

Why People Follow the Leader: The Power of Transference

We all admire leaders. In trying to understand how leadership works, however, we often lose sight of the fact that followers are a crucial part of the equation.

Regrettably, they get short shrift in the management literature, where they are described as merely responding to their leaders' charisma or caring attitudes. What most analyses seem to ignore is that followers have their own motivations and are as powerfully driven to follow as leaders are to lead.

In this article, psychoanalyst, anthropologist, and management consultant Michael Maccoby delves into the unconscious recesses of followers' minds. He looks closely at the often irrational tendency to relate to a leader as some important person from the past--a parent, a sibling, a close friend, or even a nanny--what Sigmund Freud calls "transference."

A solid understanding of transference can yield great insight into organizational behavior and endow you with the wisdom and compassion to be a tremendous leader.

Whether followers perceive a leader as an all-knowing father figure, an authoritative yet unconditionally loving mother figure, or a brother or sister who isn't necessarily a model of good behavior, the leader can manage transference ties by bringing unconscious projections to light.

Then debilitating resentment and animosity can give way to mutual understanding and productivity--and a limping organization can start to thrive.