trust issues, backstabbing, among others. The wide gap in trust issues between leadership and followership demands forgiveness and reconciliation between followership and leadership in restoring leadership effectiveness in organizations. The problem addressed in this paper is the prevalent crisis of followership characterized by apathy, disillusionment, and a lack of accountability among followers, which undermines leadership effectiveness and organizational success. The significance of this research lies in its potential to illuminate the often-overlooked dynamics of followership and its impact on leadership outcomes. By examining the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation, the study aims to provide insights into how these elements can foster a more collaborative and productive leader-follower relationship, thereby enhancing organizational resilience during crises. The study adopts qualitative method in analyzing literature and the nuances around leadership and followership. The study posits that addressing followership crises through forgiveness and reconciliation can significantly improve leadership management in Africa.*

**Keywords:** Leadership; Reconciliation; Forgiveness; Followership.

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## INTRODUCTION

The followership-leadership discourse is a recent development (Greyvenstein and Cilliers, 2012). In contemporary society, leadership is arguably one of the most publicized subjects. At the same time, there is ambiguity and variation in the definition, interpretation, and description of the qualities of leadership. It appears that leadership and the nature of the interaction between the two are given more attention in the literature than followership. In addition to providing chances for leaders to be viewed as larger-than-life figures in organizations, this uncertainty may also help to explain some of the anxiety that exists in the leadership area.

The popular maxim goes that “it takes two to tangle” is very applicable to the concept of leadership in a given society. This is based on the fact that without followers, there won’t be a need for leaders. As such, leadership makes meaning only when there are people to lead, implying the followers. Followership is a vital part of a society as they are usually the majority in any structured firm, society or organization. Relatively less emphasis is placed on followership as the means of achieving an organization or societal objective (Meindl & Shamir, 2007). The “forgotten follower” is the term used by Yun, Cox, and Sims (2006) to describe this phenomenon. The study by the trio was to use systems psychodynamics to explain followership's experiences with organizational leadership, which actually addresses the vitality of followership in the “equation” of leadership.

The gap discovered in the emphasis on leadership rather than having a fair share on emphasizing followership is a serious call to attention with the varying catastrophes that persist in many societies today. Bad followers eventually become bad leaders, as such, bad leaders do not become bad when they emerge as leaders, there is the higher tendency that they were bad as followers and only translated their identity when they became leaders. Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century society has therefore been made to function under maximum pressure (Botha, 2009) with little or no sense of dutifulness to communal growth by the followers.

Coming to this understanding about the current status quo of the modern society, it is expedient to establish that many followers have been sidelined, hurt and angry at the leaders in town and as such, making various moves towards vengeance, lack of cooperation among other anti-communal factors. It therefore becomes expedient in the course of this paper to explore the vitality and role of forgiveness and reconciliation in the management of leadership with emphasis on the followers’ perception in the experience.

## LEADERSHIP IN PERSPECTIVE

According to its vast body of literature, leadership is generally understood to be the act of voluntarily involving, influencing, coordinating, and guiding people's organizational activities to achieve favourable goals and outcomes for the organization based on strategy, challenges, and objectives (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Nohria & Khurana, 2010). Setting and expressing direction, coordinating important stakeholders, cultivating an executive temperament, and establishing and upholding these ideals are all ways that leaders accomplish this (McCall, 2010).

Leadership is broken down into two categories: people management and task management (Blake and McCanse, 1995). According to Lowman (2002) and Nohria & Khurana (2010), this study concentrated on the leadership task of people management, which is defined as how a leader includes, communicates, and treats followers in a way that makes them feel valued and respected and by providing them with opportunities to grow both personally and in their task role. In this light, leadership are to take into cognizance the importance of followers in their exploits as leaders thereby having in mind that the management of the people is an essential duty and task that should be properly handled.

The demands of change, diversity, conflict, chaos, competitiveness, paradox, and little resources have made people management more difficult in the workplace of the twenty-first century (Meyer & Boninelli, 2007). According to Nohria and Khurana (2010), this situation suggests that leaders must establish themselves in matrix systems, transition between several leadership philosophies and styles, manage intricate and varied interpersonal interactions, and cope with an organization's ever-evolving identity.

Leadership is evident in many aspects of human activity and is thought to be relevant to all types of vocations in life. Given this, several leadership authors, such as Kallestad and Bran (2005), and Olasupo (2010), assert that leadership is evident in all workplaces since it is essentially necessary in all human organizations. This implies the fact that the concept of leadership resounds and is needed by all people in any society, as this may be directly or indirectly defined as being led. But the fact remains that a form of leadership exists in the process. It could thus be said that, if a leadership is performing excellently, then it would be a successful administration.

A more collective concept of leadership arises out of a review by Yuki (2002), according to him: "Most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person (or group) over other people to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organization." In a nut shell, leadership is a complex phenomenon that touches on much other important organizational, social and personal process. Jemiriye (2004) in a rational expression in regards to leadership, expressing that leadership is of having influence and impact on others stated that, The art of regulating human nature, whether

it be physical, religious, or otherwise, is known as leadership. The ability to guide, inspire, and encourage others is what it means to be a leader. It is the art of shaping, adjusting, influencing, or directing human conduct toward predetermined or intended objectives. Therefore, in order to gain the trust, respect, and submission of the people, leadership demands compliance from the followers.

Broadly, it could be posited that leadership is salient in a society and it is essential to have insightful leaders for a society to take its right shape and to be sustained. The failure of leadership is a failure of the entire community or organization and this is why the choice of leaders matters a lot at points of committing leadership tasks to the hands of people. The role of leaders cannot be meaningful in the absence of followers thereby rating the vitality of followers in an organization or society; as such, the vitality of followers is engaged shortly in the next session of discourse in this paper.

### **VITALITY OF FOLLOWERSHIP**

Followership is important as leadership owing to the fact that a leader leads people who are called “followers” as such; the absence of followers makes leadership a mirage or futile endeavour. Followers are the direct recipients of the leadership prowess of their leaders and as such, their role as followers cannot be underrated in making leadership activities very meaningful.

As opinionated by Yun, Cox, and Sims (2006), referring to the emphasis on leadership and neglecting the presence of followers as “forgotten followers” calls for an intentional approach and bringing in the essentiality of stressing a follower’s importance and role in actualizing a societal goal and vision. The followership emphasis will help an organization in the execution of plans, fostering collaborative team work and aiding structural feedback to help the holistic running of the affairs of such a community.

In simplified term and according to Macleod (2017), the ability to follow a leader in a team, or organization is known as followership. Leadership and followership are two sides of the same coin that are inseparable. “A leader without followers is simply someone going for a walk,” as the saying goes. On the other side, an organization lacking a common direction is made up of followers without leadership. This definition of followership contrasts that either phenomenon of leadership or followership makes meaning only when the other is available.

MacLeod (2017) referred to followership as an overlooked ingredient in successful organizations. In his assessment, he sees followers as the best determinant of the success of the leader’s vision and goal for a society or organization. He presented that many people would not love to receive the compliment of being “a great follower” but in actual sense, this comment is a representation of a sincere lover of the progress of

a society one belongs to. It is essential for every member of a given body or society to understand that everyone cannot be in leadership positions or portfolios at the same time, and the understanding of members of an organization to rationalize that giving maximum support to the leadership of the association or community they belong to leads to communal and joint progress.

Followers are executors of the decisions, rules, and regulations of the leadership; when followers neglect or combat the decisions of the leaders, then it is difficult for leadership to thrive. This can simply lead to internal battles and struggles that are unhealthy for the communal good of the organization. One of the major thinkers around followership, Robert Kelley (cited in Macleod, 2017) categorized different types of followers where he saw passive followers in two categories of alienated followers and sheep followers; while the active followers are regarded as “yes-people” (or conformist) followers and effective followers.

The classification by Kelley above presents that sheep and ‘yes people’ followers are less problematic followers rating that they are limited to carrying out tasks committed to them by leaders and they are less critical thinkers that can bring new ideas for the leaders to transact or rationalize; these set of followers cause only few problems (if any) and they neither add much value to the system. While Kelly further explained that the category of alienated followers are critical thinkers with a destructive fashion of thinking to the leadership, their decisions and perceptions are independent of the leadership and most times they are not in support of what the leaders proposes or initiates, they are opinionated as to an alternative way to go about the mode of operation in the organization; the last category of active followers known as effective followers are the set of people who opines strongly with right reasoning in support of the leadership, this set of followers make a combination of creative thinking and active participation available for the leadership of their organization or community.

It is therefore evident that leadership success depends largely on the cooperation and participation of the followers in decisions that are being made. Impactful followers do not need to be designated leaders before they make positive contributions to the leadership of their society, they can always approach the leaders and provide salient guidance and advice for the organization. Followers with values, ideas, viewpoints, dedication, enthusiasm, aptitude, and competence are abundant in successful organizations. There are times when good followers disagree with the leader. They might disrupt the status quo and offer fresh perspectives and ideas. However, they do so while adhering to the organization's decision-making procedures and accepting the mission statement in its entirety.

The foregoing therefore establishes that the role and impact of followers in a given organization cannot be overemphasized. It is essential in achieving communal goals and vision, as such followers are to be seen as important and are to be personally

motivated to pursue the communal goal and growth with emphasis on the fact that they become direct beneficiaries of the proceeds of the growth of the society or organization.

### **CONCEPT OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION**

It is generally understood that humans in same society cannot avoid conflict and this is essential understanding in a given society. Failure to come to this understanding will simply complicate matters rather than aid progressive growth in a community. But regardless of the availability of dispute or conflict, resolutions become very important and this is where the concept of forgiveness and reconciliation come to play.

Smyth and Graham (2003) opined that, the old English word *for-giefan*, which means to throw away, pardon, overlook, give up, or demonstrate mercy or compassion, is the root of the word forgiveness. With implications of past hurt (or sin) as having harmed relationships, a relational context is suggested. Another distinctly Christian feature here is that forgiveness is viewed as a complete and unrestricted gift that transcends the desert and functions as a substitute for retaliation.

Forgiveness is primarily a biblical teaching until recent times where academics picked interest in the phenomenon. Academics like McCullough (2001), Worthington (2003), and Sutton (2010) among others are household names in the study of forgiveness and reconciliation. Their point of interest therefore brings a merger between forgiveness and reconciliation making it a complete approach when the two phenomenon are examined as two sides of a coin. They realized that forgiveness and reconciliation is essential in a society that will enjoy mental balance and psychological stability; in other words, since it becomes unavoidable for dispute or conflict not to exist in a society, forgiveness and reconciliation should be seen as a veritable solution to the unavoidable challenge in the society.

In common practice, forgiveness appears to be easily practicable in the give-and-take approach, but it becomes more complex when it has to be applied to betrayal, deep mental and psychological injuries, and crimes against humanity among other advanced challenges. It therefore becomes so important for individuals to be intentional about initiating forgiveness. As stressed above, reconciliation as posited by Worthington (2003) should be treated alongside forgiveness in the sense that, true forgiveness should lead to reconciliation between the two parties; this implies that reconciliation should be the end product of forgiveness.

The recent scholarship on forgiveness and reconciliation is to be applauded because it appears to be a very solid approach to adopt for a society that will enjoy progress. This stress that for the mental stability of the one who is hurt and for further future collaboration, forgiveness and reconciliation have to be imbibed in a given society. As peculiar to this study, a leader must realize the tendencies of being hurt by his or her followers and the followers must come to a realization of the tendencies of hurt from the leaders and as such, to build a community having recognized the vitality

of joint efforts as leaders and followers, it becomes expedient for both parties to adopt the approach of forgiving one another and making reconciliatory moves to ensure that they enjoy mutual growth as a society or organization.

This approach to adopting forgiveness and reconciliation is essential and applicable to leadership and followership relationship having in mind that disputes and hurts are impossible to avoid but the ability of either the follower or leader to initiate the move for forgiveness and reconciliation is essential for mutual growth and progress in the society.

### **FOLLOWERSHIP FACTORS HAMPERING PROGRESSIVE LEADERSHIP**

Progressive leadership is envy for all society as every rational society will anticipate registering progression in a steady format within their various circles. But as being established earlier, followership plays significant roles in the determination of the progresses being recorded in any society or organization and as such, this section of the paper identifies some factors from the angle of followers that can stand as obstacles to progressive leadership in the society;

The first and salient factor is the challenge of hurts from the process of emergence as leaders. This challenging situation is of paramount militating factor to cooperation of followers with an incumbent leader in a given society. The tussle for power is real as power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, the emergence of some leadership cabinet led to grievances of various sought that makes it very difficult for same set of people to work in cooperation with the leadership to achieve success, as such, the losers and victims of the emergence process become forces that pulls down the sitting administration in such society or organization. A team of leaders could therefore have leaders who are hurt in the process of becoming leaders and this could serve as a move against seeing their administration becoming successful. This is responsible for various propagandas that fly around about an administration, various rumours are aired to ensure that the leadership or distorted or lost balance.

Another major 'injury' that could be experienced by followers from the leaders can be traced to various bottle neck policies, which tend to hamper business, targets and aspirations of the followers. Some leaders care less about the effect of their policies and decisions on the followers and with these actions; they hamper the sources of income of their followers without provision of alternative routes most times. Musleh, Hartono and Sanchez (2024) explained that the behavioural style of a leader and approach to matter that concerns those being led will determine the response he or she gets from them. It implies that leaders could earn the trust and dependency of their followers or lose their support totally. When decisions are being made without considering the adverse effect on those being led, such leadership experience oppositions from their followers.

Furthermore, neglecting the suggestions of the followers by leaders can lead to grievances of various sought in the mind of followers. Some followers realizing their collaborative effort for communal growth and being actively and effectively willing to be involved could feel insulted and embarrassed by the actions of their leaders towards suggestions from them and as such leading to hurts. Some leaders fail to acknowledge the idea expressed by Blair and Bligh (2018) that, divergent views and perception need to be expressed in a given society and organization and it should be considered as positive energy in move towards decision making and outcomes of decisions, but the discouragement from leaders could hamper further suggestions and proposals from followers, which eventually leaves such leader to live a legacy of anarchy, regardless of where it results.

Followership is vital and significant as it plays a supportive and supporting role for leadership, but the progressive scenes become hampered where grievances thrive among leaders and followers and this call for keen attention and look both from the angle of the leaders and the perception of the followers.

## **FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN LEADERSHIP MANAGEMENT**

It is impossible to avoid hurting one another in leadership ventures and leaders and followers must come to this knowledge and essential fact of their relationship. It therefore becomes essential to find a meeting point between leadership and followership especially in regards to hurt and to jointly aid communal growth and progresses despites hurts that could ensue in the course of their relationships with one another.

In the goal of defining the concept of followership, Shamir (2007) opinionated that, the perspective of viewing followers in previous years as passive recipients of leadership have changed and s such, followers are seen as active participants in the leadership process and they contribute largely to the outcome of a leader. More importantly is the fact that, the follower and leader will cause greater problem when they harbor grievances towards one another and as such, introduction of the principles of forgiveness and reconciliation as a working format is very essential to execute the duties and affairs of the organization. This perception as picked from Shamir (2007) indirectly invites followers to understand their role as supportive leaders and the platform for which leadership can thrive and as such, holding grievances and hurts against leaders will hamper joint growth as such, this paper projects reconciliatory forgiveness as a principle to be adopted by followers.

Followers are to realize that leadership is a huge task which hurt might be committed unintentionally by the leaders. But when it is an intentional hurt being perpetrated, followers from their point of view should prioritize communal 'health' by



approaching the leaders and making peace with them. In the case where leadership is not easily approachable, initiating the defence mechanism against hurt is very important in order to contribute largely to the collective growth of the community. Emphasis on the understanding role of followers will firmly aid in the management of leadership affairs with the leaders being sure of the cooperation of their followers.

Conclusively on this note, Chaleff (2009) examined what good followership looks like in his publication and in view of this expressed that, good followers do not move around leaders but both leaders and followers orbit together for a common purpose, good followers defend their leaders as they realize the burden of being leaders in various capacities, good followers ensure to advance in the commitment to the communal goal and give constructive feedbacks to the joint body and leadership, good followers subject their personal interest if it does not align with the communal goal championed by the leadership of the organization; they rather drop selfish interests than compete with the leadership. Inculcating this traits by followers will help further in making forgiveness and reconciliation very easier to adopt in a given society or organization.

## CONCLUSION

A strong organization depends on followers' ability to follow as well as the leader's ability to lead. Understanding followership, what it is and how to foster it, is essential for effective leadership. This implies that leaders need to identify what inspires followers in various contexts and implement the best tactics. However, it is not just the duty of the leadership. Individuals who are followers must ask themselves and others what kind of followers they are. Do they successfully strike the right balance between loyalty and independence? Are they staying constructive while maximizing their contributions creatively?

The forgiveness and reconciliation emphasis in this paper is deduced from the fact that social interactions can lead to hurt which is almost an unavoidable phenomenon, but this hurt must always lead to progressive relationships in the future is properly handled and responded to by the parties concerned. It is also essential that in the interactions, both leaders and followers must be sincere in their distinctive roles as both are discovered to be vital in the society.

The baseline of an organizations goal should be to harmonize leadership and followership and to mutually pursue a common goal. This cannot be possible in the absence of hurts against one another especially on the parts of the followers. Followers must therefore be willing to let go of hurts and to find a soothing relief geared from forgiveness and reconciliation when hurts unavoidable comes up between both categories.

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