

## *Search for Leadership*

Varying views of leadership suggest that situations  
may differ in their demand for kinds of  
persons to fill leadership positions

JOHN S. HOLIK  
*and*  
JAMES H. CLAYCOMB

AT LEAST two concepts of leadership are held by many community leaders in Missouri. One concept is that leadership is a bundle of personality traits possessed by people who are influential. The other viewpoint describes leadership as a bundle of activities performed by persons designated as leaders. These two conceptions of leadership were derived from a survey of community leaders in 120 Missouri communities ranging in size of population from 100 to 7500. The survey was made during visits to these communities in October and November of 1963. These communities were participating in the Planned Progress Program, a trade center community improvement contest sponsored by Missouri Edison, Missouri Power and Light, and Union Electric Companies.<sup>1</sup> The authors were involved in the selection of the award winners in this contest. During the visit to each community information was collected on what community improvements had been achieved during the past year. As part of the information-gathering process, the

<sup>1</sup> John S. Holik and Wayne Lane, "A Community Development Contest As a Catalytic Agent in Social Action," *Rural Sociology*, XXVI (June, 1961), pp. 157-69; and John S. Holik, "A Power Company Sponsored Community Development Program," paper presented before the Midwest Sociological Society, April 25, 1958, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Reprinted for distribution by Union Electric Company, St. Louis, Missouri.

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JOHN S. HOLIK is Assistant Professor of Rural Sociology and JAMES H. CLAYCOMB is Research Assistant, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri. Research reported here was financed in part by a grant from Missouri Edison, Missouri Power and Light, and Union Electric Companies and is a contribution of the Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station, Journal Series No. 2834.

authors asked two questions: (1) What is leadership? and (2) What is a leader?

The first response of community leaders to either of the two questions, regardless of which was asked first, was a somewhat vague statement that "leadership exists in a super-talented extraordinary individual who is a rare combination of limitless knowledge, superior ability, abounding in experience, and has the gift of getting things done while winning friends and influencing people." However, as the authors listened for further elaborations the people began to separate leader and leadership into two separate concepts. They described a leader as an individual who either performs a bundle of activities helping a group achieve its goal or a person who has a set of personality traits enabling him to be influential in the community.

The first part of this paper describes the viewpoints held by those community leaders who felt that leadership is a bundle of personality traits. The second part describes the viewpoints of those who felt that leadership is a performance of a bundle of activities. Finally, the possibility of a variance in the definition of leadership depending upon the size of community and the type of program activities the community leaders were engaged in is discussed.

#### LEADERSHIP AS PERSONALITY TRAITS

Table 1 is illustrative of the kind and frequency of traits listed as key elements in describing leadership in terms of personality traits. The most often mentioned personality trait is summarized in the term *diplomat*. A large majority of those who named this personality trait were concerned with the type of individual who can work with people. One respondent described a leader as "a person who is able to 'con' people into doing things without getting any adverse reaction." Another described a diplomat as a matter of getting along with others. A different perspective of this trait was interpreted in terms of the method of getting along with others. "You have to use psychology or be a good psychologist" was the way several stated it.

A psychologist, in this context, was described as an individual gifted with the ability of matching people, tasks, and interests in such a way as to get maximum effort with minimum friction from all those involved in the group and project. For example, one respondent stated that "leadership is the ability to give people jobs that are interesting to them individually and are within the individual's capabilities." Another said that "a leader must exercise a degree of wisdom in selecting and making assignments." Others

suggested that a person who is a good psychologist is able to handle people and get them to work in a cooperative effort, voluntarily.

The very first reaction by a large number of people was that a leader must put himself second to his community. This personality trait is listed as *altruistic*. The frequency of its appearance was second only to that of being a *diplomat*. Here are some of the comments concerning this personality trait: "A leader must have a burning desire for better things for the community or the group he leads." "A leader is a person who doesn't think of himself, but of others. This is demonstrated by the fact that he gave his time in becoming involved in community improvements." "A leader is someone who is always there to help, not because of personal glory but for the enjoyment of seeing his community improve." Or "the leader is not concerned with who gets the credit but simply that the job gets done." A leader then is someone who not only recognizes the needs but is willing to give of himself and his time.

*Aggressiveness* was the third prominently mentioned trait. There were two viewpoints expressed by the respondents who mentioned this trait. One was the type of person who will jump in, take the lead, and push ahead without any outside urging. The other characterization was of "a person who will follow through on a project." Comments related to these two ideas are as follows: "A leader is someone who will start a program and keep a program rolling while maintaining the interest of the people"; "a leader is a person with bulldog tenacity"; "he is a person who sets goals, starts the activity, and keeps pushing until the goal is achieved." Leadership is "follow through in the face of discouragement," according to one respondent.

Table 1. Leadership as personality traits.

Trait	Number of respondents
Psychologist—diplomat	32
Altruistic personality	26
Aggressiveness	23
Visionary	22
Dependability	11
Get the job done	11
Influential personality	9
Experienced	7
Realist	5
Exemplary character	5
True believer	4
Unbiased	2

ent. "The aggressive leader is a person who has the drive and desire of improving the situation of groups and communities."

Respondents described the *visionary* in a two-fold manner. First, there was the idea that the visionary is a dreamer or a person of foresight. One man described a leader as "someone who has imagination and dreams." Another suggested "a person who sees something vividly in his mind and sets forth to bring it into being." The second perspective of the "visionary" is best portrayed as "someone who sees something vivid related to improving the community conditions." Further probing developed the following ideas. The visionary is a person who is able to see the problem and get the community to solve it. He is able to conceptualize the problem and the results of alternative plans of action related to its solution. He is able to portray this in such a vivid manner that people become inspired. Thus they engage in cooperative effort to solve their problems over an extended period of time.

As shown in Table 1, some respondents placed dependability at the top of their list of traits in describing leadership. These people had reference to individuals who had developed the reputation of getting things done when called upon by the community or some organization within it. This uncovered what one man called "being thick skinned." This trait contains the idea of being able to take personal criticism and still remain on the track of leading or guiding a group to the desired goals. Hence this kind of person is able to take personal criticism, fair or unfair, and respond in such a manner that group objectives are attained.

The above traits were the major ones mentioned in the attempt to describe leadership in terms of personality characteristics. Some of the other less frequently mentioned traits were the true believer, the realist, exemplary character, and man of experience.

The word *influence* ties together all of the terms describing leadership as personality. Thus influence is used here in the sense that a leader is a person who possesses the ability to stimulate people to action. According to this survey, influence seems to be related to the possession of the various personality traits or qualities described above and noted in Table 1. To paraphrase a respondent, the search for leadership involves the enlistment of the *personable individual*, who tends to get support or a following without the use of force. This respondent emphasized the necessity of involving a person who is able to motivate others, to jump in and perform the tasks necessary for achieving the goals. Other respondents suggested that a leader is a person who has influence because he is considered an expert or, at least, is familiar with an

area of activity not readily available to the general public. This tends to give people a feeling of security that the project is in experienced and capable hands.

According to this study, leadership is influence resulting from possessing one or more of the personality traits discussed above. However, it may be observed from Table 2 that many people feel leadership is more than influence. As one respondent said, "The search for leadership is not a matter of looking for a person who has the most influence or money. Rather it is a matter of finding someone who can perform a specific task." Thus many respondents described leadership as a bundle of activities.

#### LEADERSHIP AS ACTIVITIES

The most frequently mentioned task was organizing people into a cooperative effort on the voluntary level (Table 2). One point emphasized was getting people interested in a project. This is closely related to the second most often mentioned task, the communication of ideas. Many people said that ideas were of little value unless they could be communicated in such a way as to secure a following. Some simply said that a leader must be able to perform the task of salesmanship. Others described it as the job of getting people to work.

The *delegation of responsibilities* was described in terms of getting others to perform various tasks rather than attempting to do them yourself. Several felt that once the ball is rolling the leader should stay in the background and not interfere with the work that is going on. This description was most frequently mentioned by people in larger towns with many organizations.

The task of the planner-organizer is closely related to delegating

Table 2. Leadership as the performance of tasks.

Tasks	Number of respondents
Organizing people in cooperative effort	17
Communication	15
Delegation of responsibility	13
Planning—organization	9
Supervision	6
Stimulation of interest	5
Pace setting	5
Responsible	3
Initiation	2

responsibilities. However, there was fine-line distinction made by various respondents in this survey. In delegating responsibilities attention was focused upon mobilizing people. In the planner-organizer task, attention was focused upon the activities related to goal achievement. The planner-organizer divides the group's goal into smaller units making possible for a large number of people to participate systematically in a community project.

Leaders from the larger communities described a leader as the supervisor. These people said a leader performs such activities as making time schedules, coordinating the activities of various committees and subcommittees, keeping a record of progress and initiating the next phase of the project, and recruiting and involving people with the necessary skill for each phase of the activity. In summary, he keeps the project going in an orderly and systematic manner in achieving goals.

In some of the smaller communities the leader was described as a pace setter. The respondents in these communities would generally name some specific individual as a real leader stating that "he keeps us busy trying to keep up with him." Pace setters were described as real community workers. They not only suggested ideas for improvement projects but actually initiated the project by being the first to contribute physical labor. This type of activity was described as inspiring others to volunteer their services.

#### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Leadership may be conceptualized as personal influence or as the performance of certain activities related to the achievement of group goals. The fact that people in different communities gave different responses to the question "What is leadership?" suggests that different situations demand different kinds of persons to fill leadership positions. As an example, one person said that "the type of leadership needed may be determined by such things as the size of the community. In a large town you need a person who is good at delegating responsibilities while in a smaller community you need a person who will lead the people by his own participation in actually doing things."

Respondents in this study frequently prefaced their answers with a statement similar to the one above. This led us to compare the size of town and the kind of Planned Progress activities reported. The results indicated a contrast in the type of project activities of large and small towns. The larger communities were working on water and sewage facilities, industrial development, planning, and zoning. In contrast, the smaller towns were primarily engaged in

building community centers, park shelter houses, ball diamonds and other recreational facilities, or projects which involved volunteer physical labor. Furthermore some of the smaller projects in the larger towns were completed by commercial contractors. In the smaller towns the use of volunteer labor was the general rule. Thus respondents from the larger towns placed more emphasis upon leadership as personality traits; whereas the respondents of the smaller towns tended to emphasize the performance of tasks.

What are the implications of this study for professional people such as county Extension staff members who are involved in the search for lay leaders? This data suggest that the professional person should help lay people select different types of individuals for various leadership positions. When the group is engaged in such activities as voting a bond issue or initiating a program under the Economic Opportunities Act (which involves getting people to change their attitudes) the group should look for the well-liked influential individual.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, when the group is engaged in activities which call for voluntary labor and the performance of tasks that call for specific skills, they should look for the individuals that possess the necessary skills to perform the tasks. Furthermore, different communities vary in the way in which they proceed to work on community improvement projects.

In the smaller, more rural communities do-it-yourself programs seem to be the traditional approach to community improvement activities.<sup>3</sup> Our study indicates that under these circumstances county Extension staffs should look for people who are skilled in such tasks as carpentry, plumbing, and the like. People in these communities look to these individuals to take the lead in community improvement projects and to supervise less talented individuals. Meanwhile in the larger, more urban communities, the routine is to pass a bond issue and then contract the building of swimming pools, parks, etc. Here people are not interested in relying upon volunteers for the execution of these projects. This means that Extension staffs need to help lay groups in the more urban communities select those individuals who can influence others to become enthused about passing the bond issue, voting for new taxes, or developing educational programs for the improvement of the economic situation.

<sup>2</sup> Liveright presents a detailed discussion of types of behavior people expect of leaders in different kinds of programs. See A. A. Liveright, *Strategies of Leadership* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959).

<sup>3</sup> Hollander presents an excellent discussion of the situational aspects of leadership and insightful information on the relationship between personality traits and leadership. See E. P. Hollander, *Leaders, Groups, and Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).