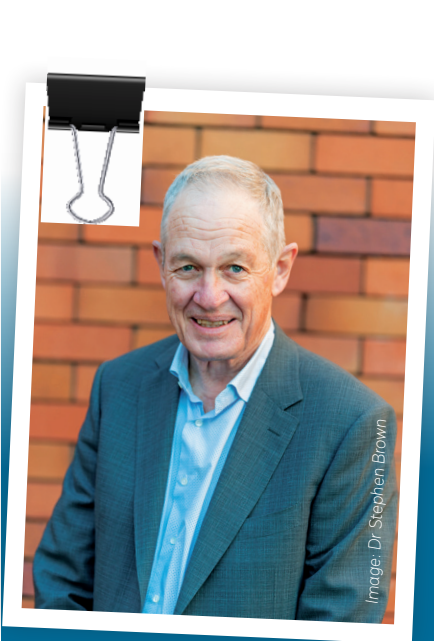


Why should anyone be led by you?

The dance between leaders and followers is a delicate one, explains Dr Stephen Brown.



Dr Stephen Brown is the Managing Director of The Brown Collective, focused on the formation of educational leaders and partnering with schools, networks and system to enable sustainable impact. The organisation reflects both his collective experience over 40 years in policy, strategy and leadership development – and that of the remarkable global network he has developed during this career.

The demands of leadership are complex, but the foundation of a good leader is rooted in meeting the needs of those who follow them (Gallup, 2025). Leadership by its very nature is about working with and through others.

Peters and Haslam (2018) assert that to be a good leader, a leader needs to be a good follower. What do followers, employees, direct reports and stakeholders want from leaders? Goffee and Jones (2000) in their seminal article posed the provocative question, Why should anyone be led by you?

Survey data (Gallup) indicates that only 15 per cent of staff in workplaces are engaged with the single biggest factor driving such discontent being inadequate leadership (O’Keeffe, 2023). The *Global Leadership Report: What Followers Want* for the World Governments Summit 2025 in collaboration with Gallup examined this very question in groundbreaking research. To date, there has been no research that has examined the needs of followers (p. 13). The study (Gallup, 2025) identified four needs of followers:

- 1. Hope:** The need to feel positive about the future and for leaders to provide a clear direction. Hope? Followers wanted their leaders to provide inspiration, have a vision and display personal integrity. Such leaders created conditions that allowed for personal growth, learning and achievement. They felt supported, were adequately remunerated and had agency but were connected to the aspirations of the organisation.
- 2. Trust:** The need for honesty, respect and integrity. The attributes identified were communication, approachability and trust. These were conveyed through collaborative practices, teamwork and compromise.
- 3. Compassion:** The need to feel cared about and listened to. Such dispositions are noted as emotional intelligence, compassion and wellness.

- Service, altruism, mentorship and support were seen as expressions of leadership compassion.
- 4. Stability:** The need for psychological safety and secure foundations during times of uncertainty. Critical indicators for followers of this need were the provision of stability, structure, accountability and the acceptance of responsibility.

According to Rath and Conchie (2008) coauthors of the text *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow* it’s easy for leaders to misunderstand what followers need. They note that leaders typically are required to do such things as articulate a vision, enable strategy, steward resources and make things happen. Rath and Conchie affirm these four-core follower needs and suggest that the foundation is professional trust.

Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy where the leader’s primary goal is to serve others. This approach focuses on the growth, wellbeing, and empowerment of the people being led, rather than on the leader’s own power or control.

Key characteristics of servant leadership include:

- **Empathy:** Understanding and sharing the feelings of others.
- **Listening:** Actively listening to others’ needs and concerns.
- **Stewardship:** Taking responsibility for the wellbeing of the organisation and its members.
- **Commitment to the growth of people:** Encouraging personal and professional development.
- **Building community:** Fostering a sense of belonging and teamwork.

This leadership style was popularised by Robert K. Greenleaf in his 1970 essay, ‘The Servant as Leader’. It emphasises that leaders should prioritise serving their team members,

which in turn can lead to higher engagement, trust, and overall effectiveness.

Ronald Heifetz emphasises that effective leadership is deeply intertwined with followership. He believes that followers play a crucial role in the adaptive leadership process. Here are some key points Heifetz makes about followership:

- 1. Active participation:** Heifetz argues that followers should not be passive recipients of leadership. Instead, they should actively engage in the adaptive work required to address complex challenges.
- 2. Shared responsibility:** Heifetz highlights that leadership is a shared responsibility. Followers must take ownership of the changes needed and contribute to the problem-solving process.
- 3. Adaptive work:** Followers are essential in identifying and addressing adaptive challenges. They need to be willing to question their own assumptions and adapt their behaviours and mindsets to navigate change effectively.

- 4. Support and challenge:** Effective followers support their leaders but also challenge them when necessary. This dynamic helps ensure that the organisation remains responsive and adaptive to new challenges.
- 5. Empowerment:** Heifetz believes that leaders should empower their followers by giving them the responsibility and authority to solve problems. This empowerment fosters a sense of ownership and accountability among followers.

Heifetz’s perspective on followership underscores the importance of collaboration and mutual support between leaders and followers in achieving successful adaptive change.

School leadership requires many of the hungers required by followers and a servant approach to these various roles – acting with moral purpose in the interest of others, showing and enacting care for others, the stimulation of inspiration, reassurance and safety amid a maelstrom of change.

The ask of school leaders continues to

grow against a blurring of the lines in relation to responsibilities of schools and educators and those beyond the school gate.

The expectations of followers of such leaders as school Principals need to be tempered against this context. Moral injury and compassion fatigue are symptoms being felt by our school leaders as they grapple with the needs of others and endeavour to thrive both personally and professionally.

You can’t undertake the act of leadership without interacting and working with others. School leaders provide inspiration and aspiration in their communities daily. Helping and supporting others are at the heart of the motivation for school leaders but sometimes this comes with overcommitment, burnout and neglect of self-care (Align, 2024).

I would encourage all leaders to regularly reflect on the question, ‘Why should anyone be led by me?’.

This quote is on The Brown Collective’s Thank You Card: ‘A Leader is a dealer in hope’ (Napolean Bonaparte, 1769-1821). **EM**



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