

# WHY WE FOLLOW

~~Obedience?~~

~~Loyalty?~~

~~Motivation?~~

Vision

Values



Natural Followership in a World  
Obsessed with Leadership

Christian Monö

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Natural Followership in a World  
Obsessed with Leadership

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[www.naturalfollowership.com](http://www.naturalfollowership.com)

Black Chair Publishing

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To all the unappreciated, ignored, and forgotten  
people whose impact on the world has been  
overshadowed by our obsession with leadership.



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## INTRODUCTION

# There are No Leaders Without Followers

*He who thinks he is leading and has no  
one following him is only taking a walk.*

—MALAWIAN PROVERB

When I first began exploring natural followership, I had no idea what I was getting into. It took years for me to realize that leadership isn't just a discipline; it's a belief system. And like any belief system, it quietly shapes our thinking. Even people with no interest in leadership carry certain preconceived ideas about leaders and followers.

While most of us are unaware of it, these ideas influence how we think and behave when we're in the company of others. Often, it's not until someone challenges these ideas that we become aware of them.

I never set out to challenge the leadership community—it just sort of happened as I began asking a series of questions. Let me give you an example: We can't have leaders without followers, yet for some reason, people tend to focus solely on leaders. Why? We don't need leadership skills to fall in love, paint our living rooms, or have dinner with friends. So why does leadership get so much attention?

I've been asking students of leadership this question for nearly twenty years. Typically, I receive answers like, "I want to become a better leader" or "I want to help others grow." But when asked to explain why, many struggle to provide a clear answer.

Another common response I hear is that people want to be leaders because they enjoy helping others reach their full potential. But what does that really mean? Do they want to help *everyone* around them reach their full potential or just a select group? Have the intended followers asked to be led by this person?

If not, who made that decision? And who determines whether someone has truly reached their full potential—is it the so-called leader or the person being led?

There's a tendency among scholars and experts to describe leaders as selfless individuals who take on the burden of helping others achieve success. But once you start questioning this premise, a very different picture emerges.

Those who invest in leadership do so because they believe their goals depend on the engagement of others. For instance, I've never met anyone who studies leadership because their friends want them to lead. However, I have met plenty of managers who study leadership because they want their staff to align with the company's goals and interests. In essence, they study leadership to control or influence the behaviour of others.

When you read that last sentence, did the word "control" stand out to you? If so, you're not alone. Expressing a desire to control people is generally considered inappropriate, but that's exactly where leadership comes into play. Leadership is often described as the art of "inspiring," "motivating," or "empowering" others. Leaders are labelled "visionaries," "catalysts," and "change agents." Although these words carry a positive connotation, the fundamental purpose remains the same—to influence the actions and mindset of others.

When we try to influence someone, we attempt to affect or change their behaviour, thoughts, or development. Thus, one could argue that leadership is about controlling people but without apparent exertion of force or direct exercise of command. Some leadership experts take great offence at this statement, insisting that leadership is not about controlling others. I agree with them, but, in practice, most individuals still see leadership as a tool to steer people in a certain direction. However, if you try to steer people in a certain direction, are you not trying to control them?

For many, leaders are enablers who create conditions for success within a group or an organization. It's argued that enabling a group to succeed is vastly different from managing people. Yet in practice, when people refer to leaders as enablers, they often seem to mean decision-makers. This becomes evident if you ask them questions such as: "Who determines the goals of a team—the so-called leader or those expected to follow?" or "What happens if the team wants to follow someone else with very different visions or goals?"

Perhaps the best evidence, however, is that we measure a leader's success by how they get others to perform. This leads us to another peculiar observation. If we argue that a leader's success is determined by how well they get others to perform, why do we focus on leadership and not followership? Why invest in a



single individual and ignore everyone else when it's the performance of the collective that matters? The only logical explanation is that we believe leaders can control the behaviour and actions of others.

Unfortunately, this mindset also affects how we perceive followers. Who wants to be a follower if that means being controlled by someone else?

## How It All Started

I've spent nearly my entire career exploring what I call "natural followership." I'm fascinated by the way people instinctively follow one another when formal rules and regulations aren't in play. Take the workplace, for example. It's not a natural environment—nor is the political arena, the military, or a sports team. These settings are deliberately structured to organize people toward specific outcomes.

Compare this to your interactions with friends. In these informal settings, you aren't confined by official rules or agreements. Instead, your actions are shaped by shared interests and values, motivated by a genuine desire for meaningful connection.

My interest in this topic dates back to a beautiful day in February 2007. During a small family gathering, my wife's uncle, Per, suddenly turned to me with a question. "Everybody talks about the importance of leadership," he began, "but why don't we ever discuss the importance of followership?"

At the time, Per was working as a bus driver. He had begun his career in a bus depot and gradually climbed the corporate ladder to become the company's head of communications. Although he held this position for several years, he missed the daily interactions with commuters. Eventually, despite protests from his colleagues and managers, he resigned and returned to driving buses. That was when he experienced an epiphany.

Like most of us, Per had been raised in a society that believes leaders are crucial for the success of a group, be it a team, an organization, or a country. Although many experts argue that leaders and managers are two separate things, most people, even the experts themselves, still see the two as closely linked.

Therefore, as a manager, Per was defined as a leader.

He was repeatedly reminded how important he and the other managers were for the success of the company. Yet, once he was back behind the wheel, it struck Per that the drivers had a greater impact on certain aspects of the business than the managers. It was the drivers, not the managers, who

interacted with the commuters every day. How they drove the bus, interacted with the customers, and handled unforeseen problems in traffic had a huge impact on the company's reputation. Those, in turn, affected opportunities for the business.

So why wasn't followership considered as important as leadership?

## The First Step

As Per told me his story, I realized that no one—not my parents, teachers, managers, or friends—had ever discussed the importance of followers with me. Now I wanted to understand why.

That evening, I turned on my computer, determined to learn more about those who follow leaders. I didn't know it at the time, but I'd just embarked on a journey that would change my entire worldview.

After a few weeks, I realized that very little research had been done on followership. While this meant I had little to go on, it was also a great opportunity. Anyone who wants to study leadership will find a mountain of literature. By the time they've gone through a fraction of it, they're already influenced by several thinkers. With followership, I was looking at a nearly empty canvas. This meant I could approach my subject with an open mind.

As we shall see in the first chapter, I chose to study leadership and followership from a follower's perspective. Since then, I've searched for answers from a broad range of disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, history, psychology, genetics, and zoology to name a few. I've interviewed researchers, leadership gurus, managers, teenagers, and children. Meanwhile, I've also held several management roles in larger companies, giving me plenty of time to study behaviours and test various hypotheses in real-life settings.

## Different Definitions

With a different perspective and a holistic approach to the subject, I found myself questioning key aspects of the leadership field. For instance, I found that while experts agree that leaders are important, they don't agree on what a leader is. Now, imagine that you and I agree that apple pie is tasty, but we don't agree on what an apple is, then what are we agreeing on? How do we know leaders are important if we don't know what a leader is?

In this book, we'll explore aspects of the leadership field that may challenge your current worldview. Some readers might find this overwhelming. As one

CEO exclaimed during a workshop: “Chris, you’re breaking my brain!” Of course, I’m not out to do that. If anything, I’m trying to do the opposite.

Leadership as a concept has infiltrated every aspect of our society, from politics and business to sports and arts. It’s sought after, trained for, discussed, and analyzes. This near obsession with leadership affects everything from how people interact and organize themselves to how engaged they are in school, at work, and in politics. Contrary to popular belief, this focus on leadership is not necessarily positive.

As I’ll attempt to show, our obsession with leadership regularly subdues people into inaction. It prevents collaboration, destabilizes democracies, and encourages selfishness. It even undermines one of humankind’s most critical collaborative processes—something I call “collaborationship,” which we’ll explore in more detail in Chapter 13.

In other words, the focus on leadership is counterproductive. Fortunately, over the last few years, interest in the concept of followership has increased. In early 2000, most people I spoke to portrayed followers as “sheep,” “puppets,” “conformists,” and “yes-men.” They saw followers as passive minions. Today, people also associate followers with social media. To me, that’s a step in the right direction. On social media, followers decide who, when, where, and how they want to follow. That means the power to follow is in the hands of the followers, which I believe, has helped change the way we interpret the word “follower.”

In addition, Gen Zers (born during the late 1990s and early 2000s) are entering the labour market. These young individuals are less willing to accept conformist roles at work. They want to be involved, feel engaged, and work in an environment where they are free to rule themselves. Sending managers to leadership training will not be enough to attract and retain the best of this generation. This might explain why, for the past few years, an increasing number of people have started looking beyond leadership for answers. Followership is finally gaining worldwide attention.

## The Rise of Nonconformist Followers

While I applaud and encourage this shift in focus, I’m also a little concerned. Most experts still see followers as subordinates and speak of followership as meaning “how to collaborate with someone with formal authority.” This worries me because it means we’re adapting followership to fit leadership’s preconceived view of the world. If we continue down this path, we’ll soon have

the same leadership theories as today, just packaged differently. That's why I believe this book is important. It presents a new theory that redefines what it means to lead and to follow.

This book is divided into three parts. In Part One, we'll shine a light on today's obsession with leadership. We'll see how we're conditioned to think of leaders and followers in a particular way and how it affects individuals, organizations, and societies.

Part Two is dedicated to explaining "natural followership" and its significance. We'll explore how our ancestors led and followed each other, how they used collaboration to overcome obstacles, and how groups of people can outsmart individuals.

In Part Three, we look to the future. We'll see examples of people, schools, and companies that have successfully applied various degrees of natural followership to improve business and education. We'll even explore how natural followership can be used to improve democracy—a clarity that is becoming increasingly important in today's turbulent world.

To be clear, I won't be offering a business model or a blueprint for implementing natural followership in various settings. My work has convinced me that it's more or less impossible to construct a leadership or followership blueprint that is applicable to every person, industry, environment, and culture.

Instead, I believe we should focus on learning how people naturally lead and follow one another. With that knowledge, we can create our own models to fit whatever environment we're in. For this reason, I hope you'll see this book as the beginning of an exciting journey—one that offers new perspectives, ideas, and understandings. Natural followership has changed my entire worldview; now it can change yours.

PART ONE



# A WORLD OBSESSED WITH LEADERS

*“Scientists, like most people, are generally conservative  
in their ability to adopt new paradigms.”*

—DONNA HART AND ROBERT W. SUSSMAN

## CHAPTER 1

# A Follower's Perspective

*Change your thoughts and you change your world.*

—NORMAN VINCENT PEALE

A month had passed since I'd begun my followership journey. I'd spent hours at the Stockholm University library searching for relevant books, articles, and academic papers. As mentioned, there wasn't much information available in the early 2000s. Search engines weren't as advanced as today, thus I struggled to find resources in my area of interest. I wanted to understand why people follow each other, but most scholars—even those writing about followership—seemed more interested in how followers should be led. Later, I would describe this as scholars adopting a leader-centric view or a “leader perspective.”

Then one day, I sat in my small home office, gazing out the window and contemplating how to proceed. I knew I had to start from scratch—but where should I begin? After what felt like hours, I finally grabbed a notebook and wrote a single question in the middle of the page:

*What makes me want to follow someone else?*

I didn't know it at the time, but as we're about to see, that question would change my entire worldview. Had I phrased it just a little differently, I doubt I would have discovered natural followership. Looking back, I'm surprised I didn't ask, “What makes me want to follow a leader?” But if I had, I would have narrowed my field of view, as that question assumes we first know what a leader is. And since most of us already hold preconceived ideas about leaders, I likely would have drawn very traditional conclusions about followers.

Instead, by asking the question in a way that required no assumptions about leaders or followers, I opened a different path. The question “What makes us follow someone else?” doesn’t imply that we follow leaders—only that there are times when we follow other people. This distinction proved critical to the outcome of my work, because, without realizing it, I had adopted a “follower’s perspective.”

## Through a Follower’s Eyes

A major issue with contemporary leadership theories is that they’ve been developed by people who tend to view the world from a leader’s perspective. Followers are generally regarded as “the others”—a collective that merely reacts to its surroundings rather than influencing them. Consequently, companies, schools, and organizations invest millions in leadership but not in followership, because they believe that leaders are influential, while followers are not.

By taking a follower’s perspective, I found myself questioning many of the traditional assumptions about leaders and followers. Take, for example, the common idea that leaders should motivate their followers to action. When considered from a follower’s perspective, a number of questions arise: Why do we assume that followers need to be motivated by a leader? Where does that idea come from? Do you need leaders to motivate you, and if so, why and when? And why is it that leaders should be the ones motivating their followers rather than the other way around?

Changing perspectives opened a whole new world to me, but I quickly realized that this came with certain challenges. Adopting a new perspective isn’t always easy. Psychologists refer to this as cognitive dissonance, which occurs when a person experiences mental discomfort due to holding two or more contradictory beliefs or values at the same time. In other words, if you’ve learned that leaders should motivate their followers, you may feel an inner conflict when confronted with facts that suggest the opposite.

I’ve experienced this myself. There have been moments when my work led me to discoveries that disrupted my entire way of thinking. It usually started with a simple question asked from a follower’s perspective: What is a leader without followers? If there were no hierarchies, whom would I follow? What happens if people refuse to follow one another? If leaders are the key to success, does that mean followers aren’t?

I mention this because you may find yourself instinctively reacting to certain conclusions in this book. When that happens, I encourage you to pause and

reflect on what exactly you're reacting to. Is it the conclusion itself, or is it the fact that it challenges an old worldview? Taking a follower's perspective will come with certain challenges, but if we truly want to understand why people follow one another, there's no other choice.

## Influenced by the Times

Many years ago, while having breakfast with my youngest daughter, Emmy, I noticed that the butter box on the table contained 600 grams of butter. Seizing the opportunity to be a pedagogical father, I pointed to the container and said, "Emmy, it says here that this box contains 600 gs of butter. Do you know what the 'g' stands for?"

Emmy, who was around six years old at the time, glanced at the box and confidently replied, "Yes. Gigabyte."

Let me tell you, when I was six years old in 1983, there wasn't a child in the world who would've guessed that a box contained 600 gigabytes of butter. We're influenced by the times we live in, often to a much larger degree than many of us are aware.

In his New York Times bestselling book *The Psychology of Money*, Morgan Housel claims that a handful of people were responsible for most of the world's development during the 1800s and 1900s. Out of the billions born during these two centuries, Housel selects seven individuals who he believes changed the world:

- Adolf Hitler
- Josef Stalin
- Mao Zedong
- Gavrilo Princip
- Thomas Edison
- Bill Gates
- Martin Luther King

According to Housel, almost everything in the world today—from country borders to technology—would have looked different if these seven people hadn't been born.

The idea that a single person is capable of altering mankind is common. It's also wrong. Without support, people like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao would never have been able to gain power in the first place. Without earlier inventors and researchers, someone like Gates wouldn't have had a computer to play with. Edison was just one of several people who contributed to the invention of the



incandescent light bulb. In fact, British inventor Joseph Wilson Swan produced an incandescent light bulb six months before Edison. We often overlook such facts. It's as if we want to believe that a lone individual has the power to change the world. It fits the leader perspective.

For example, the Swedish Constitution states that "all public power proceeds from the people." As I wrote this, Sweden had just become a member of NATO. Whether this was a decision made by the Swedish public is debatable. The main political parties decided against a referendum, fearing that Russia would interfere and influence the opinion of the Swedish people.

The Green Party spokesperson for international issues, Maria Ferm, said: "We don't see a referendum as anything worth striving for. There are great risks attached to this, such as disinformation campaigns and the like." Ferm was supported by Hans Wallmark of the Moderate (conservative) Party. "One should not underestimate Russian *devilment*, which they have proven in other contexts," Wallmark said. "It is, of course, of the utmost importance from a Russian perspective to prevent a Swedish membership of NATO."

Here's my question: If people can't be entrusted to decide on important issues affecting their lives and their country, what's the point of a democracy? There will always be a risk of foreign attempts to manipulate elections or referenda, not to mention the risk of our own politicians abusing their power.

Two months after Sweden formally joined NATO, national media reported that one of the country's largest political parties had run a so-called troll factory prior to the 2018 Swedish general election. The right-wing Sweden Democrats used more than twenty anonymous social media accounts to post offensive and provocative messages in an apparent attempt to manipulate public opinion. While the party denied the allegations, it confirmed ownership of anonymous social media accounts. It also promised to "make some minor adjustments to soften the tone going forward" but refused to shut down these anonymous accounts.

If a referendum on NATO was out of the question due to the fear of foreign disinformation tactics, would future general elections be stopped for fear of national manipulators? Besides, why do politicians believe the public is more likely to be manipulated than themselves? If anything, politicians are far more likely to be influenced by external actors than their citizens. Their power makes them attractive targets. One in ten Swedish elected representatives has reported that they have been exposed to threats, violence, or vandalism by so-called system-threatening actors due to their political mission.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Finland, which is situated between Sweden and Russia, decided to join NATO. Sweden was on the verge of

becoming the only Scandinavian country outside NATO. For weeks, Swedish politicians were courted by NATO members and promised a speedy application process if Sweden applied for membership along with Finland. When it was time for a formal decision, the political elite in Sweden had already made up their minds. At that point, they almost seemed more worried about the opinions of the Swedish people than about Russia.

In many countries, the public's confidence in their governments is low. Despite this, those in political power are generally called leaders, which consequently makes the rest of us followers. If we continue this line of thought and accept a traditional leader-centric perspective, it suggests that politicians are the ones who make decisions and direct people where to go.

This leader-centric view creates certain problems. It increases the risk of politicians misinterpreting their roles. For example, in November 2022, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson referred to the Swedish government as “my government” when discussing a possible Swedish NATO membership.

While I doubt Kristersson literally meant that the Swedish government is his, the rhetoric is interesting. It suggests that Kristersson feels he controls the government. Of course, the Swedish government belongs to the people, not to the prime minister. This is the essence of democracy.

## Leaders, Followers, and Slugs

Amazon.com is the largest online book retailer in the world. While working on this book in October 2024, I did a quick search and found 127 books with the word “followership” in the title. This was good news. Two years earlier it had been ninety-five and when I started in 2007, I found three. Of course, another search revealed more than 50,000 books with the word “leadership” in the title. That's hardly a surprise. However, I was a bit disheartened to find there were more than 1,000 books on “manure” and 692 books discussing “laundry.” The fact that there are more books about excrement and laundry than followership speaks volumes about our indifference toward this topic.

From an early age, we're taught that being a follower is something to be avoided. I recall a 2014 trip to the US city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, with my family. We were shopping when we spotted a T-shirt for kids that caught my attention. It had the word “FOLLOWER” crossed out on the chest and replaced with the word “LEADER.”



*Figure 1: A child's T-shirt with the word "follower" crossed out. Albuquerque, New Mexico 2014.*

In books and films, the heroes become leaders, not followers. Even in songs, followers are devalued. Take the first verse of Imagine Dragons's famous song *Thunder*, where Dan Reynolds sings that he's "not a 'yes sir,' not a follower."

We're constantly fed the idea that being a leader is good while being a follower is bad. If you call someone a leader, they'll probably take it as a compliment, but if you say they behave like a follower, you risk insulting them.

When I began researching followership, many people I interviewed used the word "sheep" to describe followers. In fact, until recently, Microsoft Word presented "follower" as a synonym for sheep.

This is, of course, not a compliment. Sheep are regarded as unintelligent. They're made fun of as creatures that need an overseer to constantly direct and control them, or they'll die. So, this is how we perceive followers—as dim-witted conformists who need someone to organize and direct them. Many still believe that humans are unable to collaborate effectively and efficiently without bosses and supervisors. I still meet those who claim that without managers, there will be anarchy.

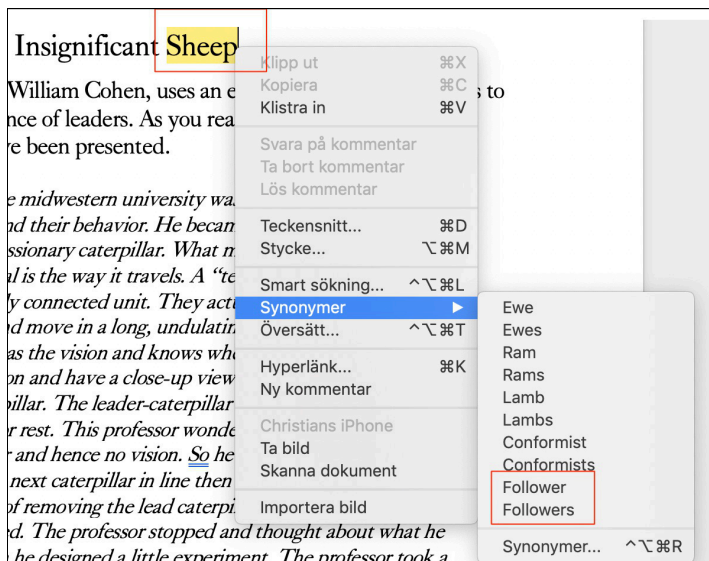


Figure 2: Until recently, the word “follower” was a synonym for “sheep.”

For years, experts have claimed that so-called leaders determine the success of a group, be it a team, school, business, or political party. If that’s true, should we also blame leaders for a group’s failures? If an employee steals, a team underperforms, a company goes bankrupt, or a political party loses an election, are the leaders always to blame? When I ask managers this question, most will argue that success and failure depend on both leaders and followers. But if that’s the case, why do companies only invest in leadership and not followership?

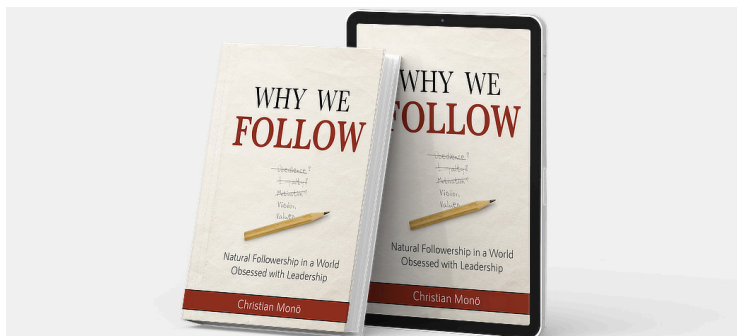
Do you recall Per, my wife’s uncle who gave up his job as a company’s head of communications to become a bus driver? For years he’d worked to improve customer satisfaction, and his opinions had been highly valued by the company. As a bus driver, he identified several measures that were needed to improve the satisfaction of both employees and customers. However, he soon found that his competence and experience weren’t valued as much when in a subordinate role. While the management would gladly use cliches such as “our employees are the company’s most valuable asset,” their behaviour suggested otherwise. No matter how hard Per tried, the managers generally ignored his and the other drivers’ advice. Why?

We live in an era where leadership is seen as the answer to most problems. Managers and other decision-makers are expected to be leaders, and subordinates are expected to be followers. Thus, managers may take into

consideration their subordinate's opinions, but, in the end, it's the managers who decide what should be done and when.

While we might choose to ignore followership, it can't be avoided. If there are leaders, then there must be followers. We can invest billions of dollars in leadership, yet how people follow each other will still impact our schools, businesses, political parties, and countries. Instead of continuing as we have for the past fifty years, which means viewing the world from a leader's perspective, we should pause and consider what we're doing. Is leadership really the answer to our problems, and if not, what is?

Changing perspectives is not always easy, but I've found that the best place to start is by asking questions. The next chapter will deal with this issue in depth.



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