

## Follow the Leader

I RECENTLY SEARCHED THE BARNES AND NOBLE WEBSITE and found 13,446 titles under the keyword “Leadership.” There are books titled “Rules and Tools for Leaders,” “E-Leadership,” “Alpha Leadership,” “Leadership Secrets of the Rogue Warrior,” and even “Leadership Lessons from *Star Trek the Next Generation*.” There are books on the leadership styles of Abraham Lincoln, Jack Welch, George Patton, Vince Lombardi, Queen Elizabeth I, Geronimo, Attila the Hun, and Moses. For those who rise to the pinnacle of their organizations, ample guidance on how to act is available.

But what about the followers? Where do the rest of us turn to learn how to be loyal, how to support organizational directives, and—not inconsequentially—how to dissent when our leaders begin to lose their way?

For example, what course of action should Enron executive Sherron Watkins have pursued when she recognized that Enron’s financial statements simply didn’t “add up”? In August 2001, she wrote to company President Kenneth Lay: “I am incredibly nervous that we will implode in a wave of accounting scandals... and that the business world will consider the past successes [of Enron] as nothing but an elaborate accounting hoax.” Her warnings went unheeded and what unfolded was the biggest business failure in U.S. history.

Or take the case of Minnesota agent Coleen Rowley who sounded warning bells at the FBI before Sept. 11 and subsequently wrote a letter to FBI Director Robert Mueller, saying, “I have deep concerns that a delicate and subtle shading/skewing of facts by you and others at the highest levels of FBI management has occurred and is occurring... and that certain facts have been omitted, downplayed, glossed over, and/or mis-characterized in an effort to avoid, or minimize personal and/or institutional embarrassment on the part of the FBI and/or perhaps even for political reasons.”

A *Time* magazine cover story, “The Bombshell Memo,” observes that “in a star obsessed culture, Rowley is a healthy reminder that it’s often people who shun the limelight—strong-willed people with more guts than glamour—who force themselves to step up and speak out while everyone else is keeping quiet.”

But is she a “healthy reminder” or a disturbing one?



personal safety that she spoke with Enron security personnel saying, ‘Mr. Fastow might do something vindictive.’

Our culture doesn’t reward those who step outside the chain of command. When things go terribly wrong, the followers are allowed to come out of the shadows to explain what went wrong, but there are strong forces at work to suppress such knowledge at times when it might actually alter the bad result. And even those who have been successful in raising their voices often carry a stigma for their actions. In many cases, the Slovenian proverb, “Speak the truth and leave immediately after,” is necessary advice.

This situation won’t improve until more of us learn the appropriate skills for the fine art of following. Too often, the person who has important contrarian views to share is placed in an adversarial relationship with organizational management—without the knowledge of what tools to use to advance his or her concerns to the forefront. And the fear of stepping outside the shadows of the leader is often overwhelming.

Following a leader is not a child’s game, and when it comes to voicing conscientious dissent, more specific and mature rules of engagement are needed. We may not require 13,446 titles on the “Fine Art of Following,” but a few would be helpful.

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