# A Systems Model of Leadership and Followership

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*"Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe"* - *H.G.Wells from "When the Sleeper Wakes", 1899.*

**Introduction**

The description of an organisation given in the previous paper is relatively simple. However, there are very many organisations in the world, and each can interact with others in a variety of ways. This leads to enormous complexity and unpredictability, which can be daunting. Fortunately, human organisation has a recursive structure, comprising organisations within organisations, and each organisation has a limited number of variables. These are:

- The quality of decision making and commands.

- The quality of implementation of commands.

- The quality of communication of commands.

- The extent to which those with command responsibility are chosen by top-down or bottom-up representation.

- The extent to which an organisation adapts internally to changes in its inputs, as opposed to influencing its environment to maintain them.

- The attitude of the organisation in its relationships with others.

- The proportion of the organisation's inputs spent on self-maintenance, as opposed to producing outputs.

- The extent to which the organisation is efficient.

- The extent to which the organisation contains redundancies and is resilient.

To help understand these variables, I have designed causal diagrams which can be downloaded here:

https://rational-understanding.com/my-books#leader-follower-diagrams

These diagrams can be translated into the natural language explanations given in the following articles. It is recommended that the reader downloads the diagrams and follows them as he or she reads each article. This will give a better understanding of both the diagrams and the text.

Desirable changes to organisational behaviour can be identified in several ways. However, each involves asking the following three questions:

a) What do we wish to achieve?

b) What key changes in basic organisational behaviour will achieve that?

c) How do we go about making those changes?

A simple root cause analysis can be carried out. This involves identifying an undesirable event, repetitively asking the question "why?", and backtracking through the diagrams from effect to cause.

The diagrams can also be translated into Symbolic Logic. This enables formal deductions and inductions to be carried out. The method of translation can be downloaded here:

https://rational-understanding.com/my-books#logic-causality-systems-slides

and the methods for carrying out deductions and inductions are described in my book, "The Mathematics of Language and Thought", which can be downloaded here:

https://rational-understanding.com/my-books/

Theoretically, system dynamics can also be applied to the diagrams. However, this would require numerical quantification of the variables. Unfortunately, the quantification of human beliefs and attitudes is fraught with difficulty. Thus, much research effort would first be needed before a systems dynamics approach to human organisation was practicable.

The variables within each human organisation are discussed in the articles below. The language used is that of general systems theory, but examples are given of organisations at different levels. For example, a "command component" can be an individual leader, a board of directors, a government, an international convention, and so on. A "subordinate component" can be lesser members of the board of directors, a government department, employees and consultants supporting a business organisation, a national population, and so on.


**Quality of Decision-making and Command**

Command is a generic term and can mean instructions, requests, or implied wishes.

Quality of decision-making and command determines whether decisions yield maximum utility for the stakeholders of an organisation, fail in this, or provide utility only for its leaders. A stakeholder is not merely a person or organisation with a financial interest, but one who is affected by it, directly or indirectly, in any way.

Individuals or organisations can both seek or seek to avoid command roles. Whether an individual seeks a command role depends on his genetic inheritance, upbringing, education and experience, but the relative influence of each is not known. Ultimately, every organisation from a small club to a group of nations is commanded by a single individual. Thus, the factors which influence an individual's attitude also affect any organisation he or she commands. There are many examples of a leader of one nation wishing to extend its influence over others.

The command component/ subordinate component relationship is known as the leader/ follower relationship when applied to individuals. Because each organisation and component organisation is led by an individual, the relationship is normally negotiated between individuals and provides emotional benefits to both. An individual's needs are for survival/procreation, relatedness, and growth and it is the satisfaction of these needs which is the subject of negotiation. The needs of larger organisations are similar, i.e., they wish to survive, have a positive relationship with the society in which they operate, and grow. These organisational needs are interpreted by individuals when negotiations between organisations, from individual to international level, take place. However, the priorities we give to both individual and organisational needs change with time, and so too do the priorities we give to their satisfiers. Relationships can therefore alter. They can be newly established, adapt, become more or less satisfactory, or fail.

Any organisation or individual that seeks a command or leadership role will, either honestly or dishonestly, display an ability to supply motivators to potential subordinate organisations or followers. These motivators may be rewards or satisfiers of their followers' needs. Thus, a potential individual leader will make displays of wealth, for example an expensive lifestyle, or of influence, for example name dropping. A larger potential command component will also

make displays of wealth and influence. Alternatively, motivators may comprise contra-satisfiers or punishments, i.e., those things we are motivated to avoid. In this case, a potential individual leader will display power through physical strength, bullying, size of following, control over the satisfiers of potential followers, etc. A larger organisation may threaten legal action and a nation may threaten war.

The quality of any command depends on the following traits of the command component. In the case of individuals, each trait is caused by a combination of genetic inheritance, upbringing, education, and experience, but the relative influence of each is unknown. Again, because organisations are ultimately led by an individual, these traits will affect any larger decision making body.

1.  The competence of the command component to make decisions, e.g., whether they have experience and understanding of the relevant field, and whether they have the cognitive skills to make appropriate decisions. Their focus is frequently relatively narrow. In practice, an understanding of human society is beyond our individual cognitive ability, and so we often simplify, focusing only on the particular organisation commanded and its immediate stakeholders. The more extensive the impact of the organisation, the more problematic this becomes. Thus for example, governing a nation needs to be supported by complex systems modelling of the type described at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/systems-thinking-for-civil-servants

2.  Whether the command component has a self-serving attitude or a collectivist one, i.e., a concern for themselves alone or for the organisation and its stakeholders as a whole. As explained in previous articles, we are social animals, and our individual interest strongly derives from that of our community. Usually, therefore, leaders will balance short term personal interests with longer term collectivist ones. However, this is not always the case, and some individuals will focus solely, or to a very large extent on immediate personal interest. Due to leader/ follower negotiations, this attitude can cascade down through an organisation and even affect whole nations. Ways of avoiding this will be discussed in a subsequent article.

3.  Whether the command component tends to centralise decision making upon itself or is willing to delegate it to subordinates. If the attitude is a self-serving one, then decisions will, of course, be centralised to ensure that they are in the interest of the decision-makers. If it is collectivist, then more delegation will take place. However, the more a decision is centralised, the more overloaded decision-makers will become. On the other hand, the more it can be in the interest of all stakeholders. The more it is delegated, the less likely it will be that decision makers become overloaded. On the other hand, the more likely it is to be in the interest of the sub-ordinates to whom it is delegated. Neither extreme is satisfactory. A balance needs to be struck, therefore, with monitoring and policing of decisions by both parties.

4.  Whether the command style is authoritarian or consultative. A consultative style requires time for consultation. Overloaded decision makers will, therefore, become more authoritarian, and less likely to fully acquaint themselves with the circumstances surrounding the decision. Due to this lack of information and criticism from more knowledgeable subordinates, authoritarian decisions are likely to be of lower utility than consultative ones. Self-serving decisions require mitigations such as justifying rationales. This also requires time and effort. Self-serving decision-makers will, therefore, also become more authoritarian. Those with more time or the interests of the organisation and its stakeholders at heart are more likely to be consultative.

5.   Whether the command component is informed or uninformed about the relevant issue. This includes the quality of information received from sub-ordinate components and from the environment. High quality information enables good decisions but requires resources to gather, verify and police.

Any of these traits is sufficient to affect the quality of decision making. However, several can combine either to have a greater effect or to cancel one another out. The traits are also inter-related with one being sufficient but not necessary to cause the other. For example, a self-serving attitude leads to a tendency to centralise decision making. This in turn can lead to overload. Due to a lack of time to persuade, overload can lead to an authoritarian attitude. This, in turn, due to a lack of consultation, can lead to uninformed decisions. All these factors lead to poor decision making. Furthermore, because there is a causal time lag, their impact steadily degrades the quality of decision making over time. Thus, a self-serving attitude is a highly significant factor in poor decision making, whose effect grows with time. This causal cascade means that leaders, who may initially have only a slightly self-interested attitude, can over time slide down a slippery slope into despotism. A partial solution may be to place a time limit on any command role, as in a true electoral democracy. However, more is required to ensure that we are not ruled by the excessively self-serving.

For a command to be issued, opportunities and threats which provide motivators to the command component or the organisation and its stakeholders must exist. Normally, there are several at any one time and the command component will grasp the opportunity or avoid the threat which yields greatest emotional benefit, leaving others for later. However, what is regarded as the highest priority opportunity or threat depends upon the command components traits as described in the previous article. For example, a self-serving attitude will favour personal opportunities and threats over organisational ones.

A potential solution is then identified, and the resources required for its implementation are compared with those available. As explained in a previous article, the use of resources has a negative emotional impact. However, the greater their availability, the less this impact.

The potential solution is also compared for compliance with the command component's understanding of the culture in which the organisation operates, i.e., social values, norms, and beliefs. Understanding of this culture can vary from a full understanding to none at all, or it can be misinterpreted. Normally, the less compliant the proposed solution, the greater the disbenefits of acting on it. However, self-serving command components can have no cultural schema, a distorted one, or may simply ignore it.

The trustworthiness of the subordinate components or followers selected to implement the command is a risk that is also assessed. This will normally be based on feedback on their past performance and a perception of whether they share mutual interests with the command component or the organisation and its stakeholders. The more trustworthy the subordinates, the greater the benefits of implementing the proposed solution.

Other risks are also considered, for example, the failure of the proposed solution to deliver the benefits anticipated, or the use of greater resources than anticipated.

A risk/benefit/cost analysis is then carried out. If carried out by an individual it is usually based entirely on emotional impacts. However, in larger organisations it can be a more formal process. Ultimately, however, even the most thorough formal analysis is founded on emotional impacts. The analysis yields an overall emotional benefit or disbenefit by adding together the positive emotional value of the benefits sought, the negative emotional value of the resources used, and the negative emotional value of any cultural non-compliance. The trustworthiness of the followers chosen to implement the solution and any other risk factors increase or decrease these individual values.

Based on this analysis, a decision is then taken on whether to implement the proposed solution. If the analysis shows a positive overall emotional benefit, then it will normally be implemented, and the command component will then consider the next highest priority opportunity or threat. However, if it has an overall emotional disbenefit it will not. An alternative solution will be proposed, and the process will repeat until a satisfactory solution is found, or it is concluded that there is none. Thus, one of two feedback loops will occur, depending on this decision.

If it has been decided to proceed with a solution, then a command will normally be issued. Motivators, i.e., satisfiers, may also be offered to encourage the follower to implement the command. The resources required for these motivators will have been taken into account during the risk/benefit/cost analysis. However, if the follower has previously proven unwilling or if the use of resources can be reduced, then a coercive approach involving contra-satisfiers may be threatened.

Finally, if it has been decided to implement a course of action which does not comply with cultural values and norms, e.g., if the command component's motives are entirely self-serving, then mitigation will be necessary. In the case of an individual leader, this can take the form of false displays of culturally acceptable motivation, explanations, rationales, distractions, etc. In the case of a business organisation, mitigation services are provided by public relations consultants, advertising consultants and business psychologists. As also stated by H.G. Wells, "Advertising is legitimised lying". In the case of a political organisation, advice can be provided by spin doctors. In the extreme it can become propaganda and the silencing of dissenting voices. Again, the resources needed for this will have been taken into account in the risk/benefit/cost analysis. It is interesting to note that a surfeit of self-serving leaders leads to a surfeit of mitigation. This, in turn, leads to much social confusion regarding the truth, and thu, to mental ill health. Positive psychology and mindfulness merely treat the symptoms and not the cause. Furthermore, they distract us from dealing with the cause.

## Quality of Implementation of Commands

Organisations are recursive, i.e., within any organisation there are component organisations. The same is true of the command and subordinate components of an organisation. Thus, within any command component or any subordinate component there are lesser command and subordinate components.  This recursion continues until we arrive at a single individual, and so, every organisation is structured hierarchically. When an individual is a command component they are referred to as a leader. When a subordinate component, they are referred to as a follower. In practice, hierarchies exist throughout human society, and all but a very few individuals are both leader and follower. Thus, when a command is given to a subordinate component it is the command component of that subordinate component, and ultimately an individual, who is responsible for implementing it.

Both the follower and the leader have a complex of needs, and each is looking to the other to help satisfy them. Thus, the leader / follower relationship is negotiated and, if successful, provides emotional benefits to both parties. Some individuals, however, have higher followership tendencies than others. This depends on their genetic inheritance, upbringing, education, and experience. The relative influence of each factor varies from individual to individual. In practice, an understanding of human society is beyond our individual cognitive ability, and so we often simplify. Simplification can involve following a trusted leader, or following a trusted ideology, philosophy, or religion. A high follower tendency can be due to low cognitive skills, or training such as that in an army or domestic service. It can also be due to a high level of trust in the leader, gained from experience or by feedback from one's peer

group. If satisfiers have been identified and exchanged between the follower and the leader to the satisfaction of both, then mutual trust also develops.

If an individual has a high follower tendency, then they will unquestioningly implement commands. However, if they do not, then the process is as follows.

To incentivise the follower, the leader will have offered motivators in return for carrying out their command, or will have threatened motivators in return for not doing so. However, it is the follower's interpretation of these motivators that is important. Errors can arise in communicating the leader's offer and, normally, offers of reward are latent, i.e., deferred until completion of the task. These facts can be deliberately exploited by the leader as a rationale for not fulfilling their promise, but this does, of course, diminish the follower's trust.

To attract followers, the leader will also have displayed a willingness and ability to provide such motivators. The more the follower trusts the leader, the more he will believe these displays. On the other hand, the more he distrusts the leader, the less he will believe them.

If the leader's motives for issuing the command are self-serving or culturally non-compliant, then he will attempt mitigation strategies. These take the form of false displays of culturally acceptable motivation, explanations, rationales, distractions, etc. They are criticised by the follower and either believed or not. If the follower trusts the leader, then he is more likely to believe them. The follower then compares his beliefs about the command for compliance with the culture in which the organisation operates. For this to be possible the follower must have a cultural schema and an accurate knowledge of that culture.

The more the follower role is wanted, the greater the follower displays their willingness and ability to co-operate. This can take the form of voluntary feedback and displays of support for the leader. The type of leader that people choose to follow depends on the prevailing circumstances, i.e., whether we face an existential threat, a non-existential threat, or there is a period of stability. On the other hand, the less the follower role is wanted, the more they will avoid making such displays, and the more they will avoid placing themselves in a position to receive such commands.

The follower interprets the leader's command, instruction, request, or implied wish. Such commands can have a positive or negative emotional impact. They are positive if they happen to coincide with action needed to provide the follower with personal satisfiers. Mostly, however, they are negative, require personal effort to implement, and yield no benefit other than positive feedback to the leader.

The promise of reward has a positive emotional impact on the follower. Its magnitude will depend on the relative priority of the follower's needs at the time. However, the more the follower believes the leader has the will and ability to provide the motivator, the greater the overall benefit. Providing there is an overall benefit, the follower will seek to acquire these rewards by carrying out the leader's commands. The more the follower benefits in this way, the more he will wish to remain a follower.

Threats of punishment, on the other hand, have a negative emotional impact. The follower will seek to remove them, either by carrying out the leader's command or, if possible, by ceasing to be a follower. The greater the follower's belief in the willingness and ability of the leader to implement such threats, and the greater the net disbenefits of following the leader's commands, the less willing he will be to continue as a follower.

The follower uses a form of emotion-based risk/benefit/cost analysis to assess the overall impact of carrying out the leader's command, taking the following into account:

a. The greater the positive emotional impact of acquiring the promised motivators or of avoiding the threatened motivators, the greater the overall benefits.

b. The greater the follower's belief in the willingness and ability of the leader to provide those motivators, the greater the overall benefits.

c. The more the resources available to the follower, and the fewer needed to implement the command, the greater the overall benefits.

d. The nature of the follower's peer group also has a part to play. The more compliant it is with the wishes of the leader, the greater the overall benefits.

e. If the follower accepts that the leader's motives for issuing the instruction are culturally compliant, this will increase the overall benefits. If the follower does not, then due to the risk of social censure, this will decrease the overall benefits.

f. Finally, any other risks are taken into account.

A decision is then made based on this analysis. If a course of action has a positive overall emotional benefit, then the command will normally be implemented. If it has a negative one, then it will not. If implementation does not comply with cultural values and norms, then mitigation, in a form borrowed from the leader, will be necessary. The resources required will have been taken into account in the risk/benefit/cost analysis.

The consequences of implementing or not implementing a leader's command depend on the nature of the command. Clearly, if it is harmful from a utilitarian perspective, then there are benefits to the organisation's stakeholders in not carrying it out. Not all self-serving or culturally non-compliant commands are harmful in this way, and so these in themselves are not criteria for failing to implement a command. Rather, difficulties arise due to blind followership, a lack of criticism of the leader's mitigation strategies, and failure to understand the culture and the ethics that underpin its values and norms. Almost without exception, we all have a follower role and a significant part to play in constraining a leader's excesses. We should therefore treat the role seriously, and develop appropriate skills.

### Top-down / Bottom-up Representation

The command component of an organisation can be selected by bottom-up or top-down representation, i.e., by subordinate components or by the command component of parent or grandparent organisations.

Ultimately, each organisation is led by a single individual, although that individual may be beholden to the leader of a parent or grandparent organisation. Thus, organisations have a command hierarchy whose size is proportional to the size of the organisation.

Top-down representation permits greater focus on the objectives of the relevant organisation and its stakeholders, but this focus can be redirected in the personal interest of the leader. Bottom-up representation, on the other hand, allows greater flexibility in selecting the appropriate command style for the prevailing circumstances, but can result in a focus on the personal objectives of subordinates. Ideally therefore, those who populate command components should be selected by negotiation between the two interests, and both should monitor the decisions and commands of leaders to ensure that they are aligned with communal interests.

It is notable, however, that top-down hierarchies corrupt bottom-up democracies. In the UK, voluntary organisations tend to be run "democratically" by committees or boards of elected lay members. They also employ staff to support them. Whilst the lay side is democratic, the staff

side comprises a hierarchy with a single leader at the top, much like a typical business. Despite the existence of a democratic lay side and claims that these organisations are run by the membership, in practice, the single individual leading the staff side almost always runs the organisation and sets its agenda. Obviously, he or she controls the staff side, and via leader/ follower trading arrangements, they become compliant to his or her wishes. The staff side also develop strategies to persuade lay members to support their leader's agenda. They learn what a lay member wants, typically, this is position and status, and use their influence in the organisation to provide it in return for support. In this way, lay members obtain leadership positions which are beholden to the top-down structure of the staff side and bottom-up democracy is diluted or lost.

I have had personal experience of this process in two entirely different voluntary sector organisations. One is a trade union. Unsurprisingly, most UK unions have now merged into very large, centrally controlled organisations with highly paid, high-profile leaders. This is a far cry from the original, small, local, and genuinely member led organisations that trade unions once were. The other was a medium sized ethical society where the same process was steadily taking place. This problem is scalable to government, where top-down business hierarchies can influence bottom-up government in a similar way. Bottom-up representation cannot survive contact with top-down representation, unless strong controls such as transparency, and a genuinely policed code of ethics are in place.