

Interview Questions for Allen Hamlin Jr, Author of *Embracing Followership* (Nov 13, 2019)

Ken Gosnell: Allen, thank you for sitting down with me today. CEO Experience believes that Well Done leadership can only happen when leaders learn to become better followers. Can you tell me why you felt like you needed to write your book *Embracing Followership*?

Answer: Before stepping into a leadership role, I was always concerned with ensuring that I was a good team member, making my best contributions and exhibiting excellent stewardship. I came across the idea of followership while reading a book entitled *A Vision of the Possible* by Daniel Sinclair. I then began to read nearly everything that had been published on followership, but still I didn't find the book that I needed. Everything out there was either academic, or addressed to leaders on how they can create good followers under them, or else was operating from a perspective of what followers can accomplish once they become leaders. I found myself asking, "But where is the book for me? To encourage me right now, right where I'm at, as a follower?" Since it wasn't available, I felt burdened by the Lord to write it, in hopes that it would serve as a guidebook for others like me.

Ken Gosnell: You share in the book that your faith in God has shaped your view of followership. Can you share more of how your faith has shaped your view of followership?

Answer: As I mentioned, stewardship—a thoroughly biblical concept—is one of my primary concerns; I want to be a good steward, which means engaging the resources, talents, opportunities, and relationships that God has given to me. When talking about followers, there is often a negative image attached, people that are little more than sheep or mindless lemmings. But with God in the picture, His fundamental invitation to us is to follow, and thus there is dignity and value attached to all of us in whatever role we may currently have. Other biblical concepts such as rest/Sabbath, calling, working in community (participating in the Body of Christ), honoring our leaders, submission, growth, and forgiveness are all prominent themes in my understanding of excellent followership.

Ken Gosnell: You write that followers are not people of mediocrity, but rather important contributors of every business. Can you explain more of how you see followers as important contributors?

Answer: In terms of sheer numbers, followers will be the majority of any group. Engaged followers are what give substance to an endeavor, taking a vision or a brainstorm and giving it life and legs through their efforts and involvement. Every follower has abilities, perspective, and experience and these are the fundamental resources that any organization has to work with, human resources. An excellent follower will contribute these resources to fulfilling the group's endeavors and common purpose. When a follower doesn't engage, or when the environment stymies followers from making their contributions, it is effectively robbing the organization of its most important capital.

Ken Gosnell: How is followership different than servant leadership?

Answer: In 2019, I completed an extensive blog series considering Robert Greenleaf's classic work on Servant Leadership, from a followership perspective (available here: <https://embracingfollowership.com/tag/greenleaf/>). For me, followership is the framework for us to consider our response to those in formal leadership roles over us and the nature of our engagement in whatever group or organization we're a part of. Since we are all subjected to someone else's authority, we are all followers in some sphere of life. However, some of us also have formal leadership roles, titles and responsibilities that further outline our organizational engagement. Servant leadership is a helpful

paradigm for considering how leaders can be follower-focused, concerned with the personal development and effective engagement of their subordinates. Followership is the other side of the relational dynamic, how we engage in contribution and relationship with our leaders, peers (fellow followers), and to the organization as a whole. We don't all operate under servant leaders, and yet there are still important obligations, as well as other opportunities for contribution, that we can and must make as excellent followers.

Ken Gosnell: Obviously it is important for Christian leaders to follow God's lead in every area of their life, which includes their business. Why would you encourage every leader to practice more followership in their company or organization?

Answer: When we create lists of leadership characteristics, we often identify such attributes as: having vision, influence, & ownership; taking responsibility; being a decision-maker; etc. But in my experience, these traits are not the sole purview of leadership: we should desire these characteristics to be present in any and every team member, every contributor to the organization. So we must intentionally cultivate an environment and a relational dynamic that encourages and facilitates each member in making his or her best contributions. God has brought all of these people together, with their particular combinations of attributes, at this time, in this place, for this work. If we do not value and enhance follower contributions, our organizations will miss some of what God has apportioned to fulfill our purposes. That's poor stewardship, and missed opportunities. Let's be faithful with what and whom the Lord has provided, and let's honor and encourage people at every level of our group endeavors so that they can similarly pursue excellent stewardship. It's a mutually supportive network that leads to greater effectiveness, improved satisfaction, and fulfillment of our goals and aims. I dedicate the entirety of Part VI of my book to helping leaders lead from a followership perspective, how to encourage and facilitate the kind of dynamic which will enhance opportunities for followers to make their most excellent contributions.

Ken Gosnell: What Bible verses do you think every leader should know and embrace who seek to become a better follower?

Answer: I wrote a follow-up companion volume, *A Discussion Guide for Teams & Small Groups*, which features Bible study material related to 12 of the main themes from *Embracing Followership*. In that resource, I cite or explore verses from many books of the Bible—there is a great deal in God's Word for us to consider as we apply ourselves to following with excellence! However, some of the key Scriptures that I think provide important starting places for considering our followership are > Matt 25:14-30; Rom 12:3-8; Eph 4:1-7 & 6:5-9; Phil 2:3-4; 1 Thess 5:12-24; Hebrews 13:7,12; 1 Pet 2:13-17.

Ken Gosnell: You write about excellence in followership. Can you explain more about how leaders can help followers excel at becoming a better follower?

Answer: While each follower is ultimately responsible for the quality of his or her engagement, leaders play a significant role in shaping the environment and establishing the values and norms which can contribute to the expression of excellence. Valuing the role and contributions of followers, receiving both communication and upward influence from followers, being accessible, and creating a shared culture of decision-taking (following on from decision-making) are all key ways of building a relational dynamic that will contribute to excellence. Fundamentally, I would say that it is the function of leaders to apply their access to resources, relational networks, and authority to remove obstacles and create opportunities *so that* followers can make their very best contributions.

Ken Gosnell: You make a case for growing followers. CEOs are often taught that we need to hire more leaders. How would you challenge that thinking and should leaders be more focused on finding good followers?

Answer: This common thinking goes back to my earlier point: that we often place certain characteristics under the heading of ‘leadership’ when what we’re actually identifying are virtues that we should want in every member of the organization. So we need to begin by recasting our thoughts about what is a good follower—and there are misconceptions on all sides of the issue: leaders’ thoughts about followers, followers’ thoughts about leaders, and even followers’ thoughts about themselves (this is the content of Chapters 2-4 of *Embracing Followership*). Focusing on hiring and developing excellent followers gives us the organizational capital we need to fulfill our purposes. Some followers will exert some informal leadership, some may eventually step into formal leadership roles, but all of them can and should embrace ownership of the common purpose, being committed to contributing and participating in the mutual network of support in coming under and alongside their peers and superiors. Those are the people our organizations need, and perhaps those are the people we have been seeking, but we’ve been unhelpfully labeling them as leaders when they do not and may not have these particular organizational roles, and yet their contributions as followers are necessary. An excellent leader can only truly be excellent if he or she has excellent followers implementing organizational vision and working toward organizational goals, so it’s in the best interests of both the individual leader and the organization as a whole to recruit members who will commit to the shared aims and apply their particular resources toward those purposes.

Ken Gosnell: How should leaders reward good followers? Do followers like to be promoted and should a CEO try to put a follower in a leadership role?

Answer: One of my burdens in writing *Embracing Followership* was to set aside the notion that everyone is or should be a leader; that seems to be the assumption of much leadership and followership literature. Followers (and leaders) are human beings, and as such should be encouraged and rewarded in usual ways such as individual affirmation/appreciation and public acknowledgment. Leaders can be important advocates for their excellent followers, helping to open up new opportunities to contribute in various spheres of the organization. There can also be a place for financial rewards as indicators of leadership’s awareness of a job well done; that depends upon the organizational culture and how the follower feels appreciated. But for me, promotion—in terms of upscaling the role—should be more about creating a platform that will enhance someone’s organizational contribution rather than merely as a reward. There are different skills needed for success in both leadership and followership—they’re different roles—and not everyone is suited to both; it can be a mistake to move an excellent follower into a leadership role which may limit their ability to contribute in their best ways and may make demands which are not suited to their particular gifts or passions.

Ken Gosnell: You state that leaders need followers and followers need leaders. Can you explain more about the relationship between leaders and followers.

Answer: I am always careful to ensure that we never make the issue out to be leaders *or* followers or followers *versus* leaders; the leader-follower dynamic should not be characterized by opposition or antagonism, but rather cooperation. Leaders and followers each have a distinct role to play in the successful operation and achievement of any group endeavor. It’s only by appreciating and encouraging one another, committing to co-laboring, that we can ensure we’re making best use of the human resources that we have available and thus making the best progress toward fulfilling our organizational aims. As with all relationships, communication, trust, honor, and forgiveness are vital; you can check the index of *Embracing Followership* to see how often I refer to these essential elements! Leaders and followers alike

are human beings, facing the same interpersonal needs, challenges, and realities concerning our faults and foibles. The more that we can properly acknowledge and appreciate the circumstances, calling, attributes, and gaps that exist in one another, the better positioned we will be to provide the necessary mutual support and encouragement as we each leverage our own abilities and perspectives so that we can together make fruitful progress toward fulfilling our organization's purpose and aims.

Allen, thank you for your time and thank you for your important work on the subject of followership.

Thank you, Ken. Your readers are welcome to continue the conversation with me, as I maintain an active blog at embracingfollowership.com and have produced a number of free downloadable resources to stimulate personal reflection and group discussion about various aspects of followership, leadership, and team to help encourage each individual and organization as they pursue their own opportunities for leading and following with excellence.