

STRATEGY ACTIVATION CANVAS

The new standard for acceleration strategies.
For decision-makers and leaders of a new generation.

Ansgar Thiessen & Robert Wreschniok





FOREWORD BY

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With inspiring practical examples
from Allianz, Baloise, E.ON, Hamburg
Commercial Bank, Microsoft,
NORD/LB, Swisscom and Swiss Re.

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The genius of the person
who knows is worthless
without the genius of the
person who understands.

Pablo Picasso

Foreword

Followers to the front

The Strategy Activation Canvas comes at a right time – in fact, it’s a management handbook which is almost overdue. For a long time, the emphasis on how to develop societies, industries, corporations or teams has been put on leaders and their system of bringing change to people. This playbook takes a refreshingly different approach, proclaiming an inclusion, a participation, in short the activation of humans in order to unleash the belief in a common goal, shaping a bright future together. This change of perspective – from leaders to followers – is at the heart of modern management literature indeed. Let me explain why.

Past

The history of followership – as theory, as practice – is not pretty. For most of human history the interest has been in leaders, not followers. Nor has this changed during the heyday of what I call the 'leadership industry,' the last forty years or so during which have mushroomed countless leadership centers, programs, courses, workshops, books, articles, webinars, videos, conferences, consultants and coaches that claim to teach people, usually for money, how to lead.

There have been a few exceptions to this general rule, when the emphasis shifted from leaders to followers, such as, for example, in the 1950s and '60s when social scientists sought to explain what happened in Germany during the Nazi period not just by looking at the leadership class but at the citizenry more generally. Still, in recent decades the leadership industry has been fixated on the person(s) at the top while remaining largely oblivious to those in the middle and at the bottom.



Barbara Kellerman
Harvard Kennedy School

Why this should be so has never been completely clear. After all, it is widely agreed that leadership is a relationship which requires, at a minimum, a leader and one follower. Moreover, the first is dependent, entirely, on the second.

There can be no leadership without followership, no leader without a single follower, which makes the omission of followers from the leadership industry that much more puzzling. But, as indicated, the leadership industry is a money maker. This suggests that part of the problem is incentive. We leadership 'experts' typically get paid for teaching people how to lead. We do not get paid – though we should – for teaching people how to follow.

Another part of the problem is semantic. The word itself – 'follower' – implies weakness and passivity. Its counterpart – 'leader' – suggests just the opposite. Strength, success, action and activity, and control. Yet if we take the time to define the word, 'follower,' the problem melts away. I have found this definition to be the most useful: Followers are subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors, and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line.

Defining followers this way has two obvious advantages. The first is clarity – followers are defined by rank, not behavior. The second is it makes it apparent that followers – those lower on the hierarchy of power, authority, and influence – do not necessarily follow. They usually follow, but they do not always.

Present

The fact that followers as I define them do not necessarily follow is important. For people in the present feel freer than they did in the past to disregard or even disobey people in positions of authority. Which is why leaders in recent decades have become weaker and followers stronger. Authority, which is associated with position, has diminished both in status and importance. Therefore, being in a higher position grants neither the respect that it once did, nor the trust.

This shift does not, obviously, apply in the same way to autocracies. In fact, in the last ten years most autocrats have become more authoritarian, not less, precisely in response to the point that I make. They recognize full well that unless they are more controlling now than they used to be – Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and China’s President Xi Jinping are examples – they will be in greater danger now of losing control than they would have been.

In liberal democracies in contrast – from the United States to the United Kingdom, from Chile to Ecuador to Bolivia – leaders have been weakened and followers strengthened. This shift applies as much to the private sector as to the public one. Consider this metric: The number of chief executive officers who left their posts in 2019 was the highest in the almost two decades since the tracking firm Challenger started counting.

Said Challenger’s head: ‘The number of chief executives who announced their departures in 2019 was staggering.’ So, why is it that business leaders are leaving their posts in droves? While the reasons are various, what I am suggesting is that highest

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on the list is followers – boards, clients, customers, suppliers, media, employees, the public – who have made the jobs of CEOs that much more difficult. That much more stressful, that much less rewarding in every way other than financially. CEOs remain obviously, by definition, in positions of authority. But equally obviously their positions of authority confer less power and less influence than they used to.

What this makes clear is that the old ways of looking at leadership have become antiquated and inadequate. To look at leadership only through the lens of the leader will no longer suffice. Instead, better now to see leadership as a system. The leadership system has three parts, each of which is equally important, and each of which impinges equally on the other two. The first part is the leader, the second is the follower, and the third is the context within which both leaders and followers necessarily are located.

Never
underestimate
the significance
of context.

In fact, just as the importance of the follower must never be underestimated, especially not now, in the third decade of the 21st century, so the importance of the context must never be underestimated either. Changes in culture and technology particularly have changed forever the balance of power and influence between leaders and followers – unless coercion is part of the equation.

Future

I am an American. So far be it from me to underestimate the importance of the leader. Having lived for four years in a country led by President Donald Trump was a vivid reminder if any were needed that leaders do matter. But, to understand the phenomenon that was Trump he cannot be looked at in isolation. He must be seen in tandem with his followers. And he must be seen within the context that is the United States of America in the here and now.

Trump was a disrupter, no doubt. But he could not possibly have disrupted without the support of, or at least the complicity of followers that ranged from ordinary Americans, specifically his dedicated and devoted base, to Senate Republicans, who nearly in their entirety remained for the duration of his presidency slavishly loyal. Similarly, this same man would never have been tolerated by his Republican peers even a decade earlier. The United States has, in short, changed. The political landscape, the political culture, was different in 2016 from what it was in 2006.

America had become more fiercely divided. Income inequity was that much more extreme. The collective conversation was harsher and coarser. And the technologies that were fledgling a decade previous had become that much more ubiquitous and, sometimes, insidious.

There are reasons why liberal democracies – and the individuals and institutions that populate them – are finding leadership and management more difficult now than before. No accident, for example, that in the last ten years the number of democracies around the world has significantly decreased, while the number of autocracies has significantly increased. As Freedom House recently put it with unsettling economy and accuracy, 'pluralism and democracy' are everywhere 'under assault.'

So, attention must be paid. It must be paid to leaders, and to followers, and to the various context within which they are situated. For the purposes of this essay though a concluding cautionary note: If you are a leader, better pay attention not only to yourself, but to your followers.

To your subordinates, your employees, your constituents, even to your peers. For only by paying less attention to yourself and more to those around you will you be able to navigate leadership in the twenty-first century successfully. Contexts are changing. Followers are changing. Which is why leaders who lead in the present as they did in the past do so at their peril.

If you share this idea of followership and if you want to shape your organisation towards a social movements, which activates its strategy broad scale, then the Strategy Activation Canvas must find its place in your bookshelf alongside central pieces of management literature.

Prof. Barbara Kellerman

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