

# **The Construct of Policy Leadership: A Conceptual Framework**

**Noryati Alias**

Faculty of Economics & Management Science  
Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia, School of Education & Cognitive Science,  
Asia e University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**Azahari Ismail**

Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v7-i3/2764 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v7-i3/2764>

## **Abstract**

This paper provides a framework in defining and presenting the concept of “policy leadership”. Policy leadership are activities that leaders in organizations take to guarantee that the internal and external policy environments keep on being beneficial to the purpose, culture, and changing circumstances of the organization. Policy leadership is not just restricted to the acknowledgment of policy unquestioningly, yet it is likewise worries on the improvements, and changes but it provides the basis for policy execution and implementation in organizations. This type of leadership is significantly important for leaders who are encircled and enclosed with internal and external policies in their organizations that need them to deal proactively and positively within the policies for organizational well-being and its effectiveness. This emerging concept will assists leaders in understanding the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of policy leadership. Besides that, policy leadership provides an opportunity for understanding the role of leaders engaging in policies to achieve organizational effectiveness. However, future research is needed to empirically validate the concept through systematic investigations that sheds light on the constructs and later devise a scale to measure policy leadership.

## **Introduction**

Leadership is positioned as an important foundation in today’s society that helps to maximize effectiveness and efficiency in organizations. Hence, Daft and Marcic (2001) observe that there may be no topic more significant and noteworthy to the success of organizations nowadays other than leadership.

Furthermore, Yukl (1989) recommends three fundamental thoughts on leadership that makes it stand out as leadership continues to evolve as the needs of the organization changes, that are: its people, the use of influence and quantifying leadership to achieve set goals.

This conceptual paper explores the leadership matters with regards to policy, namely as policy leadership, a kind of leadership that seems to be appropriate for organizations that is surrounded and bounded by policies. Definitions, elaborations and explanations of the term “policy leadership” and the behaviours that are important for policy leadership form the basis of this conceptual paper.

### **Definition of Policy**

Basically, Moore (2004) identify policy as a course or principle of action, adopted or proposed by a government, party, business or individual. The definition of policy may be utilized in many different ways, fluctuating from institution to institution, organization to organization and sometimes within institutions and organizations as well. It can be difficult to identify, yet there are basic vital features that are common to all policy: it states matters of standard or principle, it is centered around action that express what needs to be done and by whom and it is a legitimate statement that is instructed by a person or body with power to do so. Over all, policy is an instrument which makes administration easier that permits individuals to work well with the organization’s core business more efficiently and effectively. Explicitly, a policy provides general guidance about the organization’s mission and specific directions in implementing policy to achieve the organization’s goals.

Moreover, Birkland (2001) outlines the attributes that distinguishes policy, “the policy is made in the “public” name; policy is generally made or initiated by the government; policy is interpreted and implemented by the public and private sectors; policy is what the government intends to do; and policy is what the government chooses not to do” (p. 20). In addition, borrowed from Fowler (2004), he lists a series of definitions that will define the term “policy” from the narrowest to the broadest sense, (p. 8):

- a. [Public policy deals with] “the expressed intentions of government actors relative to a public problem and the activities related to those intentions” (Dubnick and Bardes, 1983, p.8);
- b. [Public policy concerns the] “output of a political system, usually in the form of rules, regulations, laws, ordinances, court decisions, administrative decisions, and other forms. Public policy may be perceived as a pattern of activity applied ... consistently and repetitively ... [It is] a dynamic process” (Kruschke and Jackson, 1987, p. 35);
- c. [Public policy is related to] “substantive decisions, commitments, and actions undertaken by those who hold or affect government positions of authority, as they are interpreted by various stakeholders” (Bryson and Crosby, 1992, p. 63);
- d. “A policy is sometimes the outcome of a political compromise among policy makers, none of whom have in mind the problem to which the argued policy is the solution ... and sometimes policies are not decided upon, but nevertheless ‘happen’ (Lindblom, 1968, p. 4);
- e. “Policy is a chain of decisions stretching from the statehouse to the classroom and is a byproduct of [many] games and relationships; no one is responsible for the whole thing” (Firestone, 1989, p. 23);

- f. [Public policy] “includes both official enactments of government and something as informal as ‘practices.’ Also, policy may be viewed as the inaction of government, not simply what the government does” (Cibulka, 1995, p. 106)
- g. “Policy is clearly a matter of ‘the authoritative allocation of values...’ [A policy] project[s] images of an ideal society” (Ball, 1990, p. 3)

As a result, based on the definitions for the term ‘policy’, Fowler (2004) concludes that “public policy is a dynamic and value laden process through which a political system handles a public problem; it includes a government’s expressed intentions and official enactments as well as its consistent patterns of activity and inactivity”, (p. 9). As a matter of fact, Azahari Ismail (1994) accepts that policies are very critical in guiding any organizational actions toward effectiveness.

### **Defining Leadership**

In their attempts to illustrate an ‘accurate and precise’ definition of leadership, thousands of research has been published in the last several decades alone. The vast majority of these clarifications have focused on a single person and his or her personal qualities and aptitudes. Social researchers have tried to identify what abilities, traits, behaviors, basis of power or aspects of the situation that ascertain how effective a leader will be able to influence others.

Leadership is the action of heading employees to accomplish goals. It assumes a paramount role in employee performance and productivity. Yukl (1989) claims that with numerous definitions of leadership; the most revealing definition is that “leadership is a process that involves influence, guidance and facilitates the activities of individuals of a group or organization”.

After communicating with leaders and examining cases of leaders, Kouzes and Posner (2003) point out that leadership “is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow”, (p. 2). Bass (1985) concludes that leadership is “the process of influencing group activities toward the achievement of goals’, (p. 56). Leadership also believes in “doing the leader’s wishes, achieving group or organizational goals, as management, as influence, as traits of the individual and as transformation of the organization, (p.30)” (Seifert and Vornberg, 2002).

### **Definition of Policy Leadership**

According to Burns (1978), policy leadership is the kind of leadership that determines how resources will be allocated and who will receive the resulting advantages and disadvantages. Alternatively, French (1978) defines policy leadership as the directing of individuals or group’s behavior towards optimal attainment of the policy goals. Notwithstanding, the leader does not only influence others in the direction of the goals of the policies, but he or she guides their subordinates towards the direction of these goals, in line with the supposition that the leader understands the philosophy, objectives and the goals of the policies to the organization.

Based on Azahari Ismail's (1994) qualitative research on conceptualizing the understanding of policy leadership among high performing school administrators in Florida in 1994, he describes policy leadership as "the activities that administrators undertake to ensure that the internal and external policy environments continue to be conducive to the purpose, culture, and changing circumstances of the organization", (p. 13). Furthermore, policy leadership is not only limited to the acceptance of a policy unquestioningly, but it is also concerns on its developments, modifications and considered implementations (Azahari Ismail, 1994). Maurice claims that policy leadership assumes that a school administrator is entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that the school functions within an adequate and responsive policy structure (as cited by Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 48)

Dyson (2007) suggests the following working definition for policy leadership from the overview of political science and organization theory:

"...policy leadership refers to the dialectical relationship between the cognitive and strategic, personal and policy skills of those in positions of authority as they negotiate a specific context of policy subsystem and macro political level (p. 11)". In addition, Dyson (2007) asserts that:

"... as leadership in this context is a relationship between actors and a policy subsystem and a macro political framework, there are disagreements about how this relationship should be conceptualized, that is, views about what should be included or excluded and what should be prioritized, (p. 11)".

### **Perspectives of Policy Leadership**

As mentioned by Maurice, policy leadership activities are guided by a set of policy leadership perspectives or perceptions (as cited by Azahari Ismail, 1994, p.82). Before discussing the components of policy leadership behaviours, a person needs to apprehend the perspectives of policy leadership. According to Azahari Ismail (1994) policy leadership perspectives represent structures of belief that gives information about policy leadership activities in organizations.

Below are ten (10) perspectives of policy leadership that seem to be important and relevant:

- a. the framework of policies is critical in determining the efficacy of the organizational functions and activities: This framework is critical for the functioning of the organization since the framework of a policy which governs organizational activities provides a body of agreements (written or unwritten) which will authorize administrative actions and guide the behaviors of the individuals in attaining organizational goals. In other words, it serves as an instrument which permits or constraints actions. Maurice argues that it also seeks to ensure that the measures undertaken by the organizations are consistent with widely held public values (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 83);
- b. policies emerge from an environment of conflicts: Azahari Ismail (1994) discovered that most policies come from an environment of conflict characterized by value fragmentation and by the processes which serve to accommodate competing interests.

- Dror argues that if the interest of the institution is not represented, then the welfare of the institution cannot be guaranteed (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 84);
- c. the policy environment and the field of practice are dynamic and interactive environments: Azahari Ismail (1994) asserts that for any organization to be in the correct path, the organization must be responsive and adaptive in its orientation. Creighton analyses that the organization must have the ability to adjust to external and internal demands and conform to the environmental circumstances while maintaining a stable course for the attainment of goals (as cited in Azahari, 1994, p. 84);
  - d. a clear vision serves as an anchor in the event of the occurrence of instability in any institution: A clear vision is the primary anchor for preserving stability in any institution (Azahari Ismail, 1994);
  - e. policy success depends on the scope and nature of support in institution: As policy success at any level depends on the scope and nature of support, nurturing and maintaining a supportive environment is critical to the welfare of an organization (Azahari Ismail, 1994);
  - f. policy advantage is rarely gained without any political effort: Maurice confirms that leaders must be knowledgeable about and be willing to be involved in policy developments if their organizations are to maximize advantages of policies (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 85);
  - g. policy implementation is an act of accommodation: According to Rein and Robinovitz (1977) policy implementation is the act of accommodating the requirements of policy directives with the capacity and circumstances of the organization (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 85);
  - h. public perception has a significant effect on policy decisions: Maurice believes that in the political environment, over time, the public perception has a greater impact on policy decisions than information that is generated through the disciplines inquiry (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p.86);
  - i. every institution is a product of its history: Dror states that an organization's internal structure, processes and traditions and network of relations are all the products of existing institutions (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 86), hence as mentioned by Maurice, it is dangerous to take policy positions that are not referred to the organization's history (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p.86); and
  - j. every policy has a history that is substantive and political: According to Maurice (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p.86), its substantive history relates to prior considerations which are embodied in its content and its political history relates to the array of interests and the field of issues which have been brought to bear overtime in considering matters related to policy.

Suitably out of these ten (10) policy leadership perspectives, more supportive insights of policy leadership will surface; Azahari Ismail (1994) proposes fourteen (14) dimensions or components of behaviours that is important for policy leadership success as shown in Table 1.1:

Table 1.1: Policy Leadership Perspectives and its Components (Azahari Ismail, 1994)

Policy Leadership Perspectives	Policy Leadership Components
The framework of policies is critical in determining the efficacy of organizational functions and activities	Policy scanning Maintaining policy currency Participation in the policy process Selection and framing of issues
Policies emerge from an environment of conflicts	Plan policy advantage Participation in the policy process Framing and selection of issues Gate keeping role – monitoring access to policy environment
The policy environment and the fields of practice are dynamic and interactive environments	Policy currency Policy scanning Framing issues Establishing policy set
A clear vision serves as an anchor in the event of instability	Goal and policy referencing Contextualizing a vision
The success of a policy depends on the scope and nature of support	Networking Forging a policy culture
Policy advantage is rarely gained without political effort	Participation in the policy process Selection and framing of issues Monitoring access to policy environment
Policy implementation is an act of accommodation	Strategic policy implementation Policy scanning Policy currency Goals and policy referencing Policy administration
Public perception has a significant effect on policy decisions	Managing public perceptions
Every institution is a product of its history	Establishing policy set
Every policy has a history that is substantive and political	Establishing policy set

### **Components of Policy Leadership Behaviours**

Lynn (1987) points out that “policy leaders are likely to be individuals with high levels of cognitive and emotional development and with the capacity to employ multiple perspectives – of organizations, of leadership, of policymaking – in appreciating the opportunities and circumstances that they face”, (p. 123). In chorus, the development of behavioral components of policy leadership is subsequently significant and timely where the components provide a

comprehensive insight into the policy leadership behaviors of the administrators (Azahari Ismail, 1994).

Azahari Ismail (1994) claims that a component of policy leadership behavior is similar to a set of skills and referring to Lynn's (1987) definition of the term 'skill' as "an ability to behave effectively in situations calling for action, an ability that, if learned and applied, will improve the performance of the organization, (p. 130)". Therefore, thirteen (13) fundamental behavioral components of policy leadership for organizations; modifying based on school as the organization; are acquired; as follows (Azahari Ismail, 1994):

- a. The ability to establish and work towards a set vision (visioning): The development and the maintenance of an organization vision is essential for effective administrative performance among leaders. According to Maurice (a cited in Azahari, 1994, p. 92) a vision is a conception of the future desire for one's institution that accommodates internal goals, processes, structures and relationships, and that considers alternative scenarios regarding the nature, role and influence of external environments, so a leader's efforts will contribute directly towards policy and institutional performance. Besides, Maurice mentions that a clear vision is the first requirement for an institution that is responsive to policy and policy needs, yet stable on its course towards the attainment of goals (as cited in Azahari, 1994, p. 93).
- b. The ability to conduct policy scanning: Maurice states that policy scanning enables the sensitivity and responsiveness to the institution's policy terrain (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 94). This behavioral component is concerned with the ability of the leader to detect how other organizations' actions may affect his / her organization (Azahari Ismail, 1994). Moreover, according to Maurice an effective scanning system is necessary to support the institution's choice of appropriate intervention strategies as well as to adequately respond to changes in the policy environment (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 95).
- c. The ability to network: As mentioned by Maurice, this behavioral component of policy leadership refers to the ability to establish and maintain collaborative relationships with parties or institutions that can contribute to the advancement of one's policy and organization goals (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 96). Furthermore, the function of networking in policy leadership is analogous to the underground root system that stabilizes a tree or the network of channels that support a thriving agricultural endeavor (Azahari Ismail, 1994).
- d. The ability to keep the policy current and aligned: Maurice states that policies are critical to the well-being and the future of an organization (as cited in Azahari, 1994, p. 98). For that reason it is necessary for leaders to ensure that new policies are appropriate and advantageous to organizations by keeping them current and aligned with other policies in the organization. Consequently, leaders are expected to equip themselves with sound knowledge and have a thorough and deep understanding of the existing policies. Cooley observes that keeping a policy current and aligned with other

policies has to be continuous and an on-going proactive process (as cited in Azhari Ismail, 1994, p. 100).

- e. The ability to actively participate in the policy process: Basically, this behavioral component essentially concerns a leader's effectiveness in ensuring the consistency of emerging policies in line with the welfare of the organization (Azahari Ismail, 1994). Additionally, Maurice looked at this behavior as a base on the belief that a leader has the responsibility to influence policies that affects the organization (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 101). Ridley (1958) emphasizes that "policy leaders should be able to feel out the situation, to know when to keep quiet and when to speak out, because these qualities usually have a great bearing upon the success of the leader in shaping policy" (p. 18).
- f. The ability to strategically plan for policy advantage: This component involves the behavior of a leader to critically, strategically and successfully place a new policy in a favorable position throughout the policy cycle. Lynn (1987) argues that strategic planning are qualities of mental and institutional processes that executives use to pursue their goals. In fact, strategic planning for policy advantage is a process by which the public executives align organizational competencies with opportunities and constraints in the political environment.
- g. The ability to strategically plan for policy implementation: This behavioral component concerns the leader's ability to study the content of a policy which is then followed by taking strategic measures for the implementation of the policy and ensure that the motivation and intent of the policy makers are observed on the whole. Leaders who are effective in strategic planning for policy implementations will detect shortcomings of the policy and draw adjustment plans to compensate or complement weaknesses early in the process (Lynn, 1987).
- h. The ability to maintain goals and policy referencing behavior: Leaders in organization must have the ability to maintain a constant inclination to reference and to frame actions taken on the basis of organization's policy goals and objectives. Maurice implies that it is the duty of a leader to guard against all kinds of tendencies or efforts to route ad-hoc decisions in dealing with policies (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 110). To realize this behaviour, a leader must always focus and maneuver all activities around the vision, goals and objectives of the organization which constitute the policy set for the organization.
- i. The ability to establish policy set for the organization: According to Lynn (1987) establishing a policy set for an organization is to initiate, maintain, and utilize procedures which render a level of alertness to and respect for the history, culture, and traditions of the institutions and engenders among all personnel a predisposition toward a unified valued position on matters of organizational policy. Azahari Ismail (1994) states the following:  
"...establishing a policy set can be personal or organizational. A personal policy set begins at the leader's knowledge of the institutional history, the evolution of policy issues and the range of value positions in the organizations which can inform policy. To

launch a policy set for the organization is to initiate, maintain, and utilize procedures which renders a level of alertness to and respect for history, culture, and traditions of the institutions and engenders among all personnel a predisposition towards a unified valued position on matters of organizational policy, (p.112)”.

- j. The ability to frame and select policy issues: Maurice observes that policies appear from field of issues, the real policy problem is so infiltrated by the attending issues that neither the problem nor the resulting policy is sufficiently clear and well understood (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p.114). As a result, organizations cannot afford to ignore issues whether it is long lasting or emergent, since these issues can be readily transformed into binding policy pronouncements or declarations (Azahari Ismail, 1994).
- k. The ability to manage public perception of policies: An effective leader has to coordinate effective public information efforts in order to influence the public perception of the policies (Azahari Ismail, 1994). Furthermore, Lynn (1987), notes the importance of public perception of policies by writing down the following:  
“...the virtue of the definition of public policy is that it focuses on the importance of persuasion and public education to effective policymaking. The goal of policymaking is not only concrete, objective and produces measurable results, but results that can be translated into favorable perceptions and understanding of governmental activity by affected and interested publics (p. 35)”.
- l. The ability to forge and nurture an accommodating policy culture: Maurice looked at an accommodating policy culture as an administrative and service delivery environment where everyone is sensitive to the indeterminacy of policy pronouncements, and where everyone is willing and actively involved in mediating organizational processes which respond to the needs and experiences of clientele with the structures of policies from which the authority is granted to act (as cited in Azahari Ismail, 1994, p. 117).
- m. The ability to manage access to policy environment (gate-keeping): Maurice believed that managing access is a process of ensuring that all public communication which represents the organization is made in a manner that would not violate past, present, or impending policy positions that the organization has taken or would take (as cited in Azahari, 1994, p. 119).

## **Discussions**

Given that concepts used to communicate, it makes sense to use the word in its most commonly understood sense (De Vaus, 2002). Furthermore, in identifying the dimensions of a concept, a thorough reading and reviewing of the related literatures that look at how people have used this concept is very useful. Concepts are regularly measured in surveys (De Vaus, 2003); as a result on this review of content on policy leadership, it coins a conceptual understanding of policy leadership behaviors, just like the other kinds of leadership that sets its characteristics or behaviours of success. Thus, one can initially consider that the policy leadership behaviors is characterized as the: 1) ability to establish and work towards a set vision, 2) ability to conduct policy scanning, 3) ability to network, 4) ability to keep the policy current and aligned, 5) ability to actively participate in the policy process, 6) ability to

strategically plan for policy advantage, 7) ability to strategically plan for policy implementation, 8) ability to maintain goals and policy referencing behaviours, 9) ability to establish policy set for the organization, 10) ability to frame and select policy issues, 11) ability to manage public perception of policies, 12) ability to forge and nurture an accommodating policy culture and 13) ability to manage access to policy environment (gate-keeping).

Initiated by a qualitative study on policy leadership by Azahari Ismail (1994) in Florida, he found that from the seven middle and high school principals who were categorized as “high performing principals”, they were not familiar with the policy leadership behaviour components as mentioned in the literatures, causing merits of each of the components of policy leadership behaviours to vary considerably. Besides, the study found that the high performing principals only addressed issues related to internally generated school policies instead of the externally generated policies by the government. These findings directly observe the importance to recommend “policy leadership” as another important kind of leadership in the management of organizational effectiveness. It is fundamentally important for organisations to develop policy and leaders to communicate policy and achieving policy goals.

### **Conclusions**

Fundamentally, this paper epitomizes the leader of the future, who is able to combine, blend and integrate adequately the three important concepts of policy leadership that deal with administration and management, policy and leadership. These three concepts create a new kind of leadership, named “policy leadership” which is important for effective organizational management. In reality, as administrators, managers or leaders who are encircled and enclosed with internal and external policies in their organizations in this rapid changing world and environment locally and globally, policy leadership is seen to be as another kind of leadership expertise, talent or ability that is needed by them in dealing proactively and positively with policies for the organizational well-being and its effectiveness.

### **Corresponding Author**

Noryati Alias; Asia e University; Malaysia; noryati.alias@aeu.edu.my

### **References**

- Azahari, I. (1994). *Policy leadership and school administrators in Florida: Towards a reconceptualization*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.
- Bass, B.M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press.
- Birkland, T.A. (2001). *An introduction to the policy process: Theories, concepts, and models of public policy making*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.
- Burns, J.M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper Row Publisher.

- Daft, R. L. and Marcic, D. (2001). *Understanding management. 3rd edition*. United States: Thomson Learning, Inc.
- De Vaus, D. (2002). *Surveys in social research. 5th edition*. Australia, New South Wales: Allen and Unwin.
- Dyson, T. (2007). *The politics of German defense and security – policy leadership and military reform in the post-cold war era*. Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books
- Fowler, F.C. (2004). *Policy studies for educational leaders: An introduction. 2nd edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- French, W. L. (1978). *The Personnel Management Process*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. (2003). *The leadership challenge*. 3rd edition. John Wiley and Sons.
- Leithwood, K. & Riehl, C. (2003). What Do We Already Know About Successful School Leadership? Paper prepared for the AERA Division a Task Force on Developing Research in Educational Leadership. Retrieved on 10 September 2007 from <http://www.cepa.gse.rutgers.edu/>
- Lynn, L.E., Jr. (1987). *Managing public policy*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Company.
- Moore, B. (Ed.). (2004). *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Oxford University Press
- Rein, M. & Rabinovitz, F. (1977). *Implementation – a theoretical perspectives: Working Paper no.43*. MIT – Harvard Joint Center for Urban Studies.
- Seifert, E., & Vornberg, J. (2002). *The new school leader for the 21st century: The principal*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Yukl, G. (1989). Managerial leadership: A review of theory and research. *Journal of Management*, 15, 251 – 289.