

The Nature of Leadership: A Policy Sciences Approach

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About the Author: **Harold Dwight Lasswell** provided leadership over decades of scholarly and practical application by championing the problem orientation and the elevation of values and human dignity. See editor’s note below.

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Editor’s Note:

This previously unpublished essay by Harold D. Lasswell (1902-1978), who is widely regarded as the most creative political scientist of the 20th Century, is offered as a contribution to understanding the heritage of leadership studies and its relationship to the study of politics and policy. Lasswell was also a lay psychoanalyst who pioneered the introduction of psychoanalytic theory into American political science. He taught not only at the University of Chicago and Yale University (in both Political Science and the Law School), but also at the Washington School of Psychiatry. His contributions to the study of propaganda through rigorous content analysis are still recognized in schools of journalism; his approaches to policy analysis and understanding the policy process provide the core framework for the policy sciences movement. Following his path-breaking studies on elites, this essay (probably written in the early to mid-1960s) offers a broad yet operational definition of leadership, and embeds the concept within the even broader framework of the policy process. Elites have a larger-than-usual share of particular resources, such as power or wealth, but leaders “provide orientation”—in short, leadership is meaningful only as part of a “leader-led” relationship. Thus the essay anticipates the current interest in leader/follower interaction.

Leadership is a hot word. It is a term of self-congratulation to those achievers who have devoted their lives to demonstrating to themselves and others that they are not as other men; that, in fact, they are uncommon, not common, men. The word is an opprobrious epithet... in the mouths of radical egalitarians who affirm that the dignity of man is betrayed and besmirched by the seeming ascendancy of the few. Even the social and behavioral scientists who try to cool the word are not untypically lured into the study of leadership as a consequence of their private yearnings.

Let us begin by joining in an attempt to cool the conception of leadership until it is a suitable tool of thought and talk. It is best understood as a “leader-led” relationship. An advantage of emphasizing the two-way character of leadership is that one is liberated from the assumption that the phenomenon is limited to contemporaries in the time and place. George Washington was a leader of his contemporaries; and he remains a leader.

We are affected by the image of a general who cast aside the sword and served his countrymen as a civilian President. Some men have been negligible to their generation mates, only to achieve a responding audience after the lapse of centuries.

How can we define the “leader-led” relationship most usefully? Think of an interaction that occurs instantaneously among persons in close proximity to one another. If two persons see an approaching rockslide simultaneously and jump out of the way, there is no advantage in trying to identify either one as “leader” or “led.” However, if A perceives the slide first and shouts, drawing B’s attention to the danger and permitting A to get off the highway, it makes sense to say that A led B. Suppose A had not time to notify B and simply shoved him out of the way. Is this a leadership relation?

Suppose we begin by thinking of leadership as the giving and receiving of orientation. When we examine the interactions that take place among the members of a group or between the members of one group and another, it is possible to discover who pays attention to whom, especially in connection with collective behavior. The relatively stable patterns of orientation are the leadership institutions in group or intergroup situations. The relatively stable roles played by an individual identify him as leader or led in characteristic circumstances. As the George Washington example indicates, it is not necessary for those who receive orientation to exert a feedback effect on the orienter. Moreover, the givers and receivers of orientation may or may not be known to one another. For many thousands of educated men, Aristotle is an identified leader; for many millions who hear and repeat his assertions about middle classes and politics, Aristotle is anonymous. Note that it is not essential that the orienter have an effect on the “led” beyond the minimum necessary to reach a given level of attention and of subsequent response. By allowing the leader-led relationship to be defined this way we keep open an important question. What impact (if any) does the giver of orientation have on the receiver?

If there is a feedback effect, the question also rises about the effect of the past recipient on the future behavior of the orienter. For instance, if a leader fails to influence votes by persuasion, the feedback effect may be to provoke the leader to use coercive violence. This may, in fact, be a stable feature of the leadership institutions found in a given setting. It is commonly believed - whatever truly or falsely - that trade union leaders in the construction industry are more disposed toward strategies of violent coercion than the leaders of teacher’s unions.

Certainly it is a mistake to assume that that leadership always conforms to a hierarchical model in which a single individual or a small fraction of the participants in a situation dominate the attention and the subsequent behaviors of the whole. The correct model may show, for example, that every member of a committee plays the role of “leader” with equal frequency and hence is “led” most of the time. A more differentiated model would specify the scope and range of matters in which particular individuals play the leading part. A may be regarded as the expert on Asia because he has been in Viet Nam; B may be the group expert on tax avoidance because he works in a lawyer’s office; and so on.

In the context of a large body politic it is wildly improbable that, when we examine everybody's career, it can be demonstrated that everyone plays a role of equal weight. On the contrary it is almost universally agreed that great and persisting differences are to be found in the roles played by members of a nation state, a giant corporation or a system of higher education. The same persons often seem to constitute an elite and to transmit their role to their children or to selected successors. The leadership relation is broad enough to include all degrees of temporary or permanent dominance and subordination or of voluntary or involuntary involvement.

It is often easier to clarify what we are thinking and talking about if we use a generalized model of the human social process and locate particular phenomena within it. For instance:

Man ↔ strives to optimize values (preferred outcomes)
 ↔ through institutions
 ↔ affecting environmental resources

The arrows point both ways to show that two-way effects are frequently found. (Note also that we can apply the same model to other living forms than man.)

It is convenient to categorize value-institutions in a short list:

Value Outcome	Institution (examples)
Power (giving or receiving support in important decisions)	Government, law, politics
Enlightenment (information)	Research Institutes, Information media
Wealth (claims to goods and services)	Finance, Industry, Commerce, Service, Agriculture, Mining
Well-Being (opportunity for safety, health, comfort)	Hospitals, accident prevention, recreation
Skill (opportunity for occupational, professional and artistic excellence)	Training Schools
Affection (love and loyalty)	Family and friendship circles
Respect (recognition)	Social classes
Rectitude (responsible conduct)	Religious and ethical associations

These categories can be used as a checklist to remind us of the universal distribution of the leadership phenomenon among all sectors of society. I've referred to Washington as an example of political power. Newton and Einstein symbolize enlightenment concerning the map of nature. Rockefeller is still a name that suggests wealth more than political power. Nurse Nightingale has stood for one form of well-being. Horace Mann is

identifiable as a leader in public education, which supplies skill as well as a degree of enlightenment. Among the leaders in the consummate expression of artistic skill we name Leonardo or Michelangelo. In family matters Margaret Sanger stands for leadership in Planned Parenthood. For many years the names Vanderbilt or Astor symbolized upper social class (respect) as well as money. The most durable leaders have been the religious figures (Buddha, etc.).

The categories can be used to locate our own roles as leaders or led. Am I a party leader in New Haven? No; I'm definitely a follower. Am I a leader in the study of political processes? Presumably so; and I am also a follower too. (And so on through the value-institution list). Our personality is, in part, an institution, since it is composed of our relatively stable roles in each sector of the social process. One knows a great deal about a person if it is possible to make accurate predictions about his "leader-led" relationships in situations that are relatively specialized to political power, enlightenment and other dimensions of life.

The conceptual map also enables us to identify our present problem. Whether our sphere of specialized activity is in research or education, or in some other institutional process, we have agreed to concern ourselves with attempting to formulate policies toward education. More specifically we are concerned with the impact of education on leadership in education and in all other formal and informal specialization in society.

It is time to ask in a more systematic way what we want to know about leadership as defined (or as defined [by] any convenient alternative mode). A problem-oriented approach will undoubtedly include five questions:

The **scientific** question: How is leadership to be explained? What consequences does it have? More narrowly, what is the actual and potential effect of education on leader-led relations?

The **historical** question: What are the trends in national, transnational and sub-national patterns?

The **projective** question: Disregarding for a moment our personal preferences, what are the most probable manifestations of leadership in the future?

The **philosophic** question: What ought to be the overriding value goals in respect to whose realization leadership relations should be guided?

The **options** question: What specific objectives and strategies are most likely to optimize the contribution of education to leadership patterns in harmony with our overriding value goals?

Much of our time will be spent listening and evaluating expert testimony on the scientific approach to the problem. But the question with the widest network of ramifying consequences is the philosophic one: What value goals shall we postulate? I suspect that

all of us are willing to agree on committing ourselves to an overriding goal for society: The realization of human dignity, not indignity. More particularly, this implies wide rather than narrow participation in the shaping and sharing of values (as partially articulated, for instance, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

More specifically:

- Effective participation in power;
- General access to enlightened maps of the physical, biological and cultural realms;
- Also to the fruits of our science-based technology of production;
- To opportunities for safety, health and comfort; also
- For the cultivation of aptitudes for vocation, professional and artistic skills;
- For freedom in the choice of intimates and of more inclusive loyalties;
- For participation in formulating and applying prescriptions of responsible conduct.

Obviously the goal of human dignity calls for leadership practices that are continually open to evaluation in terms of the shaping and sharing of all values.

The initiators of the present conference recognize the significance of historical trends and future projections. It is clear that changes in the historical process are accelerating, in thanks especially to the knowledge explosion, the rapid pace of technological innovation, the population leap, and the complication of organized and unorganized life situations. The leadership practices in every sector of national, transnational and sub-national life are malfunctioning. The inadequacies of our educational arrangements both reflect and exacerbate these malfunctions. Our policy problem is institutional innovation. We want to innovate changes of educational outlook and behavior that will assist in bringing about a more satisfactory state of affairs.

It is usually helpful to stimulate our thinking with the aid of a model of the policy process, since it aids in considering leadership. The “policy process” is an amplification of the larger social process map outline above. We referred to “value outcomes” and to the “institutional practices” specialized to each. Consider the decision process in government, law and politics. For our purposes, we can identify seven components of the decision process.

Broadcasters and publishers are among those who perform the **intelligence** function in the political process; so, too, are the planners who work out programs for metropolitan development or for the growth in industrializing countries.

Leadership in the **promoting** function is exercised by the political party officials who guide the selection of candidates and the campaigns for men and issues. Influential legislators who may be part of the **prescribing** function control the attention of colleagues by assigning bills to committees, by arranging the calendar of debate, and administering rules of order. The **invoking** function is a provisional characterization of concrete circumstances in terms of conformity or non-conformity to the requirements of a

lawful prescription. The initiative may be taken by a police officer who commands the attention of an alleged offender, or by a private complainant who brings a grievance to the notice of a community decision maker.

The **application** function includes most of the administrators who execute policy prescriptions. The function covers the final characterization of concrete circumstances, according to statutes, treaties, regulations and other components of the total code of authoritative prescription. The attention of the applier is sought by litigants and their representatives; and the decision by judges or administrators maybe affected by the reputation of the party or his counsel, as well as by the allegations of fact and argument. The **appraisal** function is performed by any voter or official who directs attention to the relationship between public policies and the success or failure of the measures taken. The initiative for the **termination** of a lawful prescription may be taken by a scholar who gathers information about obsolete statutes and summons the body politic into action to get rid of provisions in a formal code that may be revived solely for blackmailing or other doubtful purposes.

The policy process of any organized or even unorganized group can be analyzed in these functional terms. In an organized school system, whether public or private, it is pertinent to ask: Who obtains information and plans? Who promotes changes in the structure or functioning of the system? Who formulates prescriptions that change or reaffirm general expectations about structure and functions? Who initiates action to execute prescriptions, including the adjustment of grievances? Who applies the prescriptions by selecting personnel, providing facilities, defining curricula, and related acts? Who terminates a prescription and arranges compensation for any justifiable expectations built up when the prescriptions were in force? Who appraises the aggregate performance of the system and locates responsibility for failure or success? In replying to such questions it becomes clear that the informal components of the system are as significant as the formal.

If we examine any participant in the policy process several questions are pertinent. They apply whether we are considering the role of an individual or of an organized structure in giving and receiving effective orientation:

Who. During any given period does the participant play a full or part time role in the intelligence, promotional, or other functions?

Perspectives. What explicit or implicit general value goals and specific objectives are held? What expectations (matter of fact assumptions) are entertained about the prospects of success or failure? With whom does the participant identify himself (within the organization; outside)?

Situations. What are the organized and unorganized settings in which the participants interact with one another inside or outside the structure?

Base Values. What are the assets and liabilities of the participants? (In terms of all values – e.g., legal authority and control, knowledge, wealth, age and health, skills, friendly relations, social status, ethical status).

Strategies. What tactics does he use in reaching his objectives? For instance, does he emphasize persuasion or coercion?

Outcomes. What actual impact does he have on other participants who are involved in formal or informal voting or fighting?

Effects. What results beyond the immediate outcome follow? How are value levels and patterns of distribution affected throughout the social process? What institutional practices are initiated, diffused, restricted?

Such a list of questions is representative and not exhaustive of relevant matters. (Incidentally, use your own terminology to express equivalent concepts. We want to match concepts, not to spread words.)

We have emphasized the interactive nature of leadership, and the many patterns that become at least partially stabilized in the policy process of every sector of society. What keeps a given pattern stable? Why does one pattern modify another? We shall consider scientifically grounded answers to these questions during the discussion. As a preliminary comment, look at a stable relationship dynamically. That is to say, ask why X plays a leading role and Y plays a follower role. We link this with the social process model of value seeking and the evaluation of institutional forms. Consider the maximization (optimalization) postulate of human behavior. The postulate asserts that people choose one mode of action (A) rather than another (B) when they expect to obtain a net advantage in terms of all their value demands by choosing A.

Hence the stable leader-led relation can be characterized as follows:

Leaders → Expecting and obtaining net value indulgence → Initiate orientation

Followers → Expecting and presently obtaining net value indulgences → Effectively accept orientation

A few comments are needed if misunderstanding is to be avoided. All values categories are involved for both leaders and led. Evaluations may vary from full to marginal or unconscious awareness. A voter may be fully aware that he is for Smith as a protest against inflation; marginally aware that since Smith belongs to his own political Party, he would feel guilt (a rectitude deficiency) if he deserted the Party; wholly unaware of the fact that even the impulse to desert the Party tightens his value undertone of anxiety (loss of well-being).