

**Title:** Advancing Followership Discourse in Theory and Practice

**Short Description:**

Recently, there have been efforts geared towards advancing the discourse of followership both in the academic and organizational context, as individuals are becoming increasingly aware of the role they play as followers in the achievement of predetermined goals. To ensure that discourses on followership are given a well-deserved scholarly appreciation and recognition, it has become imperative to continue creating this awareness. This workshop will engage participants in both contemporary and historical perspectives on followership. More awareness of followership discourse(s) can help leadership scholars and organizational leaders recognize the importance of integrating followership into leadership education and having followership as a standalone field of study. Using the World Café approach, participants will be taken through the evolution of followership over the decades. Insights from round table discussions will be shared, and ideas for future applications will be developed.

**Detailed Abstract:**

Wherever a group of people gathers, there is bound to be an emergence of a leader-follower relationship (Van Vugt, 2006). While the importance of followership and followers in a leadership process and outcomes cannot be overemphasized, there is sparse academic research and discourses devoted to the study of followership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Leadership discourses and research have historically had the leader as their focus, with followers and their behaviors studied only in the context of leaders' development rather than that of followers (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Insufficient information and misunderstanding about the relationship between followership and leadership have largely constrained followership discourse (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

The concept of discourse began as far back as the 1970s and has been used differently across various fields (He, 2017; Liu & Guo, 2016). The study of discourse has been associated with the work of Michael Foucault (He, 2017), and Foucault's contribution "masks itself as an a-historical, universal, and scientific construct" that often influences the structure, organization, and usage of knowledge (Adams, 2017, para. 2). These constructs inspire social rules and systems that determine what meanings are given to knowledge (Adams, 2017; Moosavinia et al., 2019). Hence, it can be inferred that discourses are shaped by social power that governs the body of knowledge, not excluding discourses on followership.

In a bid to advance the discourse of followership in practice, Chaleff (2021) articulated in his book, *A Celebration of Followership*:

The researchers, educators, practitioners, trainers, and coaches who are engaged with the subject of followership are a highly motivated group that understands the power of the subject to change the way leadership is done and to improve the results. Nevertheless, when you talk with them, there is also a sense that much of the world still doesn't know

about followership or sufficiently value it. There is truth in this statement. But it is not the entire truth. (Chaleff, 2021, p. i)

Within *A Celebration of Followership*, Chaleff (2021) documents places in the world where followership—and courageous followership in particular—has made an impact. Due to the book's focus on Chaleff's (2009) model of courageous followership, it conveys only limited insight into broader perspectives and the longer history of followership. There is value in engaging leadership educators in an expanded scope of this work.

The World Café Method is a particularly promising tool for promoting and facilitating dialogue and is appropriate for gleaning insight from groups. The use of powerful questions focuses inquiry, surfaces assumptions and biases, and opens new possibilities for ideas and meaning (Brown et al., 2005). As noted by FSG (2021), “The World Café method is particularly useful when you want to be sure to explore a topic from multiple perspectives, to ensure that everyone in a room contributes to a conversation, and/or when you want to encourage participants to make new connections” (p. 1). Furthermore, World Café has been embraced as a participatory research method because “it not only produces data for the researchers but also has the potential to benefit the participants, as it facilitates dialogue and mutual learning, thus motivating their participation and responses” (Löhr et al., 2020, p. 1). According to the World Café Community Foundation (2022), World Café can take a variety of forms, but it generally includes the following components:

1. *Setting*: The host creates a “special” environment, often modeled after a café (e.g., small round tables covered with a checkered tablecloth, butcher block paper, and colored pens). The ideal grouping includes four chairs at each table.
2. *Welcome and Introduction*: The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the café etiquette, and putting participants at ease.
3. *Small-Group Rounds*: The process includes multiple 15- or 20-minute rounds of conversation for small groups seated around a table. At the end of each round, the participants move to different tables, though one individual may remain at the table to serve as the “table host” for the next round.
4. *Questions*: Each round is prefaced with a question specially crafted for the specific context and desired purpose of the World Café. The same questions can be used for more than one round, or they may build upon each other to focus the conversation or guide its direction.
5. *Harvest*: After the small groups (and/or in between rounds, as needed), individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group.

Additional facilitation guidance is provided in the World Café Community Foundation's (2015) *Quick Reference Guide for Hosting World Café*. The structure and flow of the session for the International Leadership Association conference will be as follows:

- Introduction to the concept of discourses, including related frameworks (10 minutes).
- Creation and curation of a followership timeline through session participants' contributions to a sticky wall (15 minutes).

- World Café on followership discourses (three rounds of 15 minutes each).
- Whole room discussion and debrief of prominent themes emerging from the World Café (10 minutes).
- Wrap-up and dialogue about opportunities for future application (10 minutes).

As a result of this workshop, participants will have a deeper understanding of how perspectives of followership have evolved over time and the need to advance followership discourse in theory and practice for the future. Open discussion about relevant followership concepts that can be taught in various organizational and educational contexts will allow participants to assess the value of potential workshop topics for their specific audiences. This may be particularly relevant for participants in the academic, government, or private industry who are considering how to build, recognize and appreciate a followership culture within their environment.

### **Key Takeaways:**

1. Document societal events over the past century that shaped perspectives on followership.
2. Examine the importance of discourse(s) for interpreting followership research and practice.
3. Unravel preliminary themes associated with followership discourse(s) over time.

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### **Facilitators:**

Facilitators include Eric Kaufman (Virginia Tech), Ira Chaleff (independent consultant), and Israel Oyedare (Virginia Tech). Eric Kaufman is the chair-elect for ILA's Followership member community, Ira Chaleff is the author of several prominent books on followership, and Israel Oyedare is a PhD student from Nigeria, where there is increasing attention to the importance of followership.