



Air Force pararescuemen climb a ladder to an HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter 7 August 2017 during daytime water rescue operations training in conjunction with exercise Stealth Guardian near Dog Island, Florida. The image symbolically conveys how leaders must be mindful of how their subordinates operate as followers. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Ryan Callaghan, U.S. Air Force)

The Practical Application of Followership Theory in Mission Command



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In their 2014 article “Followership: Exercising Discretion,” Ted Thomas and Paul Berg discuss the complementary relationship between mission command and followership theory.¹ While the article presents a convincing argument as to why military leaders who exercise mission command stand to benefit from a thorough understanding of followership, it stops short of providing a practical guide on how followership theory can be applied in the context of mission command. This article aims to help military leaders translate theory into practice by discussing four questions: (1) How do different types of followers respond to mission command? (2) How should military leaders manage different types of followers when exercising mission command? (3) How should teams be formed to maximize performance in mission command? And, (4) how should military leaders develop their followers for better application of mission command?²

Before delving into application, a quick review of the synergy between mission command and followership is instructive. Mission command is crucial because military operations “defy orderly, efficient, and precise control.”³ By creating conditions that empower followers, the problem of maintaining control in a dynamic operating environment can be overcome. Thomas and Berg show how the six principles of mission command link to Ira Chaleff’s five dimensions of courageous followership, namely the courage to assume responsibility, the courage to support the leader, the courage to challenge, the courage to participate in transformation, and the courage to take moral action.⁴ Among the principles of mission command, two in particular are highly sensitive to the quality of followers: build cohesive teams through mutual trust and exercise disciplined initiative.⁵

While a commander is largely in the driver’s seat when it comes to creating understanding, providing intent, using mission orders, and accepting risk, followers play a big part in influencing the dynamics of the team. The commander is responsible for developing teams, but his or her approach to this task must be sensitive to the characteristics of the people that make up the teams.⁶ The commander must know what makes individuals effective or ineffective as team members, as well as how to leverage strengths and mitigate weaknesses among team members to create positive team dynamics.

In the case of disciplined initiative, followers are even more central. Not all individuals possess the traits needed

to exercise disciplined initiative. The commander must be able to anticipate where followers may fall short and develop them so that they become more effective at exercising disciplined initiative over time. Followership theory provides military leaders with insights on how to wield their influence over subordinates to support effective mission command.

A caveat is necessary before delving into the central issue of application. This article is meant to demonstrate that making the leap from theory to practice is not an unduly complex matter, and encourage leaders to think about how they can integrate followership theory into their leadership strategy. Consequently, treatment of the material is introductory and broad, rather than in-depth and nuanced. Wherever answers are proposed, they are meant to be provisional and flexible, not definitive and rigid.

Follower Responses to Mission Command

Thomas and Berg point out that “mission command doctrine expects officers to be exemplary followers,” but that expectation is not reflective of reality.⁷ A military leader must be able to anticipate how different types of followers will respond to mission command. The concept of styles of followership, introduced by Robert Kelley in 1988, provides a useful theoretical foundation on which to build an answer to this first question.⁸ In brief, Kelley categorizes followers based on the extent to which they demonstrate independent, critical thinking and active engagement. Based on this, Kelley identified five followership styles: “effective followers,” “yes people,” “sheep,” “alienated followers,” and “survivors.”⁹ By considering the characteristics associated with each style of followership, it is possible to anticipate how different types of followers will respond to mission command (see figure 1, page 3).¹⁰

Effective followers are the exemplary followers that mission command doctrine envisions; they rise to the challenge of exercising disciplined initiative. They critically think about the commander’s intent and align their actions

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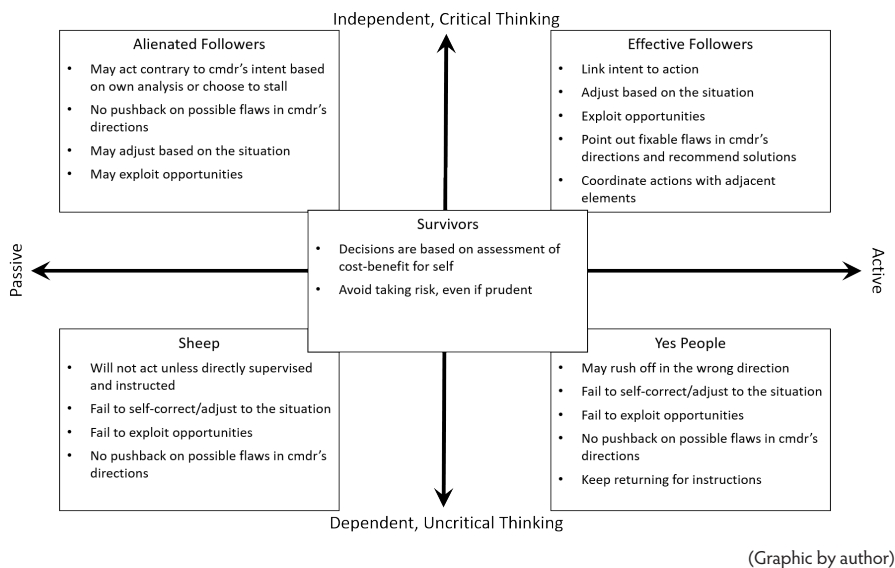


Figure 1. Followers Responses to Mission Command

Managing Followers

Military leaders can expect to take charge of teams that have

accordingly. As the situation evolves, effective followers adjust and exploit opportunities when presented with them. They are prepared to offer constructive feedback to the commander to improve his or her understanding, intent, and orders. Another trait of effective followers is their ability to “weave a web of relationships.”¹¹ In mission command, this translates to actively partnering with adjacent elements to produce a better overall outcome.

Yes people display positive energy, but without critical thinking they run the risk of misinterpreting the commander's intent and charging down the wrong path. Even as the situation evolves, yes people are likely to continue with whatever course of action they were instructed to follow. It is easy enough to imagine how this can result in catastrophe when the operating environment is complex and dynamic. Yes people may request new instructions if the current approach does not appear to be working, but that is as much as a commander should expect in terms of initiative. Finally, yes people take the commander's word as gospel even if glaring flaws exist. Sheep respond like yes people but without the same enthusiasm; they take little action without constant prodding from the commander.

Alienated followers are critical thinkers who lack positive motivation, making their responses the hardest to predict.¹² Depending on how cynical they are toward the commander and his guidance, alienated followers may choose to take their own path or simply act like sheep. They do not provide constructive feedback to the

commander, not because they do not have any, but because they do not feel invested in the success of the team.

Survivors are not necessarily passive or dependent in their thinking; rather, they react based on self-interest.¹³ They have one priority driving their actions: self-preservation. In the context of mission command, this may result in lost opportunities and ceding the initiative since self-preservation generally drives low-risk, status-quo type behavior.

members with a variety of followership styles and even display different styles in different contexts. While leaders should endeavor to develop all of their subordinates into effective followers, organizational leaders are faced with the reality of having to *operate and improve* simultaneously.¹⁴ Figure 2 (on page 4) provides an approach to managing the five types of follower traits in order to improve mission command outcomes in the short term.

Effective followers are the ultimate force multiplier when it comes to mission command. Commanders should focus on improving their own facility with mission command so that effective followers are empowered to bring maximum value to the team.

Yes people can still operate effectively under mission command, but commanders must take deliberate steps to mitigate the weaknesses of yes people. One approach is to assign tasks that are comparatively less complex and dynamic. This reduces the risk of misapplied effort either stemming from poor understanding of the commander's intent or the failure to adjust actions to suit changes in the situation. This first approach may not always be a viable option, particularly in today's complex operating environment. An alternative is for the commander to provide additional opportunities to evaluate progress and assess the validity of the current approach. This can take the form of frequent updates, tighter control of measures of performance, or even increased battlefield circulation with this group of followers. Regardless of which tactics

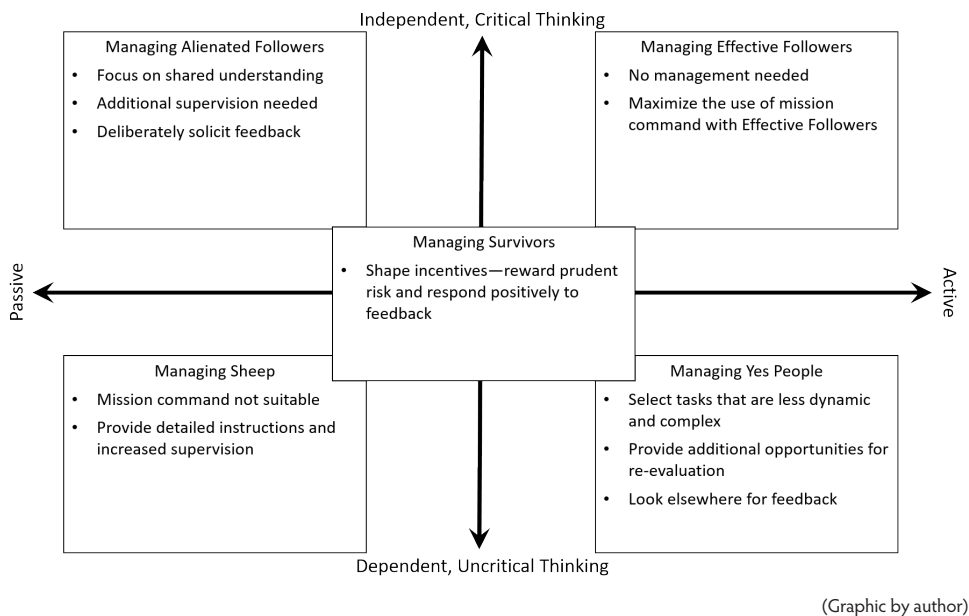


Figure 2. Managing Followers for Mission Command

are chosen, commanders should make it a point to seek critical feedback from other sources and not be taken in by the ever-positive responses of yes people.

Sheep are inherently unsuited for mission command. Commanders can attempt to apply the management approaches recommended for yes people but will likely find that the high degree of supervision and detailed instruction needed is incongruous with the philosophy of mission command.

With alienated followers, commanders should pay additional attention to developing shared understanding as a means to overcome cynicism. Developing shared understanding should not be confused with being prescriptive, as alienated followers are likely to resent having a particular perspective or approach forced down their throats. Some additional supervision, such as verbal updates or simple progress reports, may be needed at the beginning to guard against

age survivors to operate like effective followers. As with alienated followers, commanders can do so by responding positively to feedback. Specifically for survivors, prudent risk should be publicly rewarded.

Followership Styles and Teams

Having a leader manage all of his or her followers directly is generally not an option in larger organizations. Figure 3 depicts a strategy that leaders can use to structure their teams for better mission command. The goal is to leverage the strengths of each followership style while mitigating the weaknesses.

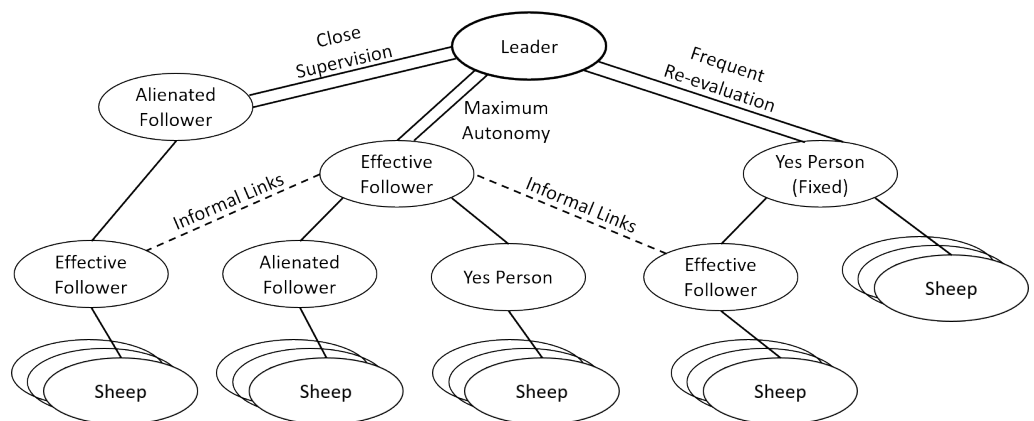


Figure 3. Followership Styles for Mission Command Teams

As far as possible, effective followers should be directly subordinate to the leader. This puts them in the best position to utilize their strong interpersonal skills to create positive team dynamics. In addition, the leader benefits from having a direct link to a source of constructive and critical feedback. As depicted, this is not always possible. In many organizations, yes people rise to positions of authority on the basis of their “can-do” attitude. Nonetheless, leaders should aim to place effective followers on every team. On top of positively influencing the dynamics within a team, the organization benefits from the aforementioned “web of relationships,” or informal links, that effective followers are adept at building.¹⁶ This helps foster collaboration between teams, which allows an organization to optimize its overall performance instead of suboptimizing at the team level. Wherever yes people occupy positions of authority, the leader must use frequent re-evaluation to ensure that his or her intent is being met, especially when the situation is dynamic.

Alienated followers can be put in charge of teams, but the leader should use close supervision to observe how the alienated follower responds. One possibility is that the alienated follower is motivated by the opportunity to set the agenda for the team, as well as having direct contact with the leader. In this scenario, the organization benefits from having an alienated follower migrate towards being an effective follower. On the other hand, the cynicism of the alienated follower may begin to create a toxic environment and drive dysfunction within the team, in which case the leader must be prepared to step in quickly. If possible, an effective follower should be included in the team to promote positive engagement among the other members.

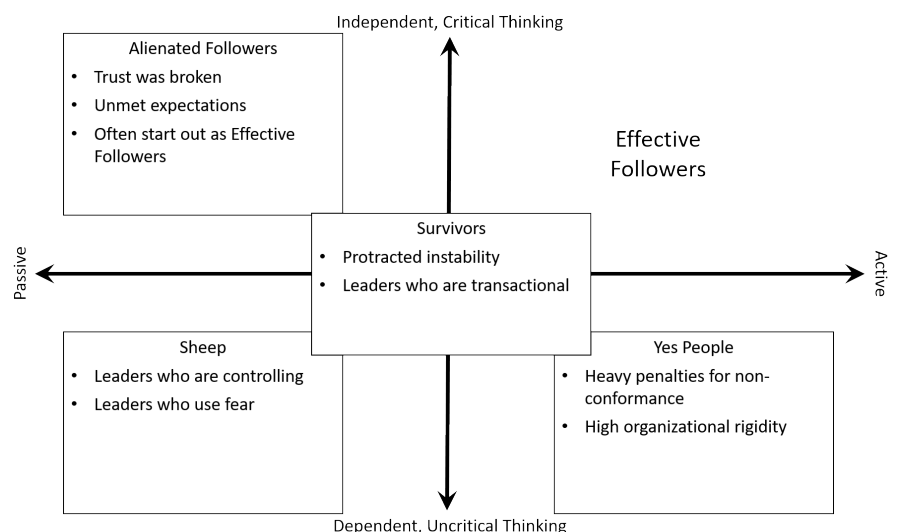
In the short-term, sheep should be placed at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy where the impact of their poor followership will be as limited as possible. That being said, unless an effort is made to develop sheep into more effective followers, they will remain a burden to the organization.

More so than the other followership styles, survivors align their behavior to the prevailing work culture.¹⁷ Instead of prescribed positions, leaders should place survivors in teams where they will be incentivized to contribute positively, that is, teams where critical thought and displays of initiative are the norm rather than the exception.

Developing Followers for Mission Command

Styles of followership are not fixed: “Under different circumstances, [followers] may use one followership pattern rather than another.”¹⁸ Followership skills can also be honed over time.¹⁹ Military leaders should aim to develop all of their subordinates into effective followers in the long term in order to reap the full benefits of mission command. To do this, leaders must first understand the reasons why individuals adopt less effective styles of followership (see figure 4).²⁰ By dealing with these causes, leaders set the conditions for followers to improve their followership.

In *The Power of Followership*, Kelley discusses the causes for each style of followership.²¹ Rather than being a direct result of individual personality, he argues that organizational factors often motivate people to adopt less effective patterns of follower behavior. The yes people style of followership is a response to heavy penalties for nonconformance, as well as highly rigid and rules-focused



(Graphic by author)

Figure 4. Causes of Ineffective Followership

work environments. When leaders micromanage and use fear to drive compliance, their subordinates tend to become sheep. Alienated followers often start out as effective followers but migrate toward passivity because their expectations were repeatedly unmet or their trust in the leader and the organization was broken. Survivors emerge when the organizational climate is marked by prolonged instability. Transactional leadership also encourages the transactional followership that characterizes survivors. If one or more of these factors are present in the organization, military leaders are unlikely to succeed in their efforts to develop better followers.

In addition to dealing with organizational impediments to effective followership, military leaders can develop their subordinates by providing them with opportunities to hone followership skills and feedback.²² This is no different than developing leaders, except that the training and feedback are focused on followership skills rather than leadership skills. For yes people and sheep in particular, the experience of operating under mission command can itself be a way to develop effective follower behavior. However, leaders must provide “observation, feedback, and dialogue” in order to

ensure that their subordinates complete the “meaning making cycle for learning” instead of repeating ineffective follower behavior.²³

Conclusion

Mission command doctrine recognizes that military organizations require effective leaders and equally effective followers.²⁴ Through a practical understanding of followership theory for both operating in and improving the organization, military leaders can better equip themselves to employ mission command. When dealing with the day-to-day challenges of operating, familiarity with the different styles of followership enables military leaders to anticipate how subordinates will respond to mission command. Leaders can then tailor their management approach for each style of followership and organize teams in ways that leverage individual strengths while mitigating weaknesses. In terms of improving the organization, followership theory explains how organizational factors can lead to ineffective follower behavior over time. At the same time, it provides a path for developing effective followers, which ultimately translates into better mission command. ■

Notes

1. Ted A. Thomas and Paul Berg, “Followership: Exercising Discretion,” *Journal of Leadership Education* 13, no. 4 (2014): 21–35.
2. This topic was discussed by U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Academic Year 2017 Staff Group 11A during Leadership 205 with Kevin Gentzler. Ideas from that discussion have been incorporated into this essay.
3. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], May 2012), 1.
4. Thomas and Berg, “Followership,” 25–28.
5. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 2–5.
6. *Ibid.*, 10.
7. Thomas and Berg, “Followership,” 29.
8. Robert E. Kelley, “In Praise of Followers,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 1988, accessed 25 September 2017, <https://hbr.org/1988/11/in-praise-of-followers>.
9. Kelley has changed the names for the various followership styles over the years; however, they all refer to the same five patterns of followers. For a detailed discussion of each style, see Robert E. Kelley, *The Power of Followership* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 87–124.
10. Follower responses are inferred based on the characteristics associated with each of Kelley’s five styles of followership.
11. Kelley, *The Power of Followership*, 148–50.
12. *Ibid.*, 99–102.

13. *Ibid.*, 116–17.
14. Carey W. Walker and Robert J. Rielly, “Crossing the Rubicon: An Introduction to Organizational-Level Leadership” (Command and General Staff College, August 2013), 6, accessed 24 August 2016, http://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/documents/cace/DCL/Crossing_the_Rubicon_An_Introduction_to_Organizational_Level_Leadership.pdf.
15. Kelley, *The Power of Followership*, 116–77.
16. *Ibid.*, 148–50.
17. *Ibid.*, 116–17.
18. *Ibid.*, 98.
19. Kelley, “In Praise of Followers.”
20. Figure 4 is adapted from Kelley, *The Power of Followership*, 87–124.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Kelley, “In Praise of Followers.”
23. Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, “A Better Approach to Developing Leaders,” *Army Press Online Journal* 16-16 (2016): 1, 4–5.
24. See, for example, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 6-10, *Leading Marines* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2 May 2016), 2–19. “Followers are the backbone of any effective organization because without loyal, dedicated followers, there can be no effective leaders.”