

## CHAPTER 2

### *Leading from the Middle: “I’m the Boss.”*

A trip to San Francisco is never complete for me without a seafood dish at the Tadich Grill. Located at the bottom of California Street, with the trolley cars rumbling past, it is the city’s oldest restaurant, family owned, dating back to 1849. What draws me there?

Good food? Of course, but good food abounds in San Francisco. The ambience? True, there’s the inviting glow from the 1940s-era chandeliers visible through the half-curtained window. But the dark, wood-paneled walls, the white tile floor, and the L-shaped wooden bar are anomalous in this city of way-out-there design.

What really pulls me there is the Tadich tradition. It’s twofold. There’s an ingratiating stodginess with its rules, like no reservations, always closed on Sunday, no singles at tables, no substitutions on the menu, and so on. That firmness turns off a few, but for 600 diners each day the apparent brusqueness is tempered by an old-world courtesy, attentive service, good food, and a prevailing camaraderie. Tadich’s family have made a conscious decision to keep and improve what works well, uphold the traditional values, and be attentive to the details—those hundreds of little things that make dining out delightful, or deplorable when overlooked. The Tadich tradition is shared by the customers. I was told: “The regulars guard the place.” After the 1989 earthquake, with building debris littering the sidewalks, the customers came by—not to eat— but to ask, “Are you OK?” Often, they bring in their grandchildren for a first visit to Tadich’s, introducing them to their favorite servers.<sup>1</sup>

Professionalism prevails—none of the servers are in between casting calls; serving is how they make their living. For Michael Buich, owner and general manager, the show and performance are right here on that tile floor. White jacketed, the servers flash past in a nimble kitchen ballet, a *pas de quatre* for servers and busers. Service is snappy—as soon as I sit down, the sliced lemons, water, salt, pepper, freshly sliced sourdough bread, and butter land in front of me alongside the cloth napkin and stainless steel cutlery. The four-page menu on

vellum-like paper slips into my hand. Printed daily, it is dark green ink on one side, black ink on the other. Shortly after the food arrives, the server checks in to make sure it is to my liking and my wine glass is full, along with a friendly word.

Late one summer night I lingered to visit with my server. I told him that the cioppino and garlic bread had been my favorite over the past dozen years, how much I enjoyed each visit. "Where's the boss?" I asked, in hopes of meeting the leader behind this restaurant's perennial excellence.

"I'm the boss." Then he pointed to another server down the bar and said, "He's the boss." Then gesturing toward the bartender he repeated, "He's the boss." I liked the sound of that and thought I knew what he meant, but was left wondering how it played out in the running of the organization.

Three years later I asked Mike Buich what he thought that server meant. He told me, "It's the server's taking responsibility; it speaks to his being a professional. When they say, 'I'm the boss,' they're expressing pride in how well they perform."

For the servers it means you're the boss of your section, you are in charge of that part of the dining room. It also means: "Let's do the job!" This "let's get on with it" attitude permeates the place. However, it is far less about getting more butts in seats than about doing the best job for the people who are dining at any moment. If each customer leaves feeling well served, more customers will follow.

Although Mike is the leader—and the servers are followers—both contribute the qualities needed for their restaurant to remain a success. By infusing the Tadic values, expecting staff to do their best, to be as professional and competent as they can be—and the staff's responding to this expectation—Mike enables what I call "leading from the middle."

That phrase, the title of this chapter, derives from a workshop activity in which a dozen or more participants line up single file, with a balloon in between each two people. Sort of like this: XOXOXOXOXOX, with people as Xs and balloons as Os. It's called the balloon trolley.

The challenge: overcome obstacles, navigate a hairpin turn, hop over a threshold, circle around a tree, or whatever the itinerary, without dropping a balloon. There are two rules: no hands on the balloons, and if you drop a balloon, you must start over.

The person in the front (the nominal leader, with a balloon in the back but none in the front) leads the group through the first leg of the obstacle course. Then another leader is appointed—this time someone from the middle. Typically, that person steps out of the line to make his or her way to the front—that's where the leader is, right?

Not always.

I place them back where they were—and they experience, literally, leading from the middle, remaining a follower while leading—pushing a balloon in front and not losing contact with the balloon behind.

Belying its simplicity, the balloon trolley taps into a mother lode of metaphors about leading, leadership, and being a follower. The more obvious insights are as follows:

- There's a literal link (the balloon) between follower and leader—without willing followers the line does not move, the balloons go nowhere.
- Because of the shape of this organization—a long line—not everyone will hear nor (literally) share the leader's vision.
- The smallest action, say, a change in tempo, has an ever-widening repercussion, just like those unintended consequences of any policy, especially one developed without consulting the people involved.

The most effective leader/follower in the balloon trolley is aware of those around him or her, in front, in back, at the tail, and at the head. She is the one most comfortable being in the midst of something and someone who has the ability to communicate ways to advance the organization.

Recently the scholarly field of leadership studies has made progress in explaining what leaders do and what leadership is.<sup>2</sup> Current theories emphasize the role of the follower. When leaders and followers take action, they are involved in leadership. Leadership is never a person; it is a process between leader and followers. Imagine two overlapping circles: the leader is one circle and follower is the other. The overlap is the leadership process. A few scholars describe leadership as an eclipsing relationship—the leader and follower are “two sides of the same coin,” the “yin and the yang,” the “eternal male and female”—but the balloon trolley example does a better job, for the way I think about leadership, in approximating a less occluding relationship.

Kelley (1988) adds to our understanding of followership through charting out types of followers.<sup>3</sup> Of the five I've observed in libraries, the effective follower benefits the leadership process. These followers manage themselves well; they are leaders in their own areas, similar to the servers at Tadich's. They require little supervision. And they are committed to the organization and to a purpose or person outside themselves. Following are some of the types in Kelley's chart:

- ***Alienated or Entrenched***—independent thinkers but alienated and often actively passive, as in passive/aggressive. They are proactive in articulating reasons *not* to do something. They drain the organization's intellectual energy to protect the existing way of doing things. When a leader (or an effective follower) seeks to change the status quo, the entrenched follower resists.
- ***Sheep***—passive thinkers. Submissive to any leader, but, depending on which way the wind is blowing, they can be stampeded by the entrenched.
- ***Yes People, Noddors, or Accommodators***—dependent thinkers, and prone to be YES people for leaders, fearful of challenging a leader's premise and

gaining his or her displeasure. Still, they do the leader's bidding, so they are active.

In the middle of Kelley's chart we find:

- ***Survivors/Pragmatists***—somewhat independent, somewhat active—not exactly “deadwood”—these pragmatists keep a low profile, do their job, and often enjoy more rewarding interests outside the library. They are bemused by the antics of ambitious librarians seeking the spotlight.

If you were to sort your fellow library staff members by type of follower, what would the distribution be? What does that breakout say about your organization? One subgroup of about forty staff for which I was the appointed leader had this distribution: an equal number of entrenched and effective (18 percent each), with more than a third as sheep and the balance either accommodators or survivors. Because the effective followers balanced out the entrenched, I think we were able to make progress. However, had there been more of the entrenched, little change would have occurred until the other categories rallied in support.

What kind of follower are you? What kind of follower is your boss? As you might guess, effective followers lead proactively and do not behave like the typecast follower—a servant in need of direction. A personal illustration follows.

I have long been committed to Ranganathan's Laws. “Save the time of the user” has been my mantra, a touchstone in every job. No one told me to adopt these tenets; I read them in library school and, intuitively, they appealed to me, made eminent sense. So some years later, I was delighted when my boss asked me to benefit library users by leading a complex streamlining effort. It felt good to be singled out, to be given the responsibility for making a genuine difference. Well, I was less happy to hear why he had chosen me. Although he believed me capable enough, the real reason was that I was the “least resistant reed to the wind of change” he was bringing to the organization!

In truth, I already had a good idea of what needed doing and was confident it could be done. My vision happened to align with the leader's; to me, he was a co-adventurer. What was unique about this leader was his strength and wisdom in fending off the political machinations of those opposed to his change agenda.

Kelley identifies a quality that sets effective followers apart from leaders: the follower's ability and desire to participate in a team effort for the accomplishment of some greater common purpose. We succeeded in my example because the several dozen staff and I collaborated. If I had chosen to direct the followers, to tell them what and where to change, the results would have been different—and negligible.

What percentage did you assign to the survivor category in your library? I sense this category includes some very good librarians, potentially effective followers and leaders. Unfortunately, many of the survivors I know are disenchanting with management roles. One told me that for her and her closest peers, “Management jobs are more stressful than satisfying. We don't have any happy, effective manager role models.”

How can we create an environment that encourages effective followers? These tangible ideas require bold leaders, ones who want to create a more effective followership:

- **Value independent critical thinking.** Critical thinking is bountiful in libraries, but often it waits to be invited into the decision-making arena. A friend told me of a first job experience. He was a newly hired reference librarian, bright and earnest. One day he saw the director and offered him some ideas on how the library could improve. He was admonished when the director scowled: “You are not here to make suggestions.”
- **Manage self.** Develop practical techniques for disagreeing agreeably and building credibility. This is an essential process for the effective follower who wants to bring others along with his vision rather than becoming isolated as the organization’s knee-jerk cynic, its irrelevant contrarian.
- **Act responsibly toward the organization, leaders, coworkers, and oneself.** It can be as simple as adhering to a few guidelines, such as not talking about colleagues behind their backs.
- **Appoint leaderless task forces in which everyone is a leader.** Experiment with groups in which all members assume responsibility for achieving goals.
- **Use temporary or rotating leaders of departments, divisions, and units.** A six-month term should give incumbents experience and new perspectives. Why do this? Because followers need to understand what leading is, and leaders need to know what it means to be a follower. And when followers help out an ineffective temporary leader, they learn something of value about leadership.

Finally, it is important to know that effective followers are on a perilous path. Kelley claims that about half the time effective followers are punished for speaking up, articulating their own viewpoints, or threatening an organization’s complacency.

If the boss is insecure, your taking a well-reasoned contrarian stand will frighten him or her, leading to envy and fault finding. Over time, your only recourse may be to leave, to find a secure leader who values the courageous follower.

While leaving is a drastic step—unquestionably one of the most difficult career choices—it is too rarely exercised by followers. Many, for economic and other pragmatic reasons, stay and endure with ever-diminishing returns, joining the ranks of the survivors or the entrenched. There are costs. Staying instead of leaving superficially validates a poor leader and lets the organization meander along. Far worse is the personal cost of suborning your vision, of giving up.

It does not have to be that way. Remember, “You’re the boss.