

When it comes to selecting our personnel we are often startled by the differences people bring to the workplace. In today's challenging hiring process we can no longer demand that people be of one voice. It is a wise choice to appreciate their differences and leverage their unique contributions for the benefit of the enterprise's successful endeavors.

A Partnership of Diversity

by Jon Craighead

The key factor that can make or break a successful business ultimately comes down to the people of the organization, both its workforce and leadership. The primary definition of a leader is someone whom people are willing to follow; therefore, such an assertion clearly highlights the role of *followership* as a critical element to a successful business partnership. Barbara Kellerman of Harvard Business School wrote a groundbreaking book titled Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders in which she provides a unique and sweeping view of the role of followers in today's business and industry. Kellerman makes important distinctions among personality types. I've selected four types of followers – Bystanders, Participants, Activists, and Diehards – so that we can look at the behaviors of each of these personalities and their impact, both positive and negative, on the enterprise.

Bystanders observe but do not participate. They make deliberate decisions to stand aside, to disengage from their leaders and from whatever is the group dynamic. This withdrawal is, in effect, a declaration of neutrality. However, their lack of participation opens the door for the more dominant players to have more power than they would normally have without accountability. This amounts to the turning of heads and pretence not to notice the adverse activity. I think this is a result of resignation and loss of hope, which is recoverable.

Participants are very engaged. They clearly favor their leaders and the groups and organizations of which they are members – or they may clearly oppose the same. Participants are usually highly skilled and passionate in their work; often they are those referred to as *knowledge workers*. They must be encouraged to explore, create, and use their talents to the fullest extent possible. They must also be held accountable to operate within the integrity and purpose of the enterprise.

Activists feel strongly about their causes and leaders and they act accordingly. They're eager, energetic, and engaged. Because they are heavily invested in people and process, they work hard either on behalf of their leaders or, conversely, to undermine and unseat them. Activists possess high levels of energy and engagement. They can be a great resource, or a major problem if they perceive they are not being heard or appreciated. When included in the process, they can create real positive change.

Diehards, as their name implies (and in a manner of speaking), are willing to “risk life and limb” for their cause . They are often very devoted to their leaders, or in contrast they can be very much against them. In either case, Diehards are defined by their dedication. Being a diehard is all-consuming. They are a great group to have on your side, and a great disruption when they are against you. Given the choice, they generally prefer to operate within the system.

Kellerman’s point is that followers have different personality styles, and we seldom bother to distinguish one from another because we assume the styles make no difference or because we assume they are all one and the same. These four represent an example of different mindsets and personalities that can comprise any working group. It is difficult, at best, to determine who people really are initially; personalities that are unconcealed through time and circumstance, and in the end you have what you have. Just as there are good leaders and bad leaders, there are good followers and bad followers. The bottom line is that you must optimize what you have, and this is a primary responsibility of leadership.

In his book Free Agent Nation, Daniel Pink describes the exodus of people leaving the corporate world for entrepreneurialism, stating it is primarily generated by a perception of being under-appreciated and/or overly managed. This creates a drain of both brain and talent badly needed in today’s corporate America. It’s essential for leadership to design ways to deal with this dilemma. I think the solution lies in the practice of interacting with and managing individuals, verses treating everyone the same. This is the essence of *Adaptive Leadership*, a term originated by the Cambridge Leadership Group. We use the term to distinguish leadership that creates a big tent of inclusiveness. This provides a platform of shared values that unites the enterprise and creates a setting where everyone can find a place for themselves to use their creativity and talents for the greater good. Kellerman’s argument is that “leadership and followership be thought of in tandem as inseparable, indivisible, inconceivable the one without the other.” Ultimately, it is a process that fully appreciates individual talents and skills. When those talents and skills are blended, they produce the unique gifts of diversity. And the successful organization that lifts the human spirit and creates a partnership of diversity benefits us all.