

Followership: An Australian University Dilemma?

David A. Holloway*

Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

E-mail: D.Holloway@murdoch.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

Exclusive top-down leadership and decision-making is a key feature of the version of 'managerialism' that is prevalent in the higher education sector. This paper challenges that dominant organisational approach. It uses a qualitative case study of followership philosophy and practices at Murdoch University to argue that there is a need to reframe the followership/leadership divide. The end result is to reconstruct the passive pejorative version of the 'follower' to a more 'active follower' role. The leadership role is then redefined to be an important, but not exclusive, part of the organisational decision-making process. The adaptability and self-organising capability of the workforce requires an inclusive, not exclusive, decision-making methodology to unlock and realise the full future potential of the modern university.

Keywords: *Universities; Followership; Leadership; Organisational culture; Managerial hegemony.*

INTRODUCTION

Followership is the often overlooked but vital element in the leadership landscape in organisations both private and public. A simple experiment reveals the dominance of the concept of leadership over the more subordinated notion of followership. A web search using Google Scholar shows 1,370,000 hits for the search topic 'leadership' whilst there are only 2,320 hits for the topic 'followership' (Google Scholar, 2006a; 2006b). Leadership has been, and still is, a 'hot' topic in the popular press as well as in practitioner/consultant and academic circles. Followership is not (Chaleff, 2003; Raelin, 2003; Dixon & Westbrook, 2003; Kelley, 1992; Hollander, 1992; Vanderslice, 1988; Litzinger & Schaefer, 1982).

This paper questions and challenges that dominant paradigm. It analyses the issue of followership as part of a larger qualitative case study into decision-making processes at Murdoch University (MU). It argues that there is a need to reframe the more negative organisational 'reading' and practice of followership such that the traditional leadership/followership dualism is dissolved and reconstituted more positively and proactively in the modern university. This implies significant changes in organisational culture; communication processes; leadership ethos; and, management mindsets before, what I term, 'active' followership can emerge as a realistic practice within current university bureaucracies. This paper is consequently constructed in four parts. The next details the MU case study site and informing approach; the second section analyses the extent of managerial hegemony within the version of 'managerialism' that has evolved in the Australian higher education sector. The

following two sections then proceed to analyse and critique the practice of followership within the MU organisational context.

Case Study Site and Organisational Background

Murdoch University Tertiary Institution (MU) is a research intensive medium-sized university in Australia first established in 1972. Murdoch University (MU) is one of four public universities and one private university located in Perth, Western Australia.¹ The University is the smallest in size of the public universities with three campuses: the main campus at South Street and satellites at Rockingham and Peel. The University has a high, national reputation for its teaching quality and research quantum. The institution like many others is strategically positioning itself within the series of reforms to higher education that the current federal government has brought in during the last decade.

The University consists of nineteen schools within which there are usually several discipline groupings. There is a Head of School in charge of the administrative and academic responsibilities within each of these designated academic organisational units (AOUs). The schools are then aggregated into three Divisions under an Executive Dean—each of these Executive Deans has been appointed from within the academic ranks. The university has been growing steadily in student numbers and equivalent full time students over the past two decades. The majority of students are non-school leavers forming nearly sixty percent of the student population (Murdoch University, 2006).

In addition there are a number of administrative divisions each currently managed by a Deputy Vice Chancellor². The university has a Vice Chancellor as the top bureaucratic officer of the institution. S/he is effectively the organisational chief executive officer (CEO). S/he reports to the university governing body headed by the Chancellor who is usually an eminent member of the public. The University is not unusual or unique in having this type of organisational structure.

¹ The other universities are the University of Western Australia (the oldest); Curtin University (with a technology focus); Edith Cowan University (the newest with a teaching and applied research focus) and the University of Notre Dame (a private Catholic university).

² This is a recent organisational move implemented earlier this year. During the period primarily analysed in this paper the title was Pro Vice Chancellor.

Participant Data Collection

The sample for the qualitative case study component of this paper was a group of fifteen interview participants selected from across the different community groups within Murdoch University. They included a mix of students, academic staff, administrative staff and members of senior management—two of the interviewees were members of the senior executive group and two others were senior administrative staff members. The actual interviews were conducted between October 2004 and February 2005³.

The sample group was a non-probabilistic purposive or judgemental sampling whereby the participants involved in this study were chosen from the existing organisational networks of the author (Neuman, 2000: 198). This sampling method used those existing social networks and was built upon these relationships. It also allowed *opportunistic observations* of happenings that occurred before, during and after interviews. The participants were known to the author who was often present and interacted with them—in different organisational and social contexts—for extended periods of time which went well beyond the interview times. As a result the participants were observed in different organisational scenarios over lengthy periods of time.

Respondent data was collected through the use of an in-depth semi structured interview. Each interview was planned to last approximately one hour and each was tape recorded with the written consent of the participant. After each interview was completed the data was transcribed from the tape onto separate word processed documents. Secondary archival data was also collected from diverse sources such as annual reports; electronic sources; official university minutes; official and publicly available university documents; and, email communications.

³ In this study the author has been an academic staff member of the Murdoch Business School for more than fifteen years which brings also a depth of ethnographic richness to the analysis of the events and followership practices within the institution.

Interviews

All participants interviewed were volunteers and the prime research method was open-ended semi-structured, conversational interviews.⁴ This approach can be classified as a variation of conventional anthropological ethnography, which has been adapted to this case study of decision-making and organisational culture at Murdoch University.

An interview or conversation with a purpose is an art rather than a skill (Berg, 1995: 29). Berg refers to three distinct types of interviews: standardized interviews in which the questions scheduled are formally structured; a non-standardized interview which does not have a schedule of formal questions and does not know what primary questions to ask and tends to be highly exploratory in nature; and, a semi-standardized—or semi-structured—interview which allows the researcher to use broadly predetermined questions and topics (1995: 33). This study used the last type. The semi-structured interview was used to keep the conversation within the framework of the subject of study. The same planned questions were utilised as much as possible to assist the respondent to concentrate on the central issues but additional questions and variations were used depending on the flow of the conversation during the interview. In addition, a semi-structured interview gave an opportunity for the respondents to raise additional relevant themes.

MANAGERIAL DECISION-MAKING PREROGATIVE: PUBLIC SECTOR

Managerialism, the early umbrella term for the reforms that have occurred in the past two decades in this country, involves the introduction to the public sector of private sector concepts and approaches. These include the use of statements of objectives; corporate plans; development of performance indicators; devolution of responsibility; greater use of risk management and (ultimately) evaluation of outcomes and objectives. The result is a shift away from concentrating primarily on accountability to a minister of the crown to a greater emphasis on “...what governments do and how well they do it”

⁴ This style of interviewing is a compromise between unstructured and highly structured interview techniques. While unstructured interviews (those without particular questions) tend to reveal a broad range of information which can be difficult to analyse, highly structured interviews (such as those in a face to face survey) may not elicit any insightful information because the right questions may not have been asked. Thus, the semi structured interview gives the researcher and interviewee some degree of direction while, at the same time, empowering the interviewee to pursue their own agendas—other topics of special interest and/or concern that are related to decision-making at Murdoch University.

(Weller & Lewis, 1989: 1). The intention of this management reform is to have outcome and achievement oriented public sector organisations maximising value for money in a world of scarce resources.

The resulting prevalent senior executive mindset favours a market forces, economic rationalist, top-down decision making approach to university management in Australia and overseas (Tourish, 2006; Holloway & Holloway, 2005; Yelder & Codling, 2004; Thornton, 2004; Holloway, 2004; Eveline, 2004; Bessant, 2002). The evidence in the literature is quite clear that managerialism has led to the corporatisation of universities in Australia and overseas. This corporatisation trend has been blamed for diverse and negative outcomes including creating an overall 'climate of fear' (Bessant, 2002) and even 'corrosive leadership' resulting in:

...the perception by managers that they are a new elite whose role is to increase productivity and maximise limited resources through constant surveillance and auditing has contributed to the normalisation of a corrosive form of leadership (Thornton, 2004: 23).

Despite a large number of critics over the years Hughes (2003) clearly argues that the public sector reforms are not a passing management fad and are here to stay. The current term used is New Public Management (NPM) although it should no longer be called 'new' given that it has now been in place for some considerable time. The essence of this viewpoint is that public institutions have to be more accountable for public resources and show that their organisational outcomes are worth the investment of funds by the taxpayer and society. These are positive and necessary changes given that the public funding process is not bottomless. On the negative side, however, is the importation of the corporate notion of a dominant managerial hegemony in which management decides all things organisational. These reforms have also extended to the university sector (Holloway, 2004a; Christensen, 2004; Boden, 2001; Stewart, 1997; de Boer & Goedegebuure, 1995).

In many cases, I would argue, university Vice Chancellors and their senior executive have embraced the NPM approach. As a result collegiality in decision-making has become a pejorative term. The focus instead was, and is, on 'managers managing' the institution with the appropriate level of accountability and responsibility for outcomes embedded only within senior managerial echelons.

This managerial focus is usually reflected in respective delegations and University regulations, although not often reflected in the original university enabling Acts.

One of the strongest exemplars and supporters of this move is Professor Steven Schwartz the ex-Vice Chancellor of Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia. He moved to Brunel University in London in 2002 and has recently been appointed the Vice Chancellor of Macquarie University in Sydney from early 2006. He has publicly advocated a market-forces approach within higher education and is a wholehearted believer in the managerialist perspective of the role of 'managers managing' their organisational domains (Schwartz, 2003, 2002, 2001, 2000). In a paper given at a right wing think tank (Center for Independent Studies) in February 2000 he argued that universities in Australia represented the last of the great socialist enterprises exhibiting "...a centrally controlled, provider-driven mentality" (2000: 2).

The answer to this dilemma, according to Schwartz, was to think of students the way hotels think of their customers because this delivered real service: "The people who work in hotels operate in a competitive, market-driven environment. They know their livelihood depends on pleasing their guests and patients and keeping them out of the hands of their competitors" (2000: 2). The solution is to take the university sector closer to a free market model with students (customers) charged full prices and universities cut loose from regulation. This attitude and approach is, I would argue, supported and reflected in the top-down management decision-making behaviour of many other Vice Chancellors and senior university executives in Australia (Eveline, 2004; Holloway, 2004a; Holloway 2004b; de Boer & Goedegebuure, 1995).

It is clear that managerialism in universities is dominant but the question is does it work effectively? Stewart points out that "University decision-making encourages lots of fights about the little things, while the important decisions – such as shutting down departments or opening a campus in Bangla Desh – are made by senior managers who may or may not know what they are doing" (1997: 36). An international study of University governance and management in mainland Europe and the United Kingdom confirms that these developments are not confined to Australia. It showed that participation, or collaboration, in decision-making is restricted to teaching, teaching policy and research whilst

“Top-down decision making is apparent in the case of setting budgetary priorities, the selection of administrators and the formation of long-term policy...” (de Boer & Goedegebuure, 1995: 45).

It is clear, therefore, that a managerial hegemony in relation to organisational decision-making exists in the tertiary sector in Australia and overseas. However, I contend that if organisations such as universities are to reap the benefit from the existing high levels of knowledge/intellectual human resources capital—via the ability to ‘tap into’ the large staff pool of ‘creativity and intelligence’ that still marks a university as special in this cognitive regard—then strategic and operational decision-making should not remain the exclusive domain of specific individuals or very, small elite groups. Effectiveness and not efficiency (falsely perceived as timely) should be the aim of well-constructed decision outcomes. The adaptability and self-organising capability of the workforce requires an inclusive, not exclusive, decision-making methodology to unlock and realise the full future potential of the organisation⁵.

The following section examines the notion that followership needs to be reconstituted and reframed to enable ‘followers’ to play a more engaged and active part in the modern university organisation.

REFRAMING FOLLOWERSHIP

The current ‘reading’ and construction of the notion of followership needs to be significantly reframed within a revised organisational context and framework. Followers cannot remain passive and powerless receptors of leadership inspired wisdom. The role of followers is no longer to be negatively cast as ‘passive sheep’ following unquestioningly a strong leader who makes all the key decisions. I would advocate that their role changes to one that is an ‘active’ followership at times interchanging the leadership–followership role and mantle of responsibility and interactivity.

In organisations even leaders have followership roles depending on their position within the organisational hierarchy. Organisations need—at whatever level organisational ‘actors’ can be construed to be followers—those who can be labelled as either dynamic, courageous or my preferred

⁵ Another paper focuses on the theoretical and methodological developments to operationalise such an effective participatory decision-making methodology. This current paper concentrates on the practice of followership within a ‘top-down’ managerial hierarchy in the higher education sector.

term ‘active’ followers. The idea is to avoid an organisational outcome aptly described in the de Jouvenal quote “...a nation of sheep begets a government of wolves” (Kelly, 1992: 34).

There is a small but growing body of literature that advocates a recasting of the traditional role of followers (Chaleff, 2003; Raelin, 2003; Dixon & Westbrook, 2003; Kelley, 1992; Hollander, 1992; Vanderslice, 1988; Litzinger & Schaefer, 1982). The call is to reconstruct the ‘traditional’ notion of ‘follower’ which tends to be a negative stereotype: typical followers supposedly display a passive and uncritical approach to work as well as lacking initiative and a sense of responsibility for outcomes. Such followers merely perform assigned tasks given them and then stop awaiting the next task. Active followers on the other hand are able to think for themselves, either individually or collectively as required; they exhibit characteristics more often associated with risk takers (and leaders); they are usually self-starters and problem solvers; they are rated highly by their peers and their nominal organisational superiors. I argue that these types of organisational ‘actors’ have discarded the pejorative ‘follower’ label: instead they are, or attempt to be, equal and active participants in the decision-making process(es).

The following sections explore and analyse the responses of the MU participants in relation to both general questions about followership and more specific questions about their MU experiences and as embedded in practice by leaders/managers at Murdoch University.

MURDOCH UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANT INITIAL PERCEPTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The fifteen MU participants were questioned first about their general understanding of followership in the organisational context. There was a high degree of agreement amongst the interviewees on this topic. There was certainly a strong feeling about the actual term itself and the connotations (negative) that the concept invoked in the respondents. The three key questions that they were asked were: *1) What do you feel **should** be the role of followers in modern organisations? 2) Are you satisfied with your role as a follower? Why/Why not? 3) What would you **change** (if you could) in your role as a follower and those of your colleagues?*

There was an overwhelming consensus amongst the respondents that the notion of the ‘passive’ follower was disconcerting to them and made them feel uncomfortable. A common comment was that the word ‘follower’ itself was to them a negative concept because it invoked in them ideas of passivity, meekness and obedience. As Martin put it “...lots of people have problems with the word...because if you follow, you know, it’s like follow the leader and the implications are that you are the follower, you take orders and so forth...” (personal communication, 2004) whilst Yolande stated that: “I think I’m having a bit of a...emotional reaction to the follow bit of the word...” (personal communication, 2005). Kenneth on the other hand argued the word follower should be replaced “...a good colleague might be a better notion...” and also advocated that: “I think that the idea of being a good colleague would actually encompass acting as a good leader and follower whenever those were appropriate” (personal communication, 2004).

Elizabeth went so far as to argue for a radical rethink of the roles of followers and managers:

I used to think there was a need to differentiate between followers and manager but I’m actually moving to the point where I’m starting to think that we are all managers and it doesn’t matter whether you have responsibility for other people or multiple tasks you all are managers in a particular way...Or alternatively flip it around and say there is no need for managers, that we all become effective followers taking responsibility for all of those things (Elizabeth, personal communication, 2004).

What is clear is that the interviewees were themselves also arguing for a reframing of the concept of followership. There was a perceived need for independence, both thought and action, amongst followers and the need to be both constructive and to speak out when required and to argue for alternative positions.⁶ As Eric said when asked if he was satisfied about his role as a follower “Oh yes I think so, I mean the...I think I’ve been prepared to speak out when it was needed and on the other side I’ve been prepared to grin and bear it when I thought that there wasn’t any point to it” (personal communication, 2004).

A more radical rewriting on the followership concept was advanced by Yolande when she argued:

Well for me I mean you know it comes just out of that kind of very fundamental egalitarian kind of position that I think...many people in liberal democracies and particularly feminists have that we are...no matter what position we’re in we are all equal. No matter what roles we may perform we are entitled to respect and our views should be listened to [inaudible] and so it is more about the roles one may play as part of a collegial community in making a contribution to the organisation than it is specifically about the act of following the leader or following the leadership of others...I was going to

⁶ This contrasts quite starkly against a number of the participants earlier comments on the role of managers/leaders with a tendency to identify a ‘father figure’ role for such individuals.

say a good leader for me is somebody who follows or works with the crowd and is [a] servant to the crowd (Yolande, personal communication, 2005).

In rethinking the role of followers the participants did not want to see the more pejorative notion of the 'passive follower' being re-enacted within modern organisations. As Elaine posited:

I think to me it's a case of not necessarily changing what they do but I've worked in enough organisations where I know there are people that just come to work because they have to and what I'd like to do is try to make sure that they engage and I think that that for me you know part of that followership...the leadership has to say what it is and the followers need to engage with it and it's trying to get people to engage as fully as possible so they get meaning and they enjoy coming to work, they're not coming to work because they have to... (Elaine, personal communication, 2004).

These consistent responses reinforce and in effect vindicate my earlier arguments in which I proposed a radical rethinking of the notion of followership. There is also a need to rewrite the role of managers such that effective empowerment and delegation/devolution of decision-making authority and responsibility becomes an organisational norm. In this scenario the follower/leader dualism is dissolved and the widespread use of teams embracing collective/individual responsibilities becomes a key feature in high performing, dynamic organisations capable of rapid adaptability in chaotic, complex business environments.

MU PARTICIPANTS ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS ON FOLLOWERSHIP

I had posed a series of general questions in the previous section about followership such as: *What do you feel **should** be the role of followers in modern organisations? Are you satisfied with your role as a follower? Why/Why not? What would you **change** (if you could) in your role as a follower and those of your colleagues?* These were not limited to their MU experiences. However, this section analyses their responses to a set of 'targeted' additional questions about their own specific experiences with the practice of followership in the MU organisational context. The relevant questions were: *1) In what situations do you feel that you are a follower (as opposed to being a leader) in your current position at MU? Why? What happens? 2) Using your experience at MU explain your understanding of the actual practice of the role of followership? 3) Do you have any other comments or suggestions about your experience with followership within MU?*

When assessing the responses of the first two questions I found that there were two distinct trends in the answers gleaned from the fifteen MU participants. Firstly, there was a noticeable divide between the administrative and academic interviewees whilst the students' responses were generally similar to

the academic ones. I argue that this occurs because the academic and student teaching, learning and research culture is more oriented to active questioning and challenging of the status quo—though normally limited to an academic discipline base. On the other hand, the administrative staff responses were more likely to reflect those responses that would be garnered, I expect, in a more traditional profit-oriented organisation or a more traditional public sector bureaucracy—a much lower level of active questioning of the current senior leaders authority, power and decision-making processes.

I have further divided their responses to the first two questions into two additional categories. The first were comments that I have classified as a reflection of passive followership either that they had observed or practiced themselves within MU. The second being what they regarded as the practices of an effective/active follower again that they had either observed or put into practice themselves.

Administrative Responses—Passive and Active Followership

A common theme amongst the administrative interviewees was a dichotomy about the need for a variation between phases of passive and active followership. The initial responses—see full set of quotes and responses in Appendix 1—tended to favour a more passive version of followership which did surprise me—taking into account that the respondents were relatively senior administrative staff members. This was particularly so when they were attempting to explain what was *expected* of them by their leaders within the organisation on a daily basis. I did expect a greater degree of workplace independence and active questioning: this was not the case.

Nellie put it succinctly when she argued that “...we don’t give people who are followers the realisation that they could make a real contribution” (personal communication, 2004). She also went on to state that staff just “...come in and do their work and they go home and, even if they contribute, we don’t recognise it, we just take it as granted...” (personal communication, 2004).

On the other hand when analysing effective (or my preferred term active) followership there was a wider range of responses. Elaine identified that a *good* follower was one who:

is sort of a good team player...to understand what skills they bring, how to apply them and if they don’t have what they need in terms of skills or tools or whatever then they could articulate [that lack]. They also show initiative and innovation because you may have been doing the same old thing the same old way ‘cause they may just say well, you know, we could actually cut that out, we don’t need to do that or we could do it better this way...(personal communication, 2004).

Teresa's assessment was that a good follower needs to make effective judgements about the act of following based on the abilities of supposedly effective leaders. These are leaders who gain the respect of those who work for them either through the generation of *good* ideas and who followers can trust as well as respect. She rates this aspect of trust highly: "...once I've got their trust...once they've got my trust... You know if you don't trust...then there's no point in doing this and that's what it comes down to"... (personal communication, 2004). Nancy focussed more on having the workplace independence to operate and the right to make changes. As was the case with Teresa's claim above, this requires that there exists a significant degree of trust in the capabilities of a member, or group(s) of members, of staff by their (nominal?) hierarchical leaders.

However, in some of the more senior management echelons there appears to be a greater sense of 'having to follow' and keeping a sense of team solidarity even if that notion is illusory. It is clear from these statements—see Appendix 1—that the prevailing sense amongst administrative staff is that it is safer to be a passive follower in most organisational situations unless you have the full confidence and trust of your immediate leader. At the same time I was surprised that so many of the responses indicated that, at MU, there was a clear expectation—that although you might have the right to speak and make suggestions—that in the end you are expected to play a more passive 'follow the leader' role in most critical decision-making scenarios. If you did not then you would pay the penalty of either being sidelined or being removed from your organisational position as happened with Dominic. This managerial (mis)behaviour is of course observed by other members of staff and helps to reinforce an attitude of some trepidation, if not outright fear, at different times of an organisation's history. This is particularly the case when major organisational structural changes are under consideration by senior management.

Academic/Student Responses—Passive and Active Followership

The academic/student responses—see second half of Appendix 1—were more dismissive of the passive follower role and far more supportive of an active questioning approach for what they perceived to be effective (active) followers. Initially Martin identified there were those who have also

paid a penalty themselves for not being passive followers. Elizabeth also has observed occasions where others within MU have been punished for not being passive followers.

Passive followership is readily observed by the respondents particularly where it is viewed as being personally opportunistic. Yolande first identifies this succinctly as: "...it's that kind of personality, you know, to be a good campus citizen means doing what you're directed to do..." (personal communication, 2005).

It is apparent that there were two types of behavioural responses being identified by the respondents in relation to passive followership. The first was an acknowledgement that the powers structure within MU was top-down oriented in most instances. Therefore, those staff members who were orienting themselves to an administrative (as opposed to an academic) career path would position themselves as *good* followers by following orders and required directions from their leader(s). The other was that the expected organisational norm was oriented more to a passive form of followership.

The notion of effective (active) followership elicited a wider and more enthusiastic range of responses. Academics and students—who were themselves members of MU decision-making bodies—supported this approach strongly. Elizabeth pointed out that: "...many, many, many times have I seen really good followership, where I've seen staff be well recognised for alerting maybe to a possible drama or potential or opportunity" (personal communication, 2004). What this illustrates is—that depending on the leader and the level of mutual trust concerned—active followership is appreciated and rewarded but not necessarily is this behaviour the organisational norm.

Robert was simpler in his posited constructs: "I mean the best followers are a leader of other followers right?...[because] You need a lot more Indians than your chiefs" (personal communication, 2004). This simplicity surfaces also in Anna's assessment: "I tend to follow when I figure people know and can convince me...you'd be making an active decision to follow" (personal communication, 2004). Kenneth on the other hand took a position that I would argue for and support most strongly—the notion of constructive conflict and argument oriented debate. Kenneth's argument comes closest to reflecting my own position of the need to dissolve the leader/follower dualism and allow for the

intermingling of these roles dependent on the organisational decision-making scenarios being encountered. The difficulty is to alter the culture to allow for or to actively encourage such behaviour.

Active followership appears to be a notion relatively foreign to a more traditional bureaucratic hierarchy such as MU which, I argue, is not that different from other universities in Australia. The current form of managerialism in the higher education sector with its top-down decision-making focus would need to go through a significant cultural reformation and reframing before an effective form of the 'active' follower could emerge and be sustained.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from this case study that followership is a contested domain in the modern university. This dilemma will only be resolved when senior managers/leaders seriously reassess their current top-down approach to decision-making processes.

The result of such a transformation naturally impacts on the senior management role in addition to the proposed changes to the leadership role that I would espouse. Senior managers need to take on more of a 'mentor' or 'boundary rider' role in which they would have an equal and important decision-making role but certainly not a privileged decision-making authority. I would advocate that they would act normally only as advisors or may be called upon when there is a decision-making impasse or inter-personal disputes that remain unresolved. A resulting restructured university organisation would then have few(er) hierarchical layers and should be applicable across the varying organisational sizes. A large organisation is in the end only an aggregation of smaller strategic organisational units.

It is critical, however, that there are internal 'champions' for just such a change throughout an organisation from the top to the bottom (Dean, 2004; Nah et al, 2001; Knight, 1987). What will be critical to this move is the development of the right level of motivation and the effective alignment of both management self-interest and organisational interests. Then such a deep move becomes more feasible. The end result is to reconstruct the passive pejorative version of the 'follower' to a more 'active follower' role. The leadership role is then redefined to be an important, but not exclusive, part of the organisational decision-making process. This will unshackle the current overly bureaucratic decision processes and help to realise the full future potential of the modern university.

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FOLLOWERSHIP MU PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

The relevant questions asked were: 1) In what situations do you feel that you are a follower (as opposed to being a leader) in your current position at MU? Why? What happens? 2) Using your experience at MU explain your understanding of the actual practice of the role of followership? 3) Do you have any other comments or suggestions about your experience with followership within MU?

Administrative Responses—Passive and Active Followership

One specific example (in relation questions 1 and 2) was from a very senior staff member Elaine who stated:

I think a follower in the first instance needs to understand who pays them okay? And what they're being paid to do. You don't turn up [to] work you know for the love of the place. You might love the place and turn up to work but you don't turn up and you don't get paid basically, okay? So we all have to understand we're paid to do a job and we're also paid to do the job whether...without necessarily having control over the direction... (personal communication, 2004).

Nancy was more scathing in her assessment of what the MU organisation expected of followers:

What would the institution think a follower would be like? Oh well, the cynical me immediately thinks the follower is [to] get on and do the job and shut up, is the follower that this institution probably would like and that's been demonstrated quite clearly with the recent or lack of...recent lack of appointment of executive deans. Here is somebody who was doing the job who was demonstrating that he had to crunch numbers and come up with, you know, the right figures and do the right thing and yet he wasn't appointed to the position for whatever reason and okay...but it was almost...it was almost we can treat you however we like and you will still be there doing the job (personal communication, 2004).

Elaine identified that a *good* follower was one who:

is sort of a good team player...to understand what skills they bring, how to apply them and if they don't have what they need in terms of skills or tools or whatever then they could articulate [that lack]. They also show initiative and innovation because you may have been doing the same old thing the same old way 'cause they may just say well, you know, we could actually cut that out, we don't need to do that or we could do it better this way...(personal communication, 2004).

Teresa was more tentative in her response and focussed more on the traits of a specific leader:

I suppose it comes down to what aspect of work I'm doing and who it is I'm doing it for. So it depends really. Follow...if you like follow the ideas of people or follow the aspects of people who I have...who I've...who I respect and who are coming up with good ideas. But it's not so much a concrete thing, it's more of an abstract thing sometimes (personal communication, 2004).

Nancy focussed more on having the workplace independence to operate and the right to make changes when making the following two-part statement:

I have said before that I'm very lucky that I'm in a situation where I can get on and do my core business without having the day to day reporting to anyone.

Oh, an effective follower is when you know where you fit in, know exactly what is your responsibility and where you can make a change and being given that...the freedom to put up suggestions or to make changes in your area where you [can] make the difference (personal communication, 2004).

Eric put this notion across a little loosely in the following way:

No I mean...you know you never...[are] just a leader or just a follower you know you often...and one of the things that you...if you're going to be effective as a part of team [inaudible 662] team you know you do need a...this notion of cabinet solidarity so interestingly enough in some of the senior roles you spend most of your time being a follower particularly...particularly if you're got a strong vice chancellor but...so if you had a debate and the party lines become blah, blah, blah then you have to be a follower then you have to say well; no, so-and-so said such and such and therefore... (personal communication, 2004).

There is also a significant degree of personal courage involved with being an active or effective follower as clearly illustrated by Dominic:

I have in the past got into trouble for speaking my mind. A classic example was at MU where I got removed from a position because I was seen as not being a passive follower. That's fine, I have no problem with that and I think part of a role of a good leader would be to accept the advice that is coming from followers (personal communication, 2004).

Academic/Student Responses—Passive and Active Followership

Martin put this as:

Well I've been a follower to the degree that I never been a leader...well not in the traditional sense.

I think...life's gone to the dogs when I think like that so I've never been a follower in that sense before and that's stuffed my career up too I must say. And I guess in many ways I don't perceive myself as having a particular leader [style] but also not a [passive] follower (personal communication, 2004).

Elizabeth also has observed occasions where others within MU have been punished for not being passive followers:

I've seen followership where as I said the follower has been deemed to be a troublemaker and ostracised and punished fairly or unfairly. I've seen here documented...highly inflammatory documents have been put on staff files... (personal communication, 2004).

Passive followership is readily observed by the respondents particularly where it is viewed as being personally opportunistic. Yolande first identifies this succinctly as: "...it's that kind of personality, you know, to be a good campus citizen means doing what you're directed to do..." (personal communication, 2005). She went on in more detail:

Oh, I think there is a very particular persona of follower in the current organisational culture of this institution and I suspect it's on the notion you're trying to develop. It is the person who follows the [inaudible 1:25] in order to gain power or in order to open up a career path for themselves or whatever. You know I mean amongst...there is a persona of somebody who will flatter the executive dean, who will be compliant, who will look to the executive dean for, you know, tell me what you want me to do and I will do it. There's that kind of persona, you know, again because I know names won't be mentioned... (personal communication, 2005).

The notion of effective (active) followership elicited a wider and more enthusiastic range of responses. Academics and students—who were themselves members of MU decision-making bodies—supported this approach strongly.

Elizabeth started this off by arguing that:

Good followership I believe is a result of good leadership and I think you have good followers if those followers are prepared...not so much publicly but are prepared to challenge their leaders, recognising the legitimacy of debate and the leaders not being alienated by that...(personal communication, 2004).

Len referred to his own leadership role in the student movement as an advocate or almost a servant role:

I do actively engage in leadership but my job is to help people. I mean maybe that's not the definition, more my job is to be the advocate or representative of students...with regards to the secretariat I give them the ownership of that...there's certainly conflict but it's, yeah, truly discursive approach (personal communication, 2004).

Kenneth on the other hand took a position that I would argue for and support most strongly—the notion of constructive conflict and argument oriented debate:

Interestingly I suspect a good follower would be one that's able to make their voice heard in terms of criticism...constructive criticism of others. I think also though an ability to hear the arguments and follow the best argument rather than follow a supposed leader whoever that might be. So I would see an issue of you know as I say of hearing the arguments and following what appears to be the most appropriate route regardless of who the leader might or might not be (personal communication, 2004).

The difficulty is to alter the culture to allow for or to actively encourage such behaviour. As Eric argues:

The thing about a university is that you've got people who are by and large very talented and are capable of a lot and I think always in a university the challenge is to make sure that...the institution isn't stifling its opportunities by not allowing those people to develop good ideas. And it's a very difficult one because you know egos very quickly emerge... (personal communication, 2004).