



The people behind the leader

Total time: About 30 minutes

Format: Individual, then pairs or small groups, then whole class

Group size: Any

Materials: Something to write with

Objective

This exercise has two objectives. First, to have students notice how we credit world-changing events to a single leader – and discover how much of that leadership depended on others. Second, to show the students how easy it is to fall into the trap of assuming everyone defines leadership the same.

Instructions

- 1) Ask each student to think of a leader who they believe changed the world. Anyone – political, scientific, historical, cultural. Have them write down the name. **(3 min)**
- 2) Now ask the students to write down the people whose work, support or engagement made that leader's success possible. Don't just settle for answers like "voters" or "fans". If answers stay thin ("his team, I suppose"), press them to keep going. **(3 min)**
- 3) In pairs or small groups, have the students share which leader they chose. Then let them discuss the following:
 - a) Why did you choose your leader?
 - b) Was it hard to identify the people who made the leader successful? If so, why?
 - c) Do you think your leader would still have changed the world without the people around them?**(10 min)**
- 4) Whole class discussion:
 - a) Does history remember leaders and forget the people who made the leadership possible? If so, why?
 - b) If a leader is nothing without those who follow, why do we treat followers as less important?
 - c) All through this exercise – did anyone stop to define what a "leader" is? If not, how do we know everyone was talking about the same things?**(10 min)**

Facilitators note: The aim isn't to diminish great leaders but to highlight our tendency to ignore followership – and to show that leadership exists only because people follow. The last question – about defining "leader" – is intended to show that we often discuss leaders without knowing how we define the term. After all, students can't pick a leader without having consciously or subconsciously defined it. A useful closing prompt: could the leader they chose just as easily be called something else – an activist, a servant of a cause, a follower of a movement?