



Samson: “They Did Evil in the Eyes of the Lord”: The Powerlessness of an Ineffective Follower

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THE POWERLESSNESS OF AN INEFFECTIVE FOLLOWER

This qualitative study incorporated a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) which explored what type of follower Samson was compared to Kelley’s (2008) followership typologies. The significance of this study illuminates ethical blind spots, despite Samson’s calling from God, that still impact individuals and present-day institutions. Furthermore, it identifies character traits required to be an exemplary follower (Chaleff, 2009; Kelley, 2008).

Samson was called to be a Nazarite for life—from before birth until his death. Although set apart for life to do God’s work of deliverance on behalf of Israel, Samson had recognizable faults, as detailed

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in Judges Chapters 14–16 (NIV Archaeological Study Bible, 2007). Samson’s ethical shortcomings and ultimate redemption lessons can be an opportunity to incorporate the Bible to illuminate or avoid ethical blind spots impacting individuals and present-day institutions. According to Gregory and Cavanagh (2011), a blind spot occurs “when something blocks light from reaching the photoreceptor” (p. 9618). For example, people tend to make poorer decisions when they act in secrecy and isolation, thus, creating blind spots (Crisp, 2019). Similarly, when we do what is right in our own eyes (Judges 17:6 & 21:25, NIV), we tend to neglect morals in pursuit of our interests and desires. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) defined this gap as the space between intended behavior and actual behavior. This gap was Samson’s failure to learn from his experiences and commit the same mistakes (Zakovitch, 2003).

Kelley (1998) developed a followership model by examining behaviors that led to effective or ineffective followers. Kelley (1998) concluded that two dimensions are the primary characteristics of followership. The first dimension, independent thinking, “measures[s] the degree a follower exercised independent, critical thinking” (Kelley, 1998, p. 143). These followers accepted responsibility, took the initiative, and provided leaders with honest recommendations or advice. Conversely, “dependent, uncritical thinking” was exhibited by followers who accepted what the leaders said without question and only did what they were told (Bjugstad et al., 2006, p. 308). One could use the second dimension to determine whether the follower was active or passive. Active and passive followers were different in their ability or inability to engage in organizational activities. For example, active followers would assist leaders in decision-making, while passive followers would wait for their leaders to decide (Tsai & Yung, 2013). Unfortunately, most of the writings about Samson are synonymous with Kelley’s (1998) second dimension, “dependent, uncritical thinking” (p. 143). Consequently, Samson was passive and refused to engage in organizational activities although he was set apart for a special service to God from birth (Judges 13:5, NIV). He ignored listening and made poorer decisions by acting in secrecy and isolation, thus, creating blind spots to pursue his own desires (Crisp, 2019).

Kelly (1998, 1992) identified five different types of followership styles: “(a) yes-people or sometimes referred to as conformists, (b) pragmatist or sometimes called survivors can switch between followership styles depending on the situation, (c) alienated is a follower who can think very well, but is somewhat stuck in their ways, (d) sheep, also known

as, passive person who does not engage their brain enough and shows minimal initiative nor responsibility, and (e) exemplary or star follower is both a critical, independent thinker and active in behavior” (Riggio et al., 2008, pp. 7–8). Therefore, the remainder of the chapter are in three sections; (1) background, (2) different behaviors and actions exhibited by Samson that reflect each of Kelley’s followership styles, and (3) the praxis of effective and ineffective followership.

BACKGROUND

The Book of Judges tells the story of a biblical Hercules (Roth, n.d.) named Samson (Chapters 13–16, NIV). God chose Samson to be a Nazarite, dedicated from birth, and the last of Israel’s judges (Judges, 13:4–5, NIV). The Nazirite (from the Hebrew word Nazir, meaning “dedicated one”) vow was made first by his mother and then by Samson himself (Trigilio & Brghenti, 2006). The vow of a Nazarite involved three things: (1) abstinence from wine and strong drink; (2) refraining from cutting the hair off the head during the whole period of the continuance of the vow, and (3) the avoidance of contact with the dead (Numbers 6:2–21, NASB). Samson was set apart for unique service to God (Judges 13:5, NIV). Samson ignored his Nazirite vow of godly devotion and relied upon his strength and abilities rather than upon God’s. Although God empowered him with supernatural strength to begin the deliverance of the people of Israel from the Philistines (Judges 13:5), it was his weakness for the Philistine women that was his demise (Judges 14:1–3, 16:1–22, NIV). His passion for women was more important than God’s expressed will (Deuteronomy 7:3, NIV). Consequently, the story of Samson is both spectacular and tragic. When Samson followed God’s leadership, he accomplished supernatural feats with physical prowess and strength (Roskoski, 2016). However, he suffered a humiliating defeat, destruction, and ultimately death (Judges 16).

SAMSON’S FOLLOWERSHIP STYLES

The Bible is replete with Samson’s followership styles demonstrated by his various encounters with women, battles, and God (Judges 14–16, NIV). Langley et al. (2013) suggested individuals or organizations can be analyzed over successive time periods. Although Samson was called by God to follow a stringent purity code, and repeatedly violated his

vow. For example, Samson married a Philistine woman, ate what was unclean, touched a carcass, drank strong wine, slept with a prostitute, again betrayed by another Philistine woman, and finally cut his hair (Rawson, 2020). Langley et al. (2013) posited experiences could be observed to understand better specific actions and how those past actions impact current events. Langley et al. (2013) surmised each event could be studied and analyzed into smaller units. Subsequently, leaders that captured these organizational processes over time could place them into practice or correct them in a timely manner (Langley et al., 2013, p. 5). According to Langley et al. (2013), those leaders had a better understanding and theoretical interpretation that worked in different situations and transferred this knowledge into actionable processes.

WOMAN AT TIMNAH

Samson pursued a Philistine woman in Timnah even though he understood intermarriage was not permitted in Israel (Deuteronomy 17:1–3, NIV). He returned home to his parents and told them to “get her for me as a wife” (Judges 14:1–2, NIV). Samson’s parents objected, but he justified his behavior by explaining that marrying a Philistine woman would allow him to infiltrate and fight the Philistines, who were the oppressors of Israel (Judges 14:4, NIV). His behavior and actions were synonymous with Kelley’s “yes-people,” which typically behave by prevailing standards or customs (Kelley, 1998, 1992). In those days, there was no king, and each tribe was driving out their enemies (Zakovitch, 2003). Samson was divinely separated and imbued by God, but they succumbed to Israel’s temptation and moral depravity, which precipitated another 40-year cycle of oppression by the Philistines (Judge 13:1, NIV). Each followed a general pattern or custom, reflecting “dependent, uncritical thinking” (Kelley, 1998, p. 142). First, they followed God, then they would turn to idols and be enslaved, and God would raise a judge to save them, which is synonymous with the verse in Judges 17:6 and 21:25, NIV. “Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” Andert et al. (2011) suggested leadership was an alternating role. Andert et al. (2011) recommended the definition of leadership should include multiple people focused on a common goal instead of one individual and mitigate the consequences of a poor leader or follower. Also, Andert et al. (2011) surmised alternating leadership occurred at all levels of organizations

with or without the explicit knowledge of senior management. Consequently, Andert et al. (2011) suggested alternating leadership challenged the traditional understanding of autocratic and hierarchical leadership. Lastly, Andert et al. (2011) concluded the “leader/follower dual function existed within each” (p. 53). Followership and leadership created a synergy that allowed for a high functioning interpersonal and intrapersonal skill sets (Tsai & Yung, 2013).

The Lion

Gordan et al. (2014) identified five positive leadership behaviors to develop trust; “(a) fair, (b) employee growth, (c) ethical, (d) culture, and, (e) work-life balance” (p. 50). Samson and his parents traveled to Timnah to meet his future bride. Samson knowingly disobeyed his parents and God by marrying a Philistine woman (Deuteronomy, 7:3–4; Judges, 14:3, NIV). Samson was not a wise man, and he did not consider the results of his actions. He only cared about the moment and not his parents, the future of Israel, or his relationship with God (Smith, 2005). Therefore, he did what looked good to him now (Judges 14:3, NIV). While Samson approached the vineyards, a lion came roaring toward him from the road (Judges 14:5, NIV). He had nothing to defend himself from the lion, and at that time, the “Spirit of the Lord rushed” on Samson, and he tore the lion apart with his bare hands (Judges 14:6, NIV). According to Kelley (1998, 1992), pragmatists or sometimes called survivors, can switch between followership styles depending on the situation.

In contrast, several days later, Samson returned to Timnah to marry and came across the carcass of the lion he killed. He saw a swarm of bees and some honey and scooped it out with his hands and ate. When he rejoined his parents, he gave them some honey to eat but did not tell them it was from a dead animal (Judges, 14:9–10, NIV). Samson was actively involved but passive on independent thinking and taking of initiatives (Kelley, 1992). He would become anxious when left to make or live with a choice and escape the uncomfortable feeling that comes with the responsibility of being an effective follower (Ntiamoah, 2018). Despite Samson’s disobedience, the Spirit of God would come on him, time after time, enabling him to accomplish incredible feats of strength. Gordan et al. (2014) developed a structural model that identified and reinforced specific leadership behaviors from the followers’ perspective. First, Gordan et al. (2014) posited leaders and organizations that treated

employees fairly achieved greater success and created a competitive advantage through people and processes (p. 51). Second, Gordan et al. (2014) concluded employee growth and development was another example of positive behaviors engendered by leaders. According to Gordan et al. (2014), employee growth developed their followers and equipped them with the knowledge and skills to be more effective (p. 51). Third, ethical behavior was the most significant and had the most impact on the followers' trust in leaders (Gordan et al., 2014, p. 52). Fourth, Gordan et al. (2014) surmised leaders that influenced organizational culture was the next most important behavior. This implied follower involvement and developed personal relationships. Lastly, Gordan et al. (2014) suggested leaders were key factors in establishing a work-life balance and those that did increased trust among followers. Samson demonstrated both by disobeying his parents and deceiving them in eating honey from a dead animal which is forbidden (Judges, 14:9–10, NIV). Consequently, Gordan et al. (2014) identified two negative behaviors: “(a) hostile and (b) ineffective environments” (p. 50). Gordan et al. (2014) concluded both behaviors had negative effects on developing trust between leaders and followers.

Prostitute of Gaza

In the Book of Judges, Chapter 16 opens with Samson meeting and staying with a prostitute from Gaza. It would be speculative to say why he decided to engage with a prostitute. However, his pattern of behaviors suggests the prostitute was an attractive woman, and Samson followed the desires of his flesh. Kelley (1998, 1992) would refer to this type of behavior as an “alienated” follower. This individual might confront a leader, or the Philistines, about their oppression but be likely to remain stuck in his ways (Kelley, 1998). However, it is safe to say Samson's previous martial victories made him a wanted man, and word spread quickly of his presence, and several Philistines awaited his departure (Nix & Pickett, 2017). There is no record of any arrests or words exchanged between Samson and these men at the gate. Scripture states Samson left at the middle of the night, and “took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron” (Judges 16:3, NIV). Unfortunately, he remained stuck in his ways by demonstrating his rash impulsivity based on

lustful sight and exposed sexual vulnerability (Boda, 2012; Butler-Kibler, 2010; Judges 16:1, NIV). He rejected his true calling by failing to be the unifying force that led the people of Israel from captivity which is evident by the portrayal of cynicism and skepticism (Roskoski, 2016). He did not act as the head of an army or tribe but alienated from his countryman, who was willing to hand him over to the Philistines (Judges, 15:6, NIV). Carsten and Bligh (2008) posited leaders needed to “involve followers in the process of vision creation, dissemination, and implementation” (Riggio et al., 2008, p. 277). According to Carsten and Bligh (2008), followers were just as important as leaders because they could effectively create and implement the organization’s vision (Riggio et al., 2008). Also, Carsten and Bligh (2008) surmised organizations that developed an effective, collaborative vision positively influenced the follower’s behaviors toward the leader and organization (p. 279). For example, leaders who articulated a vision increased the follower’s trust, performance, and unification (Riggio et al., 2008). Conversely, Carsten and Bligh (2008) suggested leaders who espoused a misaligned vision decreased the follower’s ownership and supported to implement the vision, to name a few (Riggio et al., 2008). Lastly, Carsten and Bligh (2008) concluded: “both leaders and followers” were required for a “vision to be created, accepted, disseminated and implemented” for an organization to be successful (p. 289).

Delilah

Samson’s third encounter with a Philistine woman was Delilah which resulted in his downfall (Judges, 16:4–20, NIV). The narrator recorded that Samson loved Delilah, yet her commitment was to the Philistines and the money she would get to learn the secret of his strength (Judges, 16:5, NIV). While she berated Samson for not loving her (Judges 16:15, NIV), as did the woman he had married earlier (Judges 14:16, NIV), there was no love returned. The commitment from each of these women was to their own country and for their pleasure or safety (Smith, 2005). Desperate to stop Samson, five Philistine leaders decided to employ Delilah to discover how to render him powerless (Judges 16:4–5, NIV). Samson’s lust and weakness for women, coupled with her persistence, paid off. To better understand what Samson faced with Delilah, the Hebrew translation of her name is “amorous and languishing.” According to Merriam-Webster, the word “amorous” means “inclined or disposed

to love, especially sexual,” and “languishing” means “to become weak or feeble” (Hacker, 2011). Subsequently, Delilah revealed Samson’s degraded moral state. Both his sexual appetite and distorted view of love drove him further into compromise (Crisp, 2019). Samson was not a wise man and failed to take responsibility for his actions. He did not consider the results of his actions (Kelley, 1998). Samson did not engage his brain enough and showed minimal initiative or responsibility. Kellerman (2007) suggested followers, such as Samson, complied to avoid putting anything at risk and generally going along to get along. This explanation echoed Kelley’s (1998) perception of Samson’s followership as a passive “sheep.”

Consequently, Delilah three times begged to know the secret of Samson’s strength. Finally, after Delilah nagged persistently, he confessed: “A razor has never come to my head; for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man” (Judges 16:17, NIV). Delilah took advantage of this new information, lulled Samson to sleep, had his head shaved, subdued him, and reported it to the Philistines (Judges 16:18, NIV). He immediately weakened, and the power of God left him (Judges 16:20, NIV). The Philistines seized Samson, gouged out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles, and set him to grinding in prison (Judges 16:21, NIV). According to Tsai and Yung (2013), effective followers integrated themselves into the organization’s fabric, and their input was vital to the decision-making process. Samson was a loner by choice, engaged in battles by himself instead of rallying the people of Israel, lacked the spirit of cooperation, and sought personal vengeance instead of his countrymen’s freedom from a foe of 40 years. Samson was not active in carrying out his responsibilities resulting in a disengaged, disgruntled, and inability to fulfill his calling. Samson’s battles were his own and revolved around romantic entanglements (Zakovitch, 2003).

CAPTIVITY

Samson had experienced multiple life events and was ready to transform from an ineffective to an effective follower (Chaleff, 2009). Samson finally matured into what Kelley (1992, p. 124) described as an “exemplary” follower, and his attitude and behavior matured and transformed (Chaleff, 2009). Samson’s death ended up being his most significant victory against the Philistines. They brought Samson down to Gaza and

bound him to two pillars in their temple to display amusement. The Philistines brought him out before a great crowd of rulers and thousands of people gathered in the temple to celebrate his capture. Samson's hair began to grow back, and as he leaned against the pillars of the temple, Samson prayed to God, asking for his strength to return to him one more time (Judges 16:28, NIV). God responded by sending Samson a final burst of strength, and Samson pushed against the pillars and brought the entire temple down, killing himself and all those in the temple with him. The text concluded, "Those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life" (Judges 16:30). Carsten and Bligh (2008) posited leaders needed to "involve followers in the process of vision creation, dissemination, and implementation" (Riggio et al., 2008, p. 277). According to Carsten and Bligh (2008), followers were just as important as leaders because they could effectively create and implement the organization's vision (Riggio et al., 2008). Also, Carsten and Bligh (2008) surmised organizations that developed an effective, collaborative vision positively influenced the follower's behaviors toward the leader and organization (p. 279). For example, leaders who articulated a vision increased the follower's trust, performance, and unification (Riggio et al., 2008). Conversely, Carsten and Bligh (2008) suggested leaders who espoused a misaligned vision decreased the follower's ownership and supported to implement the vision, to name a few (Riggio et al., 2008). Lastly, Carsten and Bligh (2008) concluded: "both leaders and followers" were required for a "vision to be created, accepted, disseminated and implemented" for an organization to be successful (p. 289).

Samson's lessons can help illuminate or avoid ethical blind spots impacting individuals and present-day institutions. There is value in seeking the views and insights of followers to understand the culture and dynamics within an organization. Practitioners, scholars, and organizations alike can no longer ignore recognizing the various types of followers because they make up almost 80% of an organization (Oyetunji, 2012). Being a situational follower is multi-faceted that requires a leading or subservient role according to what is best for the organization (Colls-Senaha, 2018). Subsequently, effective followers are part of the change in an organization to "create and sustain a culture of accountability and commitment" (Riggio et al., 2008, p. 110). The role of followers is multi-faceted, and followers do not just have one type of role; instead, they have many (Danielson, 2013). Also, studying effective followership helps support the leadership process by developing effective leaders

(Cartsen et al., 2010). Consequently, there must be a paradigm shift in followership that requires a concerted effort for organizations to achieve this cultural change. People at all levels must focus on changing culture through embedding a pro-followership mentality by utilizing every system and process to harness the power of followership (Colls-Senaha, 2018). Followers do not serve the leader; instead, they serve a common purpose (Riggio et al., 2008).

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Identify additional personal character traits which made Samson an ineffective follower?
2. Can a follower indeed be effective in a role-based organization?
3. How could organizations incorporate effective followership in their training and development programs?
4. Which aspects of the five followership topologies can improve either a secular or Christian organization?
5. Describe the commonalities of followership and leadership to improve the understanding of follower traits and their impact on organizational performance?

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