

“Where you lead, I will follow”: Developing a Followership Value Proposition Statement

Abstract:

We want students to be good leaders. But do we teach them about what it means to be a good follower? What can management educators do to help students think about what it means to be a good follower? What tools can be used to help facilitate this learning process? Come learn about two entrepreneurial tools that can be modified and repurposed to guide students in creating a Followership Value Proposition statement that articulates the value they can bring to a leader and the leader’s organization when serving in the role of a follower.

Session Type: Activity or Exercise

Keywords: Leadership, Followership, Value Proposition

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Introduction

We want students to be good leaders. It is stressed in leadership courses and training. And it is reinforced in job applications and interviews when prospective employers inquire of candidates about their leadership philosophy or style. While leadership is an important process that we want our students to fully comprehend before entering the workforce, it is also suggested that there is too much focus on one side of the leadership process. Various conceptualizations and definitions of leadership imply a process that involves two parties: a leader and a follower. However, a majority of existing leadership research focuses on the leader, while very few focuses on the follower (Northouse, 2019). Recent literature has attempted to bring followership to the forefront of leadership education (Chaleff, 2009; Lapierre & Carsten, 2014). To continue advancing the cause of followership, I pose the following questions: *What can management educators do to help students think about what it means to be a good follower? What tools can be used to help facilitate this learning process?*

This session will introduce session attendees to two tools that are used in entrepreneurship education that can be modified and repurposed when teaching followership to students. Session attendees will participate in an activity so that they can see how these tools can be used for classroom instruction (undergraduate and graduate students) and for student’s individual personal use in drafting a Followership Value Proposition Statement.

Theoretical Foundations and Teaching Implications

Followership

Followership is defined as “a process whereby an individual or individuals accept the influence of others to accomplish a common goal” (Northouse, 2019, p. 295). A great example of followership is the popular NBC show *The Voice*. In this singing competition, an aspiring singer auditions to celebrity judges. The only thing is that these are blind auditions because the celebrity judges are facing the audience rather than the singer. During the artist’s performances, if the judge is interested in the singer, the celebrity judge will hit a button which will cause their chair to turn around so that they are facing the singer. There are times when a singer is so good that multiple celebrity judges will hit their buttons to turn their chairs around. And when this happens, the celebrity judge makes a plea for the artist to choose them as their mentor rather than the other celebrity judge(s). At this point, the artist must choose which celebrity judge they want to mentor them. In this example, followership is demonstrated, because the artist is choosing who they want to be influenced by.

Followership has both theoretical and practical components. The theoretical approach to followership was posited by Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten (2014). Out of the two frameworks for followership (*Reversing the Lens & Leadership Process*), this activity is based on the *Leadership Process* framework which examines how following behaviors work with leading behaviors to construct leadership (Uhl-Bien et. al, 2014). In this framework, aspects of followership (follower behaviors) are used to socially construct what the leadership dynamic will be in that context between the leader and the follower.

In terms of practicality, it has been suggested that followership needs to be viewed more favorably or in a more positive light. Given this, Carsten, Harms, and Uhl-Bien (2014) suggest

five positive aspects of followership that can help organizations and individuals to discover the benefits of being a follower: 1) followers get the job done, 2) followers work in the best interest of the organization's mission, 3) followers challenge leaders, 4) followers support the leader, and 5) followers learn from leaders. Learning how to articulate these benefits can help individuals to view followership more favorably.

Value Proposition

In modern entrepreneurship education, the focus is on teaching students how to create business models. A business model describes how an organization creates, delivers, and extracts value (Neck, Neck, & Murray, 2021). When it comes to entrepreneurship, the ability to develop business models that create something a customer wants is the key skill for entrepreneurs (Clifton, 2011). The most important aspect of the business model is the Value Proposition as it focuses on the value that is created and generated for the customer and what the customer can expect from products or services being offered (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Osterwalder, Pigneur, Bernarda, Smith, & Papadacos, 2014). Two tools have been developed by Strategyzer (n.d.) to help entrepreneurs develop a value proposition to fit a specific customer profile (*The Value Proposition Canvas*) and to help entrepreneurs articulate that value proposition to that specific customer profile in a concise statement (*Ad-Lib Value Proposition*).

Teaching Implications

This activity has several teaching implications as to how it can lead to effective teaching and learning in the field of management. First, this activity has an interdisciplinary approach, in that tools used primarily for one discipline (entrepreneurship) can be modified and repurposed to accomplish an important goal in another discipline (leadership). In entrepreneurship, for a new firm to be successful, it must learn to adapt to their audience which is their customers. This

concept can be applied to the process of followership. Just as an entrepreneur brings value to a customer, a follower can bring specific resources, knowledge, skills, and abilities that can provide value to the leader(s) of an organization. And while it is important for an entrepreneur to be able to articulate the value they bring to customers, I believe that those serving in the roles of followers should learn how to articulate the value they can bring to the leader(s) of an organization as well.

Second, it teaches students a way to position themselves when entering the workforce. A common question that students get asked during job interviews and graduate school interviews/applications is “*What is your leadership philosophy?*” Given the anticipated rise of the importance followership, it is possible that future employers might begin to ask students questions to determine the type of follower they will be in certain contexts. In addition, given that students will often transition between leadership and followership roles throughout their career, it will be important for leadership educators to help students think about how they would approach a followership role in the future, how they would match a followership style with their supervisor’s leadership style, and how they would articulate the value of their followership abilities to prospective employers during job interviews.

Third, it requires students to practice self-awareness and reflection skills which are important within the business curriculum. Business school accrediting bodies have stressed the importance of students being able to demonstrate reflective thinking and their role in a larger society or context (AACSB, 2018). This activity and tools help students to determine ways to fit or to apply their natural abilities in the form of followership within an existing organizational structure.

Finally, this activity adds to the need and call to stress followership more in leadership education. Leadership and followership are two sides of the same coin. Both components are needed in the process of leadership. Providing students with followership exercises in addition to leadership exercises and concepts supports this balanced initiative.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this session are as follows:

1. Session attendees will be introduced to tools used by entrepreneurs to develop and articulate a value proposition for a customer segment.
2. Session attendees will learn to modify and repurpose existing entrepreneurship templates to be used in the context of followership.

Exercise Overview

As an overview, this exercise is designed to a) help students or participants think about how they can create value for their leaders and b) to help students or participants learn how to modify and repurpose entrepreneurship tools to develop a followership value proposition statement. The exercise occurs in the context of a case scenario throughout multiple steps.

For the first step, the instructor provides a written case study or a picture of a leader in a specific type of situation or scenario. When using the latter, it is best to pick pictures or illustrations of individuals in difficult situations (e.g. a person sitting at office desk with lots of unprocessed paperwork on their desk). The goal is to present an image in which the student or participant must assume the types of issues or challenges that the leader might be experiencing because of their role.

The second step is to instruct participants on how to use the *Value Proposition Canvas* (Strategyzer, n.d.) template (see Appendix A). The original purpose of this template is to

provide a visual description of how the value map (products & services, pain relievers, gain creators) fits with a customer profile (customer jobs, pains, gains). Just as it is important for entrepreneurs to observe and pay attention to details when it comes to customers, it is the same for followers to really understand a leader's needs, issues, and goals. When explaining the different components of the Value Proposition Template, I remind participants that while this template was designed for entrepreneurs, it can be modified and repurposed for followership by replacing the word *customer* with the word *leader*. So, the Customer Profile section is now called the Leader Profile section, and the Value Map section is now called the Followership Value Map section.

The third step involves small group work. The facilitator puts the students or participants into small groups in which they consider the case study or picture, and compile their individual responses to the following questions/prompts:

Leader Profile (*a modification of the original "Customer Profile" term*)

- Jobs: List the specific tasks the leader is responsible for getting done in their job.
- Pains: List things that might prevent or annoy the leader before, during, and after trying to do their job.
- Gains: List the benefits and outcomes that would be required, expected, or desired by the leader because of their job.

Followership Value Map (*a modification of the original "Value Map" term*)

- Products & Services: List the skills, abilities, attributes, etc. that you can provide to a leader.
- Pain Relievers: List reasons why your skills, abilities, attributes, etc. can alleviate the leader's pains.
- Gain Creators: List and describe how your skills, abilities, attributes, etc. can meet and exceed their current expectations from those in their sphere of influence.

It should be noted that since this is an activity to practice applying this template to followership, the items listed for Products & Services can be different than what might typically appear in the context of entrepreneurship. For example, products and services in the context of

followership might refer more to an individual follower's natural abilities, traits, skills, resources, or functional knowledge and expertise. In some cases, individuals who have taken the Clifton Strengths Inventory assessment (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006) will list their Top 5 Strengths as items in the Products and Services results section. When the small group presents back to the larger group, it is best for them to put their findings in table format to illustrate the clear connections between elements within the Leader Profile and the Followership Value Map components of the template (see Appendix B).

In the final step of this exercise, the students or participants take their results and convert it into a sales pitch-type format. The tool that is used at this point is the *Ad-Lib Value Proposition Template* (Strategyzer, n.d.) (see Appendix C). The original purpose of this template is to help entrepreneurs develop a written value proposition that could be stated in the form of a sales pitch. Just as it is important for an entrepreneur to make a sales pitch articulating their value proposition to a customer, it is equally important for an individual follower to have a concise followership value proposition statement that can be articulated to the leader they will be working with. Using this template will result in the development of a short and succinct followership value proposition statement (1-3 sentences). It is advised to give ample time for each small group to carefully craft their followership value proposition statement. In cases where there is a short amount of time, the instructor can show a finished product. An example could be a completed followership value proposition statement that the instructor created prior to class based on the existing case study.

Conducting this activity in the context of a small group activity enables students and participants to see and learn the nuances of using these tools. It is recommended that the

instructor provides a follow up assignment in which each individual student must develop their own individual Followership Value Proposition Statement.

Session Description

This session will be presented in a 60-minute time period as detailed below:

1. **5 Minutes: Introduction/Background.** During this part of the session, a definition of followership and the theoretical and practical approaches will be presented.
2. **5 Minutes: The Parallel between Followership and Entrepreneurship.** During this part of the session, similarities between entrepreneurship and followership will be shared. The case will be made that entrepreneurship tools can be modified and repurposed to help students think about followership.
3. **10 Minutes: Tool #1 - The Value Proposition Canvas.** During this part of the session, attendees will be presented the original version of Strategyzer's Value Proposition Canvas template along with guiding questions and prompts designed to modify and repurpose this tool for the context of followership.
4. **15 Minutes: Small Group Activity/Application.** During this part of the session, attendees will be placed into Zoom breakout rooms to practice using the modified and repurposed Value Proposition Canvas (10 minutes). When returning to the main group, each group will share the compilation of their results (5 minutes).
5. **10 Minutes: Tool #2 – Ad-Lib Value Proposition Template.** During this part of the session, attendees will be presented the original version of Strategyzer's Ad-Lib Value Proposition Template. Attendees will also be shown the connection between this template and the Value Proposition Canvas discussed previously and how the elements work together to create a Followership Value Proposition Statement. Time

permitting, small group members may have the opportunity to create their own Followership Value Proposition Statement and to present it to the larger audience. If time is limited, an example of a finished Followership Value Proposition Statement will be provided.

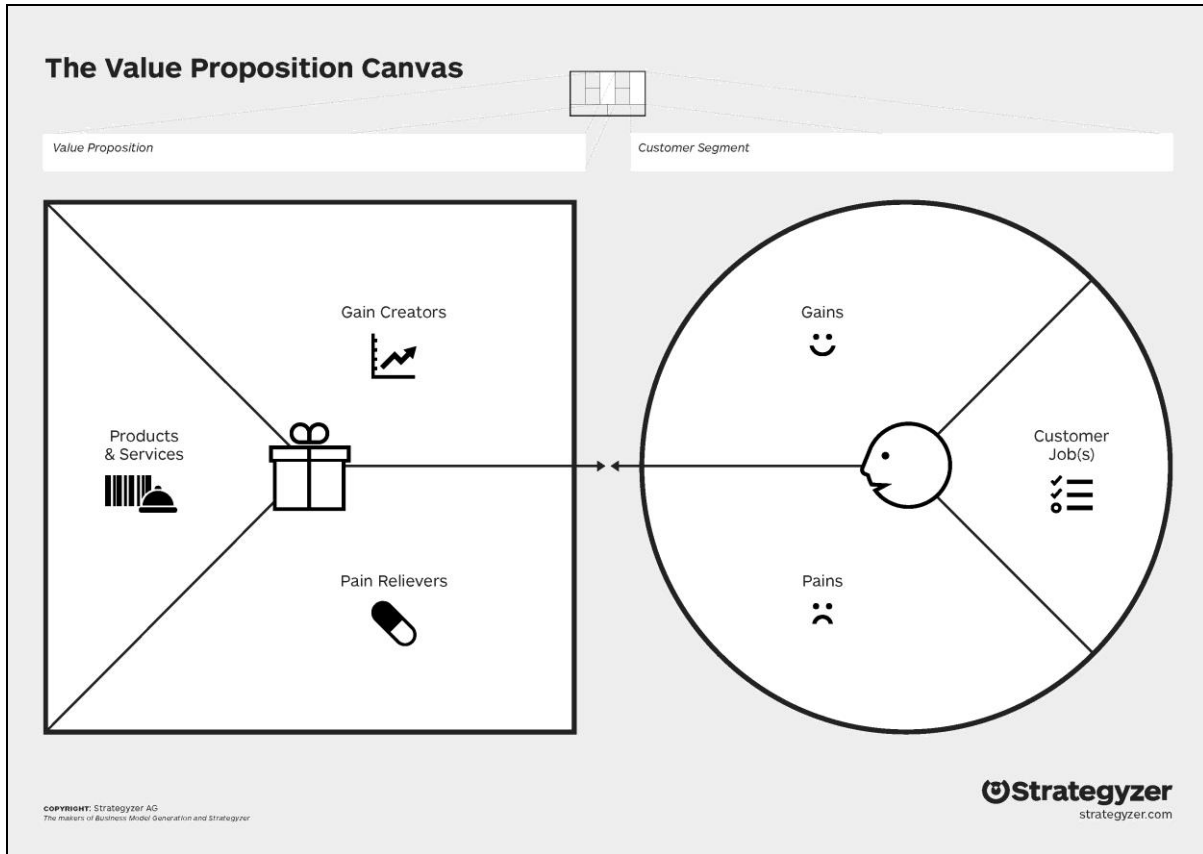
- 6. 15 Minutes: Q&A/Conversation Time.** During this part of the presentation, attendees will be provided with a handout containing references and links to additional resources on this topic. It will also be a time for attendees to provide feedback and/or suggestions on how they could utilize this activity in their classes and/or to provide feedback to the presenter on ways to improve this exercise.

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Appendix A Value Proposition Canvas (Strategyzer)

Electronic document can be fully viewed at:
<https://assets.strategyzer.com/assets/resources/the-value-proposition-canvas.pdf>



Appendix B
Small Group Reporting & Presentation Format

| LEADER PROFILE | FOLLOWERSHIP VALUE MAP |
|---|---|
| <p><u>Jobs</u> <i>List the specific tasks the leader is responsible for getting done in their job.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. | <p><u>Products & Services</u> <i>List the skills, abilities, attributes, etc. that you can provide to a leader.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. |
| <p><u>Pains</u> <i>List things that might prevent or annoy the leader before, during, and after trying to do their job.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. | <p><u>Pain Relievers</u> <i>List reasons why your skills, abilities, attributes, etc. can alleviate the leader's pains.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. |
| <p><u>Gains</u> <i>List the benefits and outcomes that would be required, expected, or desired by the leader because of their job.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. | <p><u>Gain Creators</u> <i>List and describe how your skills, abilities, attributes, etc. can meet and exceed the leader's current expectations of those in their sphere of influence.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. |

Appendix C Ad-Lib Value Proposition Template (Strategyzer)

Electronic document can be fully viewed at:
<https://assets.strategyzer.com/assets/resources/ad-lib-value-proposition-template.pdf>

Ad-Lib Value Proposition Template

Ad-libs are a great way to quickly shape alternative directions for your value proposition. They force you to pinpoint how exactly you are going to creating value. Prototype three to five different directions by filling out the blanks in the ad-lib below.

OBJECTIVE

Quickly shape potential value proposition directions

OUTCOME

Alternative prototypes in the form of "pitchable" sentences

Our _____
 Products and Services

help(s) _____
 Customer Segment

who want to _____

_____  Jobs to be done

by _____ and a customer pain
 verb (e.g., reducing, avoiding)

and _____ and a customer gain
 verb (e.g., increasing, enabling)

(unlike _____ **)**
 competing value proposition