

Give Me a Reason to Follow

An Interview With Taylor University's
Dr. Eugene Habecker

Before launching Taylor University's hectic fall semester, Dr. Habecker graciously took time to share his insights about a leader's responsibility to his or her followers.

CMR: In this CMR issue, Pat MacMillan states that "As leaders, we must lead in such a way that our people want to leave nothing on the table – hold nothing back in reserve." What do you think are some of the greatest challenges in motivating people to follow?

Habecker: First, I don't think leaders motivate followers. Rather, leaders work to align what needs to be done in an organization with what a potential follower is motivated to do. Jim Collins' reference to making sure you have the right people on the bus and in the right seat is part of this. But there's more.

I don't believe there are unmotivated people in organizations. Deep down all people, including leaders, have a motivation to do something ... to follow something – someone, some vision, some cause. So leaders don't create motivation out of thin air as much as they help unleash or provide a channel for people to put into action what they are motivated to do.

One of the ways leaders can help unleash or channel motivation is to create clarity around an organization's mission, vision and core values. When these are collaboratively developed, understood, and owned—organizational clarity can help channel and unleash what people are already motivated to do.

A further problem is that some people in organizations are in positions where they're called upon to exercise responsibilities in ways that are inconsistent with their motivation or life calling. Unfortunately, that describes some leaders. In these situations, even the most "dynamic" leader isn't going to change things long-term with a compelling call to action.

CMR: Do leaders need to give people a reason to follow?

Habecker: Let me first make a distinction between one who holds a position of authority with subordinates and a leader who has followers. In the former case, a subordinate tends to be one who holds an "I have to do this" attitude. In the latter case, a follower is someone who has an "I want to do this" attitude. Good leaders work hard to see subordinates become followers.

I'm always amazed as I read the biblical texts how leaders who could have demanded that people follow chose not to do demand that. Whether David, Moses, Nehemiah, or others—we often see people being presented with the challenge, then *invited* to follow. The biblical texts are filled with responses like "let us do it." In other words, the focus shifts from something being the "leader's idea" to something becoming "our idea." In the biblical scenarios, of course, the leader usually attempted to context the direction given within the overall framework of God's calling or direction. And so should we.

Good leaders, in addition, give followers a reason to follow. And here is where the matter of trust comes into play. Leaders need to be trustworthy, in every situation. Followers need to know that their best interests will always be part of any discussion where their leader is involved. Often a leader wants to know whether the followers believe in the leader. But *perhaps the more important question is whether the leader believes in the follower.*

Keep in mind that sharing a leadership direction with followers, which is subsequently embraced by them, is a kind of confirmation of the Holy Spirit's leading. Why? Because given the frequent biblical emphasis on unity within the body of Christ, I don't believe the Holy Spirit will lead those leaders and followers who are committed to walking in his ways in opposite and divisive directions. To do so would violate the unity of the body of Christ.

CMR: What does leading by example really mean?

Habecker: Integrity has everything to do with walking one's talk ... with making sure there is alignment between what one says and what one does. Often, we experience a gap between the expectation and the action. Those kinds of gaps demoralize people.

Leaders ought to be willing to do the most undesirable task in the organization. One of Taylor University's distinguished sons was Sammy Morris, who died during his student days in 1893. When he was asked to state his preference for a dorm room, he simply said he wanted the room nobody else wanted. That's modeling servant leadership by example. Mother Teresa was another who led in this way. Obviously, our Lord Jesus was the perfect example of this.

CMR: What are some best practices for leaders and followers?

Habecker: First, understand that good leaders follow and good followers lead. I've never known of anyone who was always the leader. A person may hold a position of authority, but the effective leaders surround themselves with people who are more knowledgeable in their fields than might be true of them. That leader is wise indeed if he/she follow the wisdom and counsel of others.

Here at Taylor, members of our University Cabinet in their assigned areas of responsibility are more knowledgeable than I. I'd make a huge mistake if I didn't follow their counsel on many issues. It's in that sense that those followers also lead. And in the context of organizations, leaders and followers

are constantly being leaders who follow and followers who lead.

Second, and Patrick Lencioni has helped me here, good leaders constantly push for organizational clarity and insist on having healthy leadership teams. Succeed here and good things can happen.

And third, the biblical texts are foundational for any leader and follower. The fruit of the Spirit text in Galatians; the great text in 1 Corinthians 13; the words of our Lord in the gospels – all of these represent best practices for leaders and followers. The basic theology of the Christian faith is built around the idea of being a follower. Christ called us to be followers, even as he in essence was a follower of his Father. Paul challenged his readers to be followers of himself, even as he followed Christ.

CMR: As a university president, what advice do you give to students regarding leadership?

Habecker: Here at Taylor, we work hard on transparency. It utterly amazes me how non-transparent people can be in relationships. Deals are struck in back rooms that would never be discussed at the table. People make or receive anonymous phone calls or send anonymous letters. We try to make sure we keep people in the loop, staying transparent with one another. Pat Lencioni talks about vulnerable trust, where we have the courage, in the spirit of transparency, to note our failures as well as our successes. We support one another, even in our difficulties.

We had a difficult experience several months ago when we lost five members

of our university community in a tragic accident. This was then followed by a discovery, widely reported in the media, that two of the students had been mis-identified. While the coroner's office took full responsibility for the error, it was nevertheless a difficult moment for all of us. As I walked with our student body president to do a very difficult press conference, I shared that there are situations where you simply have to cast yourself completely on the Lord and let him be your strength.

I also try to make clear to students that God is ready to use them now in leadership and followership. They don't have to wait to start leading until after they graduate. I tell them they don't have to go through a leadership curriculum to be good leaders. Sometimes it's better if they first learn more about being good followers. So we work hard at modeling good leadership and followership for them as students. And then we talk about real time. It's a very stimulating environment for all of us as learners.

Dr. Eugene B. Habecker, president of Taylor University, Upland, Ind., has held many leadership positions throughout his career, including president of the American Bible Society (ABS) and Huntington (Ind.) College. He is the author of four books: *Affirmative Action in the Independent College*, *The Other Side of Leadership*, *Leading with a Follower's Heart* and *Re-Discovering the Soul of Leadership*. You may contact him at president@taylor.edu.



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