

Leadership bingo: Baudrillard's double refusal and a future for followership

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper investigates Jean Baudrillard's "Double Refusal," and probes what happens in the space between leadership and followership. The paper tracks the trajectory from leadership bingo to followership bingo as a strategy to mitigate the double refusal.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a theoretical paper, and presented in an essay format.

Findings – It is important to assess the consequences of the Baudrillardian "Double Refusal" – the refusal to lead and the refusal to be led – and the consequences of this double refusal for the language and behaviour of leaders and followers.

Research limitations/implications – This is a reflexive essay. A provocations piece.

Practical implications – A consciousness of the social semiotics of leadership failure and the benefits of a follower-centric organizational culture.

Originality/value – I confirm that the application of Jean Baudrillard theory of the double refusal has benefits to leadership theory. This is a rare and promising intervention.

Keywords Leadership, Followership, Jean Baudrillard, Double refusal

Paper type Viewpoint

I play leadership bingo. Let me explain. I carry a bingo card into every meeting. It has 16 words and phrases in it (Figure 1).

As the meeting progresses, I hover with my red marker and confirm – with each stroke and every uttered phrase – the incompetence and meaninglessness of leadership in our lives. The old joke used to be, "Why did you run this meeting when you could have sent an email?" We have now moved to a different question: "Why did you send this email when you could have had a thought bubble and kept it to yourself?"

This short article summons an unusual scholar in leadership studies: Jean Baudrillard. I deploy his concept of the "double refusal" to diagnose leadership failures, particularly the widening disillusionment and disconnection between leaders and followers. My goal is to enable a productive inversion: to move from leadership bingo to followership bingo. The transformation in terms, tropes and theories are productive in an era of claustropolitanism (Redhead, 2009; Brabazon, 2022), deaths of despair (Case & Deaton, 2021) and widening international inequalities with profound political consequences (Estes, 2019). As suggested by my literal and metaphorical bingo card, language matters to this transformation.

Our professional lives are filled with truncated phrases and opaque slogans that result in comedic memes and Dilbert cartoons. Transposed from this comedy, a very serious question must be asked of leadership and this Goffmanesque *Presentation of Self* (1959). The clichés on my bingo card confirm the existence of a gap in meaning and an ambiguity in communication systems that explains the scope and scale of leadership failure in both public and private organizations. Leadership as a term, concept and trope is an empty signifier that the

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Leadership Bingo

Drill Down	Circle Back	Low hanging fruit	Incentivizing
Giving 110%	Baked in	Right-sizing	Touch base
Optics	Close the loop	Socialize the document	Blue sky thinking
Going Forward	Game changer	Paradigm shift	Disruption

Source(s): Tara Brabazon

Figure 1. Leadership bingo card

burgeoning Leadership Industry attempts to stuff with case studies and examples. Interview questions focus on leadership models, rather than leadership theories. Models, spanning from transactional to transformative, authentic to servant, build the Goffmanesque frontstage of empty terms that promote consensus rather than absence. Leadership remains a zombie concept, emptied of meaning, and yet is still shambling through organizations and institutions (Rutherford, 2000; Beck, 2002; Brabazon, 2020).

Through these zombie concepts, structural failures and bingo boxes, leadership remains a punctuation in our daily lives. Indeed, there is an inverted relationship between the number of times a leader discusses leadership and their actual capacity to lead. Jean Baudrillard predicted this inversion through his conceptualization of “the double refusal.” In two of his posthumous books, *Carnival and Cannibal* (Baudrillard, 2010a) and *The Agony of Power* (Baudrillard, 2010b), he described the sovereign’s refusal to dominate as well as the subject’s refusal to be dominated.

It is power itself that has to be abolished – and not just in the refusal to be dominated, which is the essence of all traditional struggles, but equally and as violently in the refusal to dominate. For domination implies both these things, and if there were the same violence or energy in the refusal to dominate, we would long ago have stopped dreaming of revolution. And this tells us why intelligence cannot - and never will be able to – be in power: because it consists precisely in this twofold refusal (2010a, pp. 17–18).

This refusal to dominate – to exercise sovereign power – can be seen in the incomplete “revolutions” of May 1968, the “post-political” Italian Autonomists in the 1970s, or the failures of the Communist Party in late 1970s France. These individuals and politicized collectives agonized about power – to deploy Baudrillard’s title – and resisted its execution.

Indeed, as Žižek has written emphatically, “power itself is an embarrassment and there is no one to assume it truly” (Žižek, 2014, p. 8).

This clustering of high theory that is rarely used in discussions of leadership can be applied to an individual, organization or institution. Leaders refuse to lead. Followers refuse to be led. This is an economic system of “non regulation” rather than deregulation (Frum, 2018, p. 101). The resultant disconnection – a breach of belief, faith, trust and collaboration – means that followers refuse to follow. The incompetence of leaders to hold and execute power is recognized by followers, who then disconnect, often in disgust. This is a (post)followership culture where line management fails. In this space created by the “double refusal” between leaders and followers, disorder, chaos, incompetence and underperformance emerges, often accompanied by words and phrases like “quiet quitting” or “burnout” (Kirkpatrick, 2017; Thacker, 2018). Authority and power are questioned or ignored, rather than valued and respected. This “double refusal” has been studied through an array of historical periods, sometimes described as an interregnum (Baudrillard, 2016; Bauman, 2012; Stahl, 2019; Streeck, 2011, 2014, 2017).

The double refusal provides a framework to understand the irrationality – and denial – of power. A leader cannot lead. Followers refuse to be led. The subsequent step is crucial. What happens next? In the space, gap and disconnection created by the double refusal exists anger, ambivalence, fear, disgust and confusion. It was witnessed through the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Brabazon, Redhead, & Chivaura, 2018), as well as his later denial of the election loss in 2020. As Frum noted through Trump’s cycles of “winning” and “losing”,

The thing to fear from the Trump presidency is not the bold overthrow of the Constitution, but the stealthy paralysis of governance; not the open defiance of the law, but an accumulating sub version of norms; not the deployment of state power to intimidate dissidents, but the incitement of private violence to radicalize supporters (2018, p. xi).

The “paralysis of governance” that perpetuates a “sub version of norms” was also seen in the Brexit result and anti-vaccination communities. This gap in information, information literacy, knowledge and expertise triggers the words and phrases on my bingo card. The pointlessness of leaders that do not lead and followers that will not be led is masked by language like game changers, disruption, incentivizing, low hanging fruit and socializing the document. Such terms ensure that the space of the double refusal is stuffed with confusion, ambiguity and incompetence, so that a consciousness of leadership failure is continually masked and/or deferred.

This century has witnessed embarrassing, banal and ignorant moments. The online environment allows any idea – no matter how bizarre – to be published and shared, as both Twitter/X and Facebook implement “community notes” rather than expert fact checking. Baudrillard’s double refusal assists in the understanding of how racism, xenophobia, colonization and misogyny can transform from a criminal matter and abhorrent in civil society to the banal punctuation of a phone-scrolling population. The unsayable becomes normalized – banal – and allowed to grow, thrive and breed. Because leaders are unable to frame the parameters of debate, extreme views and profound inaccuracies are normalized through their repetition.

Talking in clichés is not only an inelegant proxy for leadership, but blocks the development of leadership. These words and phrases stuff the credibility gap constructed by the double refusal. When deploying the diagnostic of my leadership bingo card, consciousness can emerge to enable a new semiotic system of alternatives, pathways, and possibilities, transcending the double refusal. This new semiotic system reconfigures followership. As Aghaei *et al.* argue, this is followership without leaders (2023). This is one trajectory of the double refusal: followers with autonomy, expertise, direction and commitment.

Moving beyond the self-involved leader

We have all been there. We are in a meeting and a #random dominates the allotted time with their career narrative. Since the pandemic, this problem has increased in its frequency. Instead of people sharing their name and role, and moving on with the discussion, “leaders” now launch into a monologue about their career, while flexing their optics, metrics and stretch targets. They fill the space of the double refusal with self-involved talk that blocks consciousness of the disconnection and disrespect between leaders and followers. The goal is to claim authority and positional power in the room rather than create space to discuss relevant content. This is post-expertise leadership. These inflated and frequently imagined career narratives puff out the importance of the “leader” while also reinforcing the double refusal. Because they lack credibility and authenticity with their workforce, it is necessary to fill the gap with irrelevant stories and self-serving bluster.

It is always difficult to know what to do in these situations, where the confidence of the supposed leader in (over)sharing a career narrative resembles Noam Chomsky at an anarcho-syndicalist conference. I now refuse to play this game. I sit in silence. I do not make them feel comfortable with their delusions. This discomfort is important, as silence is a way to re-focus listening, reorganize the positioning of power and renew followership engagement. This is, as Collinson confirmed, a way to “rethink” leadership and followership (2009). Leadership is not performed through talk and confidence. Instead, followership is revisioned through silence and reflection.

The pandemic increased the visibility – the screens – in our lives, but has also revealed the role of silence as resistance to incompetent leaders. Think about the Zoom or Teams meetings we have experienced where the screens are off, microphones are muted and the group has completely disengaged. People are present, but absent. They are displaying the double refusal through disconnection as resistance. Digitization ensures we can be present, but disconnects visual and sonic commitments with ease.

Recognizing the disengagement of followers, but not its cause, organizations manage this failure of engagement by focusing on leadership selection and leadership training. Leadership is only part of this problem. It is intriguing how rarely the leadership literature references Jean Baudrillard or even mentions the double refusal. Indeed, Google Scholar lists only 42 references to his trope in this field. There are various reasons for this lack of citation and research use. One clear cause is unpopular and uncomfortable. The double refusal unravels layers of assumptions and ideologies about leadership, and reveals the scale of follower disconnection. Other terms, such as Quiet Quitting and Burnout, place the focus on workers, rather than the failures of leadership. The double refusal sits in the failure of leadership as the origin and cause of anger and disengagement of a workforce.

Jean Baudrillard did not validate the mask that shields the Leadership Industry from diagnosing the scale of failure and disconnection. But the consequences are profound. As recognized earlier, David Frum demonstrated the consequences of the creeping organizational cancer of the double refusal: “an accumulating sub version of norms; not the deployment of state power to intimidate dissidents, but the incitement of private violence to radicalize supporters” (Frum, 2018, p. 11). This sub version of norms is seen from Andrew Tate and the incels, to JD Vance and “childless cat ladies.” Public good is parked for individualized self-interest. Small and marginal issues are puffed out in their significant to mask incompetence and a lack of expertise. Baudrillard’s double refusal is activated through Goffmanesque vanity, underperformance and bullying, and gaslighting methodologies for domination. Summoning both banality and “sub versions of norms” configures a culture of instability, confusion, agitation and a lack of focus. It lives in the seething silence of followers. It is ignored by the leaders increasing the gap from followers through the double refusal, when saying the unsayable via the prophylactic of free speech.

(Post) leadership and reconnecting follower(ship)

Leadership is not an identity. It is a set of behaviours and practices. Followership is not an identity. It is a set of behaviours and practices. A leader without followers is not a leader. They are taking a walk. They are speaking in a Zoom meeting of one, albeit with 15 darkened and muted screens.

Any leadership goal, mission or vision, depending on the noun in fashion at a particular time, must be shared with followers and recognized as valuable and relevant. If they do not validate the significance of this goal, then nothing happens. The failures of leadership emerge because there is an empty chair. Someone may sit in the seat and hold positional power, but they maintain no credibility or authenticity. If followers do not follow, then nothing is achieved. There are alternatives to this seething, muted blank screen, but they require the silence of leadership, and listening to alternatives, options and trajectories.

Followership is a small word and a small literature, but it is integral to intervening in the double refusal. Even when followership is considered, too often it is read through the lens of leadership. Instead, a productive thought experiment is to invert our thinking: followers construct leaders.

Provocative research is reimagining this future. Almeida *et al.* welcome leaderless followers (2021). Aghaei *et al.* demonstrate new theories of followership in response to unethical leadership behaviour (2023). Carsten and Uhl-Bien have built a career enriching followership and the “crimes” of obedience to poor leaders (2013). Güntner *et al.* have investigated followership resistance in response to destructive leaders (2021). This remarkable literature is rendering followership as disconnected from its binary pairing of leadership. The ethics, decency, silence and resistance of followers is enabling a transformative organizational culture.

Follower is an underutilized word. It is easier to discuss employees, workers, hired help or staff. Yet workplaces are dominated by followers, not leaders. Too often, leadership training remains the focus. Followership carries a bit too much Tolkien in its semiotic briefcase. Money is made in the leadership industry. The capacity and power of followership is sliced by precariat workers, and contract and casualized staff. Indeed, empowered followers, questioning the ethics of the post-Global Financial Crisis workforce, inhibits profits and positive brand recognition.

Most of us, most of the time, must do what others instruct us to do. The double refusal is passive, slowing the completion of tasks or focusing on compliance rather than excellent. To improve this organizational culture of mediocrity relies on the authenticity, engagement, trust and desire of followers. Instead of undertaking this difficult work in followership values, behaviours, practices and community building, too many organizations trade CEOs and CFOs like cards in a game of Go Fish. Through weakness, failure and incompetence, a bizarre corrective narrative remains: if the best leaders can be selected, then the institution will be successful. Once more, it is important to remember that leadership is not an identity. It is a set of behaviours and practices.

Followership is a set of decisions about listening, activity, commitment, motivation, behaviour and responsibility. If followers are only studied to understand leadership, then our view of work, achievement and life is truncated. The double refusal remains if followers do not follow. No leadership seminar in the world will make any difference to the disconnection of followers if they refuse to follow.

With followership added to an organizational vocabulary, the focus of the working environment changes to the development of active, independent critical thinkers, who also build teams and innovative collaborations through the sharing of goals. James Maroosis recognized the one crucial skill for followers: “response-abilities” (2008). These two words capture the capacity to learn, be interactive and adapt. Deep thinking is required, which is based on active listening and reflecting on the views and approaches of others. This is the building of horizontal relationships, rather than hierarchies. Therefore, response-abilities remain the concept that transcends the double refusal, by building authentic, meaningful and collaborative tasks and goals.

No one is born to lead. Strength and confidence are overrated. Too easily, confidence becomes overconfidence, strength transforms into bullying and aggression manifests into toxicity. Historic injustices are maintained. With an inverted follower-centric model of work, the double refusal can be breached. The lens can be reversed (Ferrari, Bugli, & Coker, 2025). Followership is not a preparation for leadership, a way to manage up or exclusive of leadership. The best leaders must remain followers. Followership is a way of thinking about power, work, meaning and inclusivity. Through listening and thinking, relationships and communication systems are built.

It is timely to return to the Baudrillard-inspired double refusal: the refusal to lead and the refusal to be led. Incompetent yet overconfident leaders fill in the gap between leadership and followership with the slogans on my bingo card. Their incompetence is confirmed through empty signifiers, and followers disconnect, often with disgust.

Most of us as citizen-workers have disconnected from our leaders because we do not trust them. They are not credible. They are brittle. They do not know what they are doing. This situation of weak leaders is made even worse because – following on from the Peter Principle (Peter & Hull, 1969) – they surround themselves with other incompetent leaders so that their fragility is not revealed.

In professional development leadership sessions, we often value being active, speaking up and showing courage. My leadership bingo card provides a script for this behaviour. Instead, there is value in listening, learning and silence. Instead of my leadership bingo card, there is another option. This time, the bingo card is not about talk, optics and spin. It is not filling the spaces of the double refusal with nonsense (Figure 2).

Followership Bingo

Learning	Listening	Honesty	Reflection
Connect	Support	Collaborate	Engage
Silence	Intervene	Integrity	Trust
Respect	Openness	Reflection	Compassion

Source(s): Tara Brabazon

Figure 2. Followership bingo card

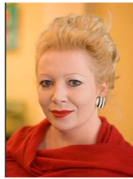
Bridging the double refusal requires a new bingo card for meetings, founded on listening, learning and silence. This bingo card is not about talk, but research, expertise and thinking. Through respect and reflection, compassion and openness, a follower-centric leadership culture can be built that values integrity and transparency, rather than ego and optics. These are response-abilities. The double refusal is displaced for an engaged workplace that builds both mattering and meaning.

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