



## I Lead, Therefore I Follow

**W**hen I first encountered the maxim “I lead, therefore I follow,” I felt confused. I thought it made more sense to assert something like “Lead, follow or get out of the way.” How could one lead and follow at the same time? It just didn’t seem logical to link the two concepts together.

Consider the following scenario, however. Your lieutenant proposes a strategy to address the gang problem in your district. The strategy includes an effort to identify young pre-gang members. Officers will complete contact cards on these wannabes when interviewed in the company of known gang members. After three documented contacts, officers will notify the parents of these at-risk juveniles. You believe this program is less important than other priorities, and you say so to the lieutenant. Eventually the lieutenant announces his decision to move ahead with the strategy. Later you discuss this issue with the two probationary officers working under your leadership. You explain the program is unimportant, and that they therefore do not need to diligently follow the lieutenant’s direction.

A few weeks later you notice your two trainees are not following all of your directions. They fail to scrutinize crime-analysis documents, and they plan their discretionary patrol accordingly. You talk with each of them to correct their lack of cooperation and compliance. After thinking about these conversations, you come to a troubling conclusion. They behave toward you exactly as they’ve witnessed you behave toward your lieutenant. By example, you have taught them it’s acceptable to evaluate directions from leaders and then decide which to follow diligently. You have given them a faulty model of a follower’s

behavior. You have unwittingly taught them to disobey you.

### On the Other Hand

Now consider a second scenario. You make a traffic stop. The driver appears unusually nervous. Something about his behavior causes you to grow cautious. After obtaining his driver’s license, you order him to step from the vehicle and pat him down for weapons. He has none. He answers your questions evasively. You conduct a cursory search of the vehicle and find a gun under the front seat. You hook him up and request backup. You discover he was just involved in an armed robbery with shots fired.

Later, as you prepare your arrest report, the lieutenant expresses concern about the probable cause for your search. He tells you to prepare your report indicating you observed the barrel of the gun protruding from under the seat while requesting the suspect’s driver’s license. You clarify that you did not see the gun prior to the search. He explains the robbery case will be lost unless you follow his suggestion.

Hopefully, you’ll never be exposed to this type of corrupt leadership. But if it should occur, is there a rule to follow? If being a good follower is important to your leadership, is there any exception to the general rule of following those above you?

### Principle vs. Preference

The defining difference between the two scenarios is principle as opposed to preference. In the first scenario, the lieutenant directs you to do something you believe is low priority. You would prefer not to do it. This is a matter of preference and is no excuse for non-compliance. In the second scenario, the lieutenant asks you to violate a basic

principle, and you must resist. In such cases, I recommend using a strong word to draw attention to the principle. For example, in this scenario I would say, “Lieutenant, I believe that would be perjury.”

In the practice of leadership, to cultivate legitimate authority, you must follow the leader yourself. When you step out from under authority, you lose that power. The only exception involves matters of principle, not simply preference. Legitimate authority does not demand followers violate laws or established principles. If you are asked to do something illegal, immoral or unethical, a polite but firm resistance is appropriate.

The big challenge here is to distinguish between principle and preference. Most of us instinctively want to classify something as a matter of principle if we hold a strong opinion or preference. In my nearly four decades of law enforcement experience, I can count on one hand the rare times when a superior officer even suggested I violate a principle. Although I must admit there were many times when my first reaction was to inaccurately classify my preference as a principle.

### Bottom Line

Effective leaders understand the importance of being a model follower. They strive to discern between preference and principle. Consequently, they propagate a chain of powerful leadership—on point. **LOM**

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