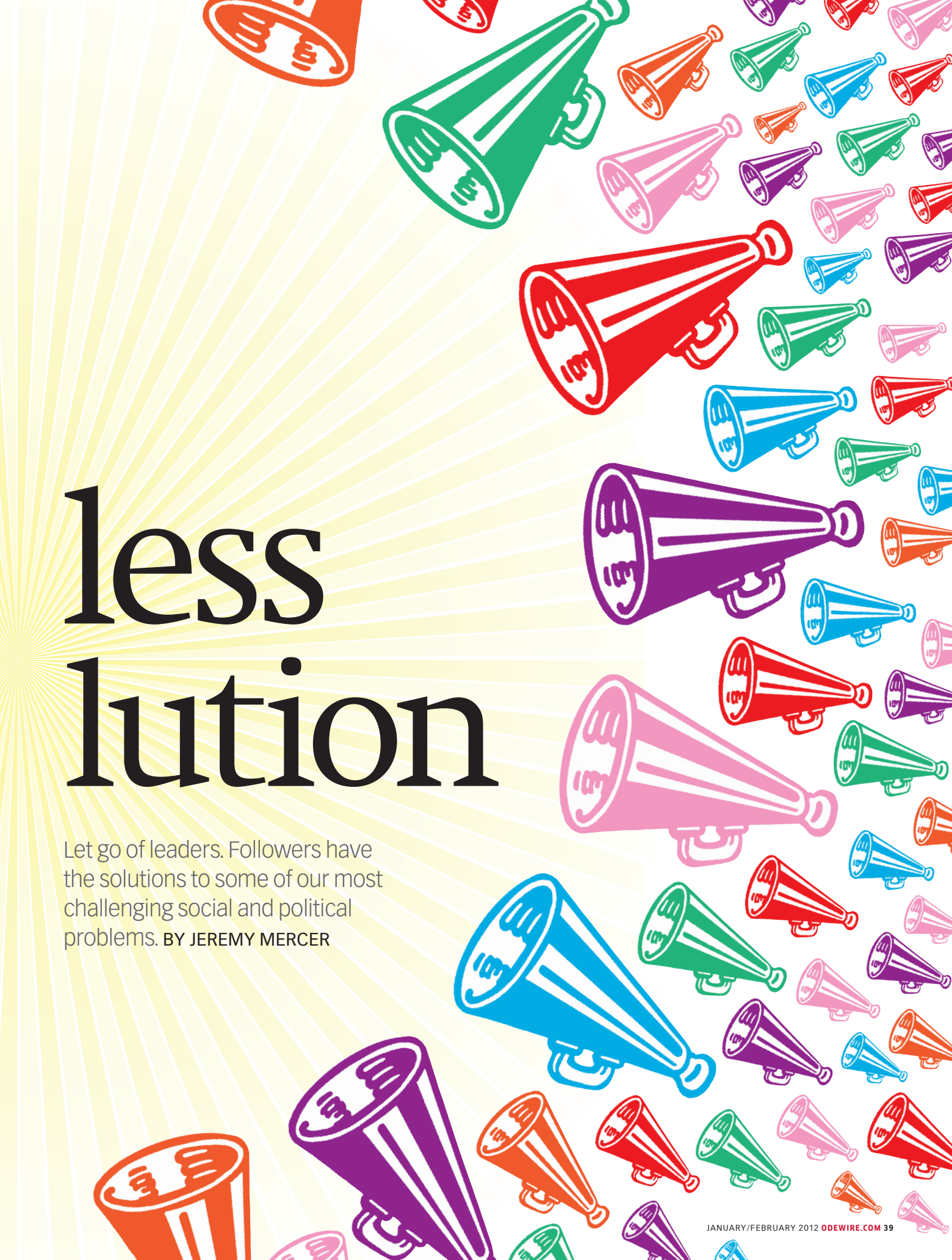


 Spirit

The leader revo



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Let go of leaders. Followers have the solutions to some of our most challenging social and political problems. BY JEREMY MERCER



WHEN THE FLORIDA Marlins were suffering through a mediocre spell of baseball in June of 2010, most people simply shrugged and said it was to be expected. After all, the team had one of the smallest budgets in the Major Leagues and began the season as 100-1 long shots to win the World Series. Nonetheless, the Marlins went ahead and fired their manager. “We believe we can do better and be better,” said Jeffrey Loria, the team’s owner.

But did this change make the team better? Barely. Under the old manager, Fredi González, the Marlins won 34 games and lost 36 for a winning percentage of .486. With the new manager, Edwin Rodriguez, the team went 46 and 46, a winning percentage of .500.

The Florida Marlins are no aberration. Using regression theory to even out standard swings between winning and losing, baseball statistician David Gasko analyzed more than 300 cases of managers being fired mid-season and concludes that this drastic step increases a team’s chance of winning by less than one-quarter of 1 percent. “It has no effect. A team that’s going to win 76 games with its old manager will win 76 games with its new manager,” says

Gasko. “The influence of a manager is more subtle than people think and it plays out over a longer term.”

What’s true for baseball is true of society as a whole. Research shows that in both political parties and corporate boardrooms, leaders are vastly overrated. Studies indicate CEOs have little effect on the overall performance of their companies; lower-ranking employees are the most vital resource. And although presidents and senators are lionized, grassroots movements have the biggest political impact. “This is the time of the follower,” says Barbara Kellerman, a professor at Harvard University’s

Kennedy School of Government and author of *Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders*. “The world is increasingly driven by people in the middle and down below, not the people traditionally conceived as leaders.”

We are just waking up to the decisive role followers play in our business, political and spiritual communities. Society has long had a noxious obsession with leadership, but a nascent followership movement is working to bring more respect, resources

great majority of people have a strong need for authority. ... It is the longing for the father that lives in each of us from his childhood days.”

Following is also among our most natural instincts, rooted deep in our evolutionary past. The need for good followers arose when our ancestors moved from jungles to open grasslands where they were more vulnerable to predators and needed better organization. Groups with good followers had a relative advantage over other clans



MANAGER EDWIN RODRIGUEZ OF THE FLORIDA MARLINS ARGUES WITH HOME PLATE UMPIRE TED BARRETT DURING A GAME AGAINST THE TAMPA BAY RAYS. THE FLORIDA MARLINS HOPED RODRIGUEZ WOULD IMPROVE THEIR GAME, BUT THE NEW MANAGER BARELY CHANGED ANY SCORES.

and recognition to those who toil out of the limelight. What’s more, by helping flatten oppressive hierarchies and re-establish more natural group dynamics, followerships may forge a world in which we’re all more satisfied with our jobs, our governments and our daily lives.

Following is one of our most nurtured qualities. As children, we learn nearly everything by following our parents, while over the years we are conditioned to follow orders after being repeatedly told to clean our rooms or raise our hands in class. Psychologist Sigmund Freud recognized this trait in *Moses and Monotheism*: “The

because they could focus their energies on survival instead of internal squabbling. From an evolutionary perspective, following became a favored genetic trait.

However, somewhere along the way, the natural system of following changed. According to Mark van Vugt, an evolutionary psychologist at VU University Amsterdam, for most of our history, human groups were relatively small—about 150 people, the so-called Dunbar number of maximum social efficiency—and had no fixed leader. Instead, leaders varied depending on the task at hand, whether it was fetching water, defending territory or



setting up camp. “If you went up to these groups and said, ‘Take me to your leader,’ they would look completely puzzled because that is a modern, Western concept,” says Van Vugt. “There is a disconnect between how leadership evolved and how it is practiced today.”

The first disconnect appeared about 10,000 years ago when civilizations became more complex, and permanent leadership structures were instituted using systems such as monarchies. The divide

the breach between leaders and followers, it attracts unsuitable leaders. *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom tells how the formidable Apache tribe fell into disarray once the American military gave its leaders cows; as soon as there was a material benefit to leadership, power struggles ensued, hastening the downfall of the Apache nation.

This fixation on leaders has also spawned a \$50-billion-a-year industry that

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ROBERT E. KELLEY, AUTHOR OF *THE POWER OF FOLLOWERSHIP*



U.S. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA, A MAN WHO ONLY TWO YEARS AGO WAS WIDELY SEEN AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER, FINDS HIMSELF AT THE MERCY OF POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP, INTRACTABLE DIPLOMATIC PROBLEMS AND ADVERSE ECONOMIC CYCLES.

began to grow during the past century as the Industrial Revolution led to assembly line economies wherein people were placed in confined jobs at the mercy of hands-on bosses. As Van Vugt jokes, there were no micromanagers on the savannah.

The cultural trends of the past 30 years have only aggravated the situation. Movies, TV biopics and mainstream biographies depict leaders as indispensable heroes and followers as unimaginative sheep. Meanwhile, leaders receive ever-escalating rewards: In America, the average CEO earns 343 times as much as the average worker. This windfall not only breeds resentment and widens

sells leadership seminars and leadership books and advanced university degrees in leadership. By one estimate, for every 1,000 publications on leadership, there’s just one devoted to followers. That’s a colossal economic machine intent on selling us the premise that the only worthwhile existence is that of leader.

ONE PERSON WHO’S OBSERVED the debilitating consequences of this is Michele Woodward, an executive life coach based in Washington, D.C., and author of two books on how to live a happier life. In her work, she sees



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OF *FOLLOWERSHIP*

gifted individuals who are frustrated or depressed because they don't fit the mold of what she calls “loudership,” the rough, brazen style of people like former GE boss Jack Welch. “People have been socialized and inculcated to believe leadership is the virtuous model that all successful people achieve,” Woodward says. “People with strength for implementation or following things through feel like failures because they are measuring themselves by this impossible yardstick.”

This is part of what Mary Uhl-Bien, co-director of the Institute of Innovative Leadership at the University of Nebraska, calls the tragedy of our culture's “romance of leadership.” Society is so eager to attribute extraordinary skills to leaders that they receive credit for the contributions of lower-ranked employees, creating “a demeaning effect” for all followers.

And the effect isn't just demeaning; it's corrosive. When employees are faced with hierarchical, authoritarian leaders, studies show such employees are more passive, less invested in results and unwilling to contribute ideas or criticisms that might benefit the group. Even more perilous is what Keith Grint of the Warwick Business School calls “destructive consent”: followers who are content to watch leaders make bad decisions because such followers aren't invested in the company's success and might even secretly enjoy seeing their leaders fail.

ACCORDING TO DAVID COLLINSON of the Lancaster University Management School, this obsession with leadership can also rob followers of dignity that is integral to human existence. Collinson has observed employees everywhere from truck factories to oil rigs and sees people dividing their lives between “indifferent me at work” and “real me outside of work.” He warns against this. “It's a way that people cope with not being in control of their lives in the workplace,” says Collinson. “Psychologically, they become two people, which isn't necessarily a healthy situation.”

Indeed, polls consistently show that between one-half and two-thirds of people are dissatisfied with their jobs, while 70 percent report that their biggest problem is

their boss. This profound sense of alienation is the culmination of the leader/follower disconnection. And when people reject such a major part of their identities as their jobs, “unhealthy” is an understatement.

Any conversation about the dangers of passive followership usually begins with a tyrant like Adolf Hitler and the horrors that can occur when the masses unquestioningly follow a charismatic leader. It is no surprise, then, that one of the most eloquent calls for active followership came from a direct witness to Hitler's rise. In the 1930s, the playwright Bertolt Brecht watched as Hitler and Joseph Stalin exploited the follower instinct to build totalitarian regimes. Terrified by how easily Hitler's cult of personality swept up unthinking followers, Brecht wrote a poem called “A Worker Reads History” as an appeal to question the supposed omnipotence of leaders. One stanza asks,

*Caesar beat the Gauls.
Was there not even a cook in his army?
Phillip of Spain wept as his fleet
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no
other tears?
Frederick the Greek triumphed in the Seven
Years War.
Who triumphed with him?*

“From an early age, we learn to be followers and to swallow our questions,” notes Norman Roessler, a Brecht scholar at Temple University. “Brecht saw doubt and skepticism as among the highest human traits.”

Another exile from mid-20th-century totalitarianism offered a broader solution. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, philosopher Karl Popper argued that people cede control of their lives by idealizing leaders. He blamed Plato, saying the Athenian philosopher saddled society with the toxic concept of “philosopher king,” a leader who shuns wealth and fame and cares only about justice and the welfare of the people. In fact, Plato went so far as to declare, “The greatest principle of all is that nobody, whether male or female, should be without a leader. . . . In a word, he should teach his soul, by long habit, never to dream of acting independently.”

This concept of the ideal leader causes



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IRA CHALEFF, AUTHOR OF *THE COURAGEOUS FOLLOWER*



THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT, HERE AT ZUCCOTTI PARK IN NEW YORK, HAS SPREAD INTERNATIONALLY WITHOUT A LEADER.

by witnesses. Meanwhile, people from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya are showing what can happen when followers declare en masse, “We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore”—and have the technological tools at hand to do something about it.

“In the political arena, the follower is driving the action far more clearly and vigorously than anywhere else,” says Harvard’s Kellerman. “The Tea Party, the Arab Spring, the Berlin Wall—except in utterly totalitarian places like North Korea, it is all coming from the bottom up.”

In the late 1970s, Robert Kelley spent long weeks on the road working as an executive consultant. One evening, in yet another anonymous hotel room, he happened to open a desk drawer and found the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. It struck him then that a powerful parallel existed between the two books. Just as the teachings of Jesus probably wouldn’t have taken hold without the efforts of Paul, Joseph Smith’s religion would never have blossomed without Brigham Young. “I realized there was an external face and an internal face to any great endeavor,” says Kelley. “Then I said, ‘Wait a minute, when you go past that second person, there’s a

whole other group of people who are making it happen.”

This hotel room epiphany was the birth of followership. Although the term was coined in the 1920s, it only entered the mainstream in the 1980s when Kelley published *The Power of Followership*. He argued that followers were an underappreciated resource, and too many passive followers were a liability. So Kelley shifted focus and began lobbying for candid work environments where followers have value and voice. Within the notoriously hierarchical business world, it was tough slogging at first, but followership gained traction, partly due to real world events—9.11, the Catholic Church’s abuse scandals, the collapse of Enron—when followers’ warnings were ignored with catastrophic results.

Another reason followership took hold was the growing body of evidence showing just how dependent leaders are on their followers. In one study, René Olie of the Erasmus University Rotterdam analyzed the performance of 45 Dutch companies and found changing CEOs had little impact on a company, but a changeover among lower-ranking executives had serious consequences. Similarly, the economist Boris Groysberg tracked the performance



of Wall Street leaders when they changed companies. In his book *Chasing Stars*, he concluded these star performers generally perform poorly in their next jobs—because their colleagues and followers were heavily involved in their initial successes.

Today, one of the most energetic advocates for proactive followership is Ira Chaleff, the author of *The Courageous Follower* and a man known as “the anti-Dilbert” for his workplace optimism. He teaches followers to confront leaders effectively and empathize so they don’t get trapped with “philosopher king” expectations. “It’s important to risk the discomfort of honest dialogue in the workplace,” says Chaleff. “It’s about improving communication and collaboration. And yes, it’s a step toward creating healthier relationships built on mutual respect and admiration.”

Chaleff’s methods have been adopted by such diverse organizations as federal employee groups in Washington, D.C., and police training programs in California. In a larger sense, the followership philosophy is revolutionizing workplaces. Within the airline industry, excessive deference to pilots was causing safety problems, so airline crews now get training on how to question authority. Even the military, that bastion of command-control decision making, is adopting followership. U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta says the rank and file needs to be consulted about upcoming budget cuts, and for the cuts to be successful, there has to be buy-in on all levels.

All of this is encouraging for the founder of modern followership. But Kelley has higher hopes and says the same philosophy can be applied to social issues. “Whether it be with Al Qaeda or drug dealers or bullying in school,” says Kelley, “it’s all about followership: Teaching people to think for themselves, to exercise their critical

thinking, to learn to stand up to bad leaders who promote hurting others.”

IN A RELIGION THAT REFERS TO ITS members as a “flock”—the Christian community—it’s surprising to see followership embraced. But the movement is seen as an antidote to leader-centric television evangelists and mega-churches, not to mention the authoritarianism of the Catholic tradition. The followership philosophy is underpinned by passages like this from the Gospel of Matthew: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you.”

In this light, Rusty Ricketson, pastor

examples such as young Muslim men being twisted into suicide bombers by al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, passive followers can lose themselves in any mainstream religion. Consequently, followership has become a foundation of the Barnabas Ministry, a group dedicated to helping people cope with unhealthy or abusive relationships with churches. Earlier this year, a remarkable paper appeared in the journal *Science*. Researchers studying baboon troops in Kenya concluded that active followers—the beta males, in animal behavior parlance—enjoy healthier lifestyles because they don’t incur the same stress as alpha males. Sure, beta baboons have fewer mating opportunities, but they are able to devote more time to

those opportunities while leaders spend their energy protecting their status and guarding their mates. “Results show that life at the top has a real downside,” notes Susan Alberts, co-author of the study.

If being a follower is a good thing in the natural world, this suggests that our obsession with leadership could be artificial, and something as basic as a

fresh focus on followership might restore a truer social balance and create richer, more interconnected communities.

Consider Twitter. People still measure themselves by how many “followers” they have. That much hasn’t changed. But to gain followers on Twitter, you must also follow others. There is a leadership/followership equilibrium. For a new generation, followership is losing its stigma—and followers are discovering their voices. ■

JEREMY MERCER, a fierce follow the leader competitor throughout elementary school, has no qualms about declaring himself an all-star follower.

RESEARCHERS STUDYING BABOON TROOPS IN KENYA CONCLUDED THAT ACTIVE FOLLOWERS—THE BETA MALES, IN ANIMAL BEHAVIOR PARLANCE—ENJOY HEALTHIER LIFESTYLES BECAUSE THEY DON’T INCUR THE SAME STRESS AS ALPHA MALES.



and professor at the Luther Rice Seminary and University in Georgia, wrote *Followers First* to remind people that church should be about the shared spiritual search, not earthly power structures. “If we perceive each other as fellow followers, we are talking about a common beginning point for all people,” says Ricketson.

Christianity is far from the only spiritual movement that seeks to humble its leaders. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “Let no one say that you are a follower of Gandhi. You are not followers but fellow students, fellow pilgrims, fellow seekers, fellow workers.” For just as poor leader/follower relationships in the workplace can lead to split personalities, a poor leader/follower balance in a spiritual setting can result in a follower’s personality becoming eclipsed. Beyond extreme