When I first heard that I’d been selected as the recipient of the 2014 EDUCAUSE Leadership Award, my thoughts turned to my good friend Dewitt Latimer. Dewitt lost his life in a motorcycle accident in May 2013, shortly after being appointed CIO at Montana State University. Dewitt had been my second-in-command for almost ten years at the University of Notre Dame, and I’d known him for many years before that through our association in the Southeastern Universities Research Association when Dewitt was working at the University of Tennessee.
The main title of this article, “Gathering No Moss,” comes from Dewitt: he used the phrase as part of his e-mail signature. Dewitt was a tremendously talented engineer with a seemingly inexhaustible curiosity, a passion for excellence, and a dedication to learning how to be a better leader. He also had a quirky personality, and it took some people a little time to get used to that. But what stood out the most for me about Dewitt was his deep commitment to the people who worked for him. He was always on the go, gathering no moss: working with his team members while helping, supporting, and leading them. As Deputy CIO and Chief Technology Officer at Notre Dame he was also, of course, supporting me in the direction that I had set for the IT organization.

Thinking about Dewitt led me to thinking about all of the people who have supported me over the years—people who have worked for me, have followed me, and ultimately have been responsible for the successes that we achieved. Although those successes are often attributed to the leader, no one—especially in the higher education IT profession—achieves success without the help of many, many others.

So I would like to talk first about followership. Not everyone can be a leader; we can’t all sit in the front row. As that famous philosopher Bob Dylan said: “You’re going to have to serve somebody.” And if I’m going to serve somebody; at least I am going to serve them well. Edith Wharton wrote in one of her poems at the beginning of the 20th century: “There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it” (Vesalius in Zante). And the great American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein is quoted as having said: “The most difficult instrument to play in the orchestra is second fiddle.”

Followership is, of course, the other side of the leadership coin. All leaders follow the directions of others, whether it’s the CEO following the directions of the board of directors, or the quarterback following the directions of the coach, or the military officer following the directions of the Commander in Chief or the Joint Chiefs of Staff. There’s an old adage that in order to be a good leader, you must first be a good follower.

Followership skills are thus key for any successful leader, but we don’t often talk about what those skills are. What makes a good follower? And where would one go to learn about followership skills? There’s a huge amount of information available about leadership. A Google search on leadership will return somewhere in the order of 400 million hits; a search on followership will yield about 400 thousand results. Likewise, entire academic departments have been created to teach people about leadership skills, but I’m not aware of one that teaches followership skills. And yet, a successful leader must first know how to follow.

A great deal of material has been written about followership (even if not on the magnitude of the writings about leadership). I’m not going to go into all of the theory, but there are some very good books: Followership: How Followers Are Cre-
is a discipline of supporting leaders and helping them to lead well. It is not submission, but the wise and good care of leaders, done out of a sense of gratitude for their willingness to take on the responsibilities of leadership, and a sense of hope and faith in their abilities and potential." And Kellerman wrote: "Followers are more important to leaders than leaders are to followers."

I should note here that I come from a military background. I served twenty years in the U.S. Air Force as an officer and then worked my way into the higher education IT field after being appointed the CIO at the Air Force Institute of Technology. While in the air force, early on, I learned from General Wilbur L. "Bill" Creech, for whom I worked at Tactical Air Command, that an organization will be only as successful as those at the bottom are willing to make it. General Creech said: “Think big about what you can achieve, but think small about how to achieve it, because we get things done through individuals and groups of individuals.”

So, what are the characteristics of good followers? Some would no doubt agree with the leadership scholar and author Warren Bennis, who stated: “If I had to reduce the responsibilities of a good follower to a single rule, it would be to speak truth to power.” Those of us who lead higher ed IT organizations—which have the critical responsibilities of servicing campus constituents and students and on which services our students depend for their success and their education, and ultimately their lives—need to have the truth spoken to us. We need to understand what is happening at all levels of the organization and with all of the services that we’re providing.

In The Responsibility Virus (2003), Roger Martin wrote about the Responsibility Ladder. At the bottom of the ladder (Level 6) are those who are the least responsible—the ones who will simply drop a problem on their supervisor’s desk, throw up their hands, and say, “I need help.” That’s OK. If they need help, the leader should be prepared to give it. But most leaders would prefer followers who are little higher up on the ladder, perhaps at Level 4: “Describe a problem to the superior and ask for help in structuring it.” Better yet is Level 2—“Providing options to superior with own recommendations”—which I particularly like from my own staff because I’ve always followed the principle that you should hire people who are smarter than you are and then listen to them. Finally, at the top of the ladder are the most responsible followers, the ones who make decisions and subsequently inform their superior.

At this point we should flip back to the leadership side of the coin. What skills, in addition to followership skills, are needed for leaders? As I noted, I come from a military background. As a result, I’ve often been asked about my transition from military life to academic life, a transition that involves hugely different cultures. The common perception is that military leadership styles are fundamentally incompatible with the culture of higher education. But in fact, as I grew more experienced in higher education, I came to realize that the leadership skills and leadership styles I had learned in the military were perfectly applicable to higher education.

For example, a quick online search yields the 11 Leadership Principles of the U.S. Marine Corps (http://www.marines.com/being-a-marine/leadership-principles). Since the Marine Corps has the reputation of being the most gung-ho of all the military services, one might think that the leadership principles for the Marine Corps could not possibly be compatible with leadership skills in higher education. However, with the change of one simple noun in the list below (“marines” to “employees”), this list can easily be applied to higher ed IT organizations. As a matter of fact, I’ve used these principles as a guide in my own higher education leadership career.

1. Be technically and tactically proficient.
2. Know yourself and seek self-improvement.
3. Know your marines and look out for their welfare.
4. Keep your marines informed.
5. Set the example.
6. Ensure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished.
7. Train your marines as a team.
8. Make sound and timely decisions.
9. Develop a sense of responsibility in your subordinates.
10. Employ your unit in accordance with its capabilities.
11. Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions.

I continue to refine and develop these principles by mixing in what I gleaned from my personal experience in the air force—that is, my own lessons learned:

- It's a good landing if you can still get the doors open. Strive for perfection, but remember that what we're doing is hard and that we can accept less than perfection from people.
- Always remember that you fly an airplane with your head, not your hands. No matter how technically proficient you may be, think hard about how to apply those skills, especially when dealing with other people.
- Never let an airplane take you somewhere your brain didn't get to five minutes earlier. Plan ahead. You'll benefit from doing so.
- If it's red or dusty, don't touch it. Be careful where you step, especially if you don't know anything about the subject.
- Don't drop the aircraft in order to fly the microphone. Remember your priorities, especially in crisis situations.
- You start with a bag full of luck and an empty bag of experience; the trick is to fill the bag of experience before you empty the bag of luck. Learn quickly.
- You can only tie the record for flying low. Beware of hubris.
- If you must make a mistake, make it a new one. As U.S. Navy Admiral Hyman Rickover (among others) reminded us: “It is necessary to learn from others’ mistakes. You will not live long enough to make them all yourself.”
- Will Rogers never met a fighter pilot. There really are some people you simply won’t get along with. Accept it.

Followership skills are critical for successful leaders. Learning the secrets and skills of great number twos remains the surest path to becoming a number one. Take note of those people who are providing support to the leaders in your organization. Emulate them, copy them, and strive to be like them. And finally, whether you are a follower or a leader (or both), you'd be wise to listen to the simple advice of Mark Twain: “Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.”

© 2015 Gordon Wishon. The text of this article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0).