What “follower” qualities should I take on as a “leader?”

There are many skills that both followers and leaders share.

Redefine the term “follower.”
By your actions and input, make this a powerful word. Become an active member of the group and let the “leader” know what you need and what you can offer to the group.

Take on your own responsibility.
As a follower, take the opportunity to be a part of decision-making and planning processes, learn how to do some of the work on your own without relying on the leader, and accept opportunities when the leader is delegating tasks. This will provide you with a feeling of ownership in the group.

Learn effective communication skills.
Develop the ability to provide effective feedback to the group and to the leader. Let him or her know the needs of the group. This also involves being able to listen carefully and evaluate what is happening in the group.

Accept feedback.
If feedback is honestly and constructively given, listen to the giver and examine the feedback to see if it is valid or not. While you are not obligated to accept every piece of positive and negative feedback, it is important not to discount it right away.

Leadership occurs in any role and in any activity in which you are involved. It occurs within groups of friends, in living situations, at work, during classes, and in student organizations. Leadership doesn’t mean dominating or taking over, but rather encouraging others to be the best they can be and helping the group you’re in to work together constructively. In fact, the best leaders may not have a title or an official role, but may simply be an effective “follower” or member in the group to whom others look. This brochure will discuss how leading and following can combine to make you and those around you successful.

The term “follower” is used throughout this brochure. Often this term may have a negative connotation, bringing to mind someone who cannot think for him or herself or who follows blindly. However, several leadership theorists use it in order to describe constructive ways of acting as part of a group. The followers determine whether the leader has the ability to lead. They actually have the ability to confer leadership on individuals. In fact, all leaders have been, and still are, followers in different areas. To be successful, you need to be able to switch back and forth between both roles.

What are some key “leadership” characteristics?

The list of what it takes to be a leader could go on and on. There are, however, some key competencies that are important for leaders to know. If you don’t master these, the rest won’t be worth knowing. Start with these tips and the rest will follow.

Integrity: Leaders must be true to themselves. Leaders who behave consistently with their value system are perceived as honest and inspire trust in their followers. Leaders need to know themselves well to be true to their values, as well as to create a vision for their group that comes from the heart.

Autonomy: Leaders must be self-directed. Individuals who can act without an authority figure telling them what to do each step of the way can make the decisions necessary to move their group towards its goals. Leaders need to see options, make choices, and solve problems in order to direct themselves and others. With the self-confidence that arises from experience and self-knowledge, leaders have the strength to make choices that help to accomplish a vision.

Group dynamics: Leaders must involve group members. Those who incorporate group members’ ideas into the group vision are recognizing that they can’t be leaders without followers. Leaders need to know which leadership style fits each “membership” style, and they need good communication skills. They need to pay attention to their group’s energy and cohesiveness, using motivating and teambuilding techniques.

Human relations: Leaders must use the human touch. Individuals who create an organizational environment in which all participants feel welcomed, respected, and valued are exercising their influence well and can maintain group membership and energy. Leaders need to know the difference between leadership, management, and power-wielding. They need to know how to create an inviting atmosphere. Leadership is an interactive process between people and requires attention to the use of power.

Positioning: Leaders must see the big picture. The effective leader knows who to see when the group needs outside help, how to ask for assistance and get the resources the group needs, and how to steer the group through the policies and procedures that exist on most campuses. Leaders need to know which tasks require the help of people outside the group and what the group can do on its own.

Task effectiveness: Leaders must get the job done. Competent leaders match tasks to followers’ abilities and motivations, provide training in organization tasks, and seek to streamline work so it flows efficiently. While leaders do not need to perform every task for an organization, they do need to be able to delegate tasks and follow through to the completion of a project. They need to be familiar with the tasks that their organizations routinely perform.

Vision: Leaders must see the future. Those leaders who have developed a clear vision, with the assistance of followers, and who constantly articulate the vision to followers empower their group to accomplish more than one person could when acting alone. Leaders need to solicit their members for their dreams and to formulate goals from those desires.

Commitment: Leaders must take leadership to heart. Those who persist in the pursuit of a vision and who consistently use well all the competencies of leadership succeed throughout their commitment. Patience, hard work, and a passion for the future of one’s organization are critical attributes of a leader.