UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

A good leader is one who follows the followers.

उत्तम नेता वह है जो अपने

अनुयायियों का अनुसरण करता है ।

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SUBJECT

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MARKS

125

WORD LIMIT

~1200 words

Answer Hint

Leadership as responsiveness rather than blind authority; followers as a source of knowledge, legitimacy and ground realities; listening, empathy and participative decision-making; distinction between following people's aspirations and merely following popular opinion; servant leadership and constitutional/public values; balance between responsiveness and moral courage; argue that a leader leads best by listening first and aligning collective action with legitimate aspirations.

Model Answer

Introduction

Leadership is conventionally associated with giving direction, taking decisions and influencing others. Yet leadership that is disconnected from those being led can become authoritarian, unrealistic or unresponsive. The statement “A good leader is one who follows the followers” presents a paradox: the leader must guide the people, but must first understand where they wish to go. Following followers therefore signifies listening to their legitimate aspirations, learning from their experiences and allowing collective wisdom to shape leadership, rather than surrendering judgment to popular opinion.

Understanding the Paradox

A leader who merely commands may secure compliance, but a leader who listens can secure commitment.

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“Following the followers” does not mean blindly accepting every demand. It means that leadership begins with **observation, consultation, empathy and responsiveness**. The leader follows the people's legitimate needs and aspirations before determining how best to achieve them.

Thus, effective leadership involves a continuous cycle:

Listen → Understand → Consult → Decide → Lead → Learn → Adapt.

The leader remains responsible for the final decision but does not assume that authority automatically provides superior knowledge.

Followers as a Source of Knowledge

People at the grassroots often possess knowledge that senior leaders cannot obtain from reports alone.

A district collector may understand a policy from official guidelines, but farmers, workers, teachers and local communities understand its practical consequences. Similarly, a corporate executive may formulate a product strategy, while frontline employees and customers possess valuable information about actual problems.

Therefore, a leader who follows the experiences of followers can identify:

- emerging problems,
- unintended consequences,
- practical constraints,
- innovative solutions,
- changing expectations.

Listening thus becomes an instrument of better decision-making, not merely an act of courtesy.

Servant Leadership

The idea is closely connected with **servant leadership**, in which the leader views authority as a responsibility to serve rather than a privilege to command.

Mahatma Gandhi's leadership illustrates the importance of understanding people's lived realities. His engagement with ordinary Indians transformed political leadership from an elite activity into a mass movement.

Similarly, leaders in public administration are expected to remain citizen-centric. A welfare programme succeeds not merely because it is well

designed at the top but because the administration understands the needs of its intended beneficiaries.

Hence, **a leader who follows the people in understanding their needs can lead them more effectively towards common goals.**

Participative Leadership and Democracy

Democracy institutionalises the principle that rulers must remain responsive to the governed.

Elections, public consultations, local self-government, social audits and citizen feedback mechanisms allow people's experiences and preferences to influence governance.

Participative decision-making also increases legitimacy. When citizens feel heard, they are more likely to cooperate with policies even when every individual demand cannot be accepted.

However, democracy does not mean that leaders should follow every popular demand. Constitutional rights, minority interests and long-term public welfare may sometimes require leaders to resist temporary majorities.

Thus, **following followers must mean following legitimate democratic aspirations, not simply following the loudest majority.**

Leadership in Organisations

The principle applies equally to businesses and institutions.

An effective manager does not merely issue instructions. By listening to employees, the manager can discover operational problems, encourage innovation and improve workplace morale.

For example, frontline healthcare workers may identify deficiencies in hospital procedures long before senior management notices them. A leader who listens and incorporates their knowledge can improve both institutional efficiency and patient service.

Here, following followers means **remaining close to the people who actually implement decisions**.

Following Does Not Mean Abdicating Leadership

The statement has an important limitation.

A leader who simply follows public opinion can become a follower of immediate emotions rather than a leader of long-term interests.

History and public life demonstrate situations where leaders must take unpopular decisions because:

- public opinion may be misinformed;
- short-term interests may conflict with long-term welfare;
- minority rights may require protection;
- evidence may contradict popular belief;
- ethical principles may demand resistance to social pressure.

A leader who follows prejudice, misinformation or mob sentiment cannot be considered ethical merely because such views are popular.

Therefore, **responsiveness must be combined with moral courage.**

The Leader as a Bridge Between Aspiration and Vision

The strongest leadership is neither purely top-down nor purely bottom-up.

Followers provide **needs, experiences and aspirations**. Leaders provide **vision, coordination, prioritisation and direction**.

For example, citizens may demand better employment opportunities. A leader's role is not simply to repeat the demand but to translate it into policies concerning skills, investment, infrastructure and entrepreneurship.

Similarly, employees may identify dissatisfaction within an organisation. A leader must convert their feedback into institutional reforms rather than merely acknowledge complaints.

Thus, the leader follows the **direction of legitimate aspirations** while leading the collective effort towards their realisation.

Ethical Dimension

Following followers also reflects several ethical values.

Empathy enables a leader to understand the experiences of others.

Humility recognises that leadership does not imply omniscience.

Respect treats followers as participants rather than instruments.

Accountability requires the leader to respond to legitimate concerns.

Inclusiveness ensures that less powerful voices are not drowned out by influential groups.

This is particularly important in public administration, where vulnerable communities may lack the institutional power to make their voices heard.

Examples from Different Spheres

In science, successful research teams often allow junior researchers to challenge established assumptions.

In the military, commanders depend upon information from personnel operating on the ground.

In social movements, leaders often emerge from the lived experiences and aspirations of affected communities.

In business, customer feedback can reshape products and services.

In democratic governance, citizen participation can reveal gaps between policy design and implementation.

Across these contexts, leadership becomes effective when authority remains connected to reality.

A Balanced Model of Leadership

A good leader can therefore be visualised as having **“ears close to the people and eyes fixed on the larger horizon.”**

The leader should:

Listen to followers without prejudice.

Distinguish genuine needs from transient demands.

Consult diverse stakeholders.

Use evidence to evaluate competing claims.

Protect constitutional and ethical principles.

Decide when a decision is required.

Explain the rationale transparently.

Adapt when new evidence emerges.

This creates a relationship in which followers are neither passive recipients nor the unquestioned masters of policy.

Conclusion

A leader who never follows the people may become detached from reality; a leader who only follows them may lose the capacity to provide direction.

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Good leadership lies in the synthesis of listening and leading.

The leader should follow the followers in **understanding their experiences, hearing their legitimate aspirations and learning from their knowledge**, while leading them through vision, ethical judgment and responsible decision-making.

Ultimately, the paradox captures a profound truth: **the authority to lead is strengthened when the humility to listen comes first.** A leader who knows when to follow is better equipped to know where and how to lead.

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