“Followership” immediately caught my attention. There are tons of books on leadership but what about followership? It is parallel to all the books on parenting compared to those on being a kid (are there any?). There is a literature on citizenship comparable to that on political leadership, but in business and organizational life we are overdue for some good studies of followership.

Barbara Kellerman teaches at Harvard. She is author of several books on leadership and her articles have appeared in the Harvard Business Review, New York Times, Washington Post, and many other publications. Her opening case for paying attention to followership is common sensical and right on target. Obsessing about leaders and ignoring followers is very shortsighted.

She chooses to define followers by “rank” rather than by “behavior.” “Followers are subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line” (p. xix). Kellerman is concerned with mindless or misled followers (Milgram’s famous experiments, Hitler’s followers); she notes individuals and groups who have raised their voices and achieved change from the bottom up. The legacy of Sixties activism and the power of today’s communication technologies suggest that de facto leaders can no longer take for granted that their followers will comply at all times.

The heart of Kellerman’s book consists of a set of chapters illustrating her typology of followers along a “level of engagement” spectrum from “Isolates” (utterly detached and disinterested; reinforce status quo by default) to “Bystanders” (consentingly choose to stand by and watch) to “Participants” (engaged, usually in support of leaders) to “Activists” (eager, energetic, hard working engagement) to “Diehards” (all-consuming, total engagement). German citizens under Hitler are her central example of what she means by Bystander. “Participants” are illustrated by the employees of Merck during the Vioxx scandal: some of whom supported the risky drug, others of whom warned against it. “Activists” are illustrated by the Catholic laity in New England who stayed within the church but raised heck until those priests guilty of sexual abuse—or covering it up—were finally dealt with. “Diehards” are illustrated by the “Anaconda military operatives trying to chase down Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, despite inadequate military intelligence, supplies, and preparations.

As Kellerman acknowledges here and there, the picture is not so clear: Nazi Germany had not just Bystanders but Participants, Activists, and Diehards—some (most!) of each for Hitler, some against. Same complexity in the other cases. Kellerman asks “Where does this leave us? If Participants, Activists, and Diehards are in and of themselves neutral, value free, how do we distinguish good followers from bad ones? To this question there is, obviously, no single answer. Where you stand depends on where you sit—on what are your basic beliefs, on what are your fundamental values, and on what you think of this leader and these followers in this situation in particular” (p. 229).

So, unfortunately, we are no better off on this topic after reading Kellerman than before. Her continuum from Participant to Activist to Diehard is hopelessly fluid, murky, and subjective. She gives us no insight on how to motivate people to greater engagement—or guidance on when to disengage; when to dig in, and when to negotiate or compromise. Kellerman provides no insight on why people support anti-semitic, imperialistic Nazis rather than the Voice of the Faithful movement against abusive priests, no workable criteria for evaluating good or bad followership. This is a Harvard Business publication but the argument and examples are rarely helpful to the workplace and marketplace.

Kellerman’s fixation on rank makes her analysis far too static to be helpful. She doesn’t get anywhere near the real complexity and richness of the subject. Just think for a minute about a position player on a football team: in the middle of the game, good “followership” means listening to the QB call the play and
carrying out your assignment precisely and “obediently” with “diehard” engagement. On the sideline during the game, or in a practice session, or outside of a practice session, being a good follower might mean bringing up your ideas and suggestions, even arguing for your point of view. At other times good followership (and good leadership) means keeping your mouth shut for a while (bystanding?).

What makes a good follower? We need not waffle around as Kellerman does. How about a few of these characteristics: a good follower (I prefer “team member”) will understand and commit to the team’s mission, be loyal to the team, accept personal responsibility, be well-prepared, question authority but be wise about timing and tone, think win-win, step up and lead when called upon, help teammates get better, etc., etc.. Unfortunately, virtually none of this is addressed by Kellerman. We don’t know what good followership entails—and thus we would have no idea how to find it, develop it, or reward it. Too bad.