

Implicit Ideas of Leading Held by Village Chiefs in Laos

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Abstract

Village Chiefs in Laos work at the community level in urban and rural villages. Officially they “administer” rather than “govern” in meeting their responsibilities to maintain peace and order and “lead the people toward development.” This research explores ideas of leading held by 15 Village Chiefs and Vice Chiefs in rural areas outside of Vientiane. We argue their work takes place within a system that creates an “entrenched ambiguity” about their role and use implicit leadership theory as a framework for understanding their everyday ideas of leadership. The research explores the meaning they give to “leading” as well as a constellation of issues that fill in their ideas about leading in this ambiguous context. These include how they understand “success”; the motivation to take on responsibilities of Village Chief; what they view as the primary challenges as well as the keys to effectiveness; where their ideas about leader and leading originate; why someone in this setting would want, or not want, to be in a leadership role; how they view the performance of others filling roles similar to theirs; and what advice they offer about leading. We maintain that how they see these issues is consequential for poverty reduction and economic development if villages move from being “implementation units” to “development units”.

Keywords

Lao Village Chiefs, Leading and Leadership, Implicit Leadership Theory, Villages as Development Units, Leadership-as-Practice, Economic Development, Leading Versus Administering

1. Introduction

Village Chiefs in Laos work at the community-level in urban and rural villages

with constitutionally mandated responsibilities to maintain order and unify villagers around national development goals. This research explores ideas of leading held by 15 Village Chiefs and Vice Chiefs in rural areas. It is set within the system in which they try to meet their responsibilities, with leadership-as-practice used to frame the research and implicit leadership theory an interpretive framework. The focus is not restricted to the meaning these Village Chiefs give to “leader”, but includes a constellation of issues that fill in their perspectives on leading in this context.

We argue that, although having to fulfill their responsibilities in an ambiguous space between centralized authority and the realities of their villages, Village Chiefs hold many implicit ideas about leading. These ideas are influenced by interactions with the state and Party but heavily shaped by personal experience and the practice of doing their work. They place importance on what villagers expect, consistent with a leadership-as-practice perspective in which ideas develop by acting in ways that resonate and unify. Their ideas also reflect the reality that a Village Chief has little formal authority to draw on so that emphasizing qualities that appeal to villagers increases the chances for cooperation and re-election. Because their ideas about leading come heavily from the village setting it is unclear how closely their priorities reflect national development goals. The question in part turns on what is considered “development.”

Negative views about leading surface. Overwhelmingly others interested in the Village Chief role are seen as seeking to benefit themselves, family and friends, or simply to have power. This might reflect opinions about potential competitors, but the wider socio-political environment, including corruption in Lao society, may be more important. Finally, these Village Chiefs attribute most of their challenges to villagers, far more than from lack of resources, having no salary or improving the village economy. We consider what this means.

This research is the first to survey ideas of leading across villages. Agreement to conduct it placed restrictions on what could be asked. Future research will have to negotiate these boundaries, which is especially challenging when public officials are the subjects. Trying to meet that challenge is worthwhile should Village Chiefs gain more opportunities to incorporate elements of leading as a result of any movement to make villages “units of development”.

The paper proceeds as follows. First it places the Village Chief in the broader context of Laos’ institutions of governance and decentralization related policy. Section III then summarizes the role’s official responsibilities and reviews the few studies that examine it in practice. Next, the Village Chief is viewed from a leadership perspective with leader-as-practice and implicit leadership theory introduced as conceptual and interpretive tools. Section V outlines the research design and how interviews were conducted in 15 rural villages. “Results”, Section VI, summarizes Village Chief responses to questions in tables while providing illustrative comments. Section VII discusses what “leader” means to these Village Chiefs in comparison to other relevant studies, where their ideas originate,

the broader implications of the importance given personal experience and practice, the meaning of negative attributions to other current or aspiring local leaders, and the implications of villagers being so high a proportion of their challenges. The final section points out limitations of this work and proposes directions for future research.

2. The Village Chief in System Context

Village Chiefs function at the lowest level of government. They are responsible for communicating and implementing central government policies while also playing a pivotal role in determining if what villagers want, or wish to avoid, is acted on. They are formally charged with maintaining order and promoting economic development. This section places their role in the context of the larger system.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is one of the few remaining self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist states. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party has ruled since 1975 when the Pathet Lao took over the government. The Party's reach is broad and deep and impacts virtually everything in Lao society. The state, made up of the government and the Party, is powerful and poised to respond forcefully to anything thought to challenge its goals, authority or policies.

Since 1975 there has been adaptation to the realities of governance and the need to balance ideology with pragmatism. The *New Economic Mechanism* exemplifies this. Adopted in 1986, it advocated decentralizing government control and encouraged private economic activity alongside state-owned enterprises.

Some observers believe that, despite these adaptations, socialist ideals remain pivotal in shaping actions of the state (High, 2021; Lutz, 2022). Other observers acknowledge that the rhetoric of socialism remains but question the degree to which the state's actions are reflections of it. One view, for example, sees the state's power being maintained and projected through opaque relationships between democratic centralism and a historically pervasive system of patron-client relations that the Party attempts to manage (Sayalath & Creak, 2017: p. 180; see also Stuart-Fox, 2005, 2006; Baird, 2018). Others have applied the term "Market-Leninism" to Laos. Used in analyzing the evolving political economies of Vietnam and China, it refers to market economies that formed piecemeal following failures of planned economies. These altered relations take place among ruling interests, but "within relations of domination of a specifically Leninist character" (London, 2017: p. 407).

Regardless of which view most accurately describes Laos, sustainable economic development and widespread poverty reduction, especially in rural areas, remain important national goals (c.f., Phonevilay, 2020). The path to achieving them requires the state grapple with an issue directly related to the role of the Village Chief: how to gain the flexibility needed to energize economic activity at the local level while maintaining control. Closely related is the challenge of addressing, "a state bureaucratic apparatus that can lurch toward incoherence, and

is prone to ineffective modes of top-down decision making, target-driven policy directives and inefficient implementation” (Creak & Barney, 2018: p. 9).

Some insight came in March 2011 when the Four Breakthroughs (*Boukthalu*) and Three Builds (*Sam Sang*) emerged from the 9th Party Congress as long-term guidelines to, “break away from entrenched but ineffective ways of thinking and behaving” (Noonan, 2013: p. 3). The Four Breakthroughs directed changes in conservative thinking; human resource development, especially in civil servants; governance and management systems; and poverty eradication. The Three Builds assigned responsibility for achieving the Breakthroughs by (1) building the provinces as strategic units, (2) strengthening the capacity of districts and (3) building villages into development units (Noonan, 2013: p. 7).

These directives reflected a sense within the Party “of an urgent need to break away from entrenched but ineffective ways of thinking and behaving” and to devolve responsibility to local authorities where an “active administration” at the grass roots level would drive development¹ (Noonan, 2013: pp. 3, 7). Simon Creak however questioned the Party’s claim of “a revolution for the new era” (Creak, 2014: p. 159). The guidelines were better understood as an effort to strengthen state authority while advancing key development objectives. One of the most important of these was graduating from Least Developed Country status (United Nations, 2021). Creak’s interpretation was bolstered by a Politburo resolution addressing the tension between centralization and decentralization. It proposed that, “centralization must be strong before decentralization of rights and administration can be given to local-level administrations; ... if this decentralization to local level is correctly and appropriately undertaken, in return it will strengthen centralization” (Creak, 2014: p. 160).

Ambiguity about decentralization precedes *Boukthalu* and *Sam Sang* by many years. A SIDA study published in 2003 by Hagnon and Van Gansberghe described even earlier initiatives as two steps forward, one step backward (Hagnon & Van Gansberghe, 2003). In 2002 a Vientiane English-language newspaper summarized government policy, explaining the country expected to escape poverty by 2020, with development efforts decentralized to villages that would be “implementing units”² (Vorakhoun, 2002; see also High, 2006).

3. The Village Chief Role

Village Chiefs must be Party members and are elected by villagers from an approved list. They receive no government salary but set fees for services³ and decide which proportion supports the Chief and Vice Chiefs and which goes into the village fund⁴. Virtually every document a villager needs, including forms for

¹“Active administration” is an interestingly ambiguous phrase. Does it mean working harder to implement government policies and programs, or undertaking initiatives that go beyond implementation?

²Laos has been classified as a “least developed country” since 1975. A 2018 triennial review made it eligible to leave the list as early as 2024, having met two of the three criteria (Zsombor 2020).

³The fees cannot conflict with existing national, provincial or district laws.

⁴Villages can apply for government support, but must contribute 30% to infrastructure projects.

taxes, marriage, business and change of address, starts at the village⁵. Vice Chiefs are appointed, the number depending on village size. Each is given a specific area of responsibility. The larger villages in this study had one for culture and education and another for security.

Article 86, as amended, of the 2015 constitution defines Village Chiefs as having “administrative” responsibilities, in contrast to the heads of provinces, cities, districts and municipalities who “govern”. These responsibilities are to, among other things, “lead the people towards development on social-economic, natural resources protection, create peace and order, provide education, and to enhance unity among the people creating villages with development goals” (National Assembly, 2015). The constitution also stipulates they may not serve for more than two consecutive terms, but in practice some are re-elected many times.

Few studies explore the Village Chief role, but three provide insight into aspects of their world relevant to this research. In “Experimental Consensus: Negotiating with the Irrigating State in the South of Laos” Holly High explores a village’s rejection of a state program to use water pumps intended to support two annual rice crops, thereby fostering economic development (High, 2013). Rather than directly turning down the program, villagers first signaled agreement with poverty reduction and development policies, then argued that the pragmatics of their situation meant they could not be implemented.

The Village Chief played a minor role in this clash between the wishes of central authority and villager preferences. He “furnished me with all of the papers he had related to irrigation: they formed a slim file indeed of only a few pages. ‘Is that all?’ I asked. He replied rather bitterly, ‘That’s all they gave me: just orders. No training’.” (High, 2013: p. 495). High concludes that although the village lacks autonomy and is at a disadvantage in power terms, room to maneuver existed as long as there was no direct resistance. “The result is an entrenched ambiguity in state-society encounters where each agreement is contingent, each consensus experimental, policy on paper is little guide to policy in practice, and compliance is always conditional.” (p. 505).

In “Beleaguered Village Chief” Jerome Whittington summarizes the turmoil of a Village Chief caught between government policy and villagers who signed a petition rejecting changes in land use rules and their push for more intense agricultural practices. The Chief, who was “the hinge of everyone’s expectations”, felt he should be strong in expressing villager’s objections to district authorities, but worried that he would be punished. He was caught in the “ambivalent institution of the village chief”, an ambivalence especially acute around agrarian policy and development when, “Village chiefs are routinely called upon to do the work of making district policy make sense in light of diverse and often unworkable local circumstances.” (Whittington, 2014: pp, 104-105).

Sarinda Singh’s exploration of how state officials use religious ritual to attain village cooperation with development programs provides another opening into

⁵Starting in 2019 individuals may go to a bank and send their land tax payment directly to the government.

the world of the Village Chief. She notes that in rural areas the power of centralized institutions is more limited. The narrative of development through revolutionary struggle has been replaced by the promotion of economic growth and market liberalization. “The ideal of prosperity often motivates rural villagers to seek greater engagement with state authorities despite the failure to achieve participatory forms of development..... and marginalized officials often remain committed to the Lao state though they echo villagers in their private criticism.” (Singh, 2014: p. 1062).

4. The Village Chief from a Leadership Perspective

In the West leading is a common focus of academic research, popular writing, and trainings (c.f., Bennis, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; House et al., 2004; Maxwell, 2007). In other places leading is much less publicly discussed or researched. This includes Laos⁶. This is illustrated by the efforts of Case and colleagues to understand the language of leading used by Lao rural farmers. They describe their work as “mapping a territory which has previously received scant attention” (Case, Connell, & Jones, 2017: p. 175).

Our interest is not restricted to the meaning these Village Chiefs give to “leader”, but includes a constellation of issues that fill in their perspective on leading in this ambiguous context. These incorporate how they understand “success”; the motivation to take on responsibilities of Village Chief; what they view as the primary challenges as well as the keys to effectiveness; where their ideas about leader and leading originate; why someone in this setting would want, or not want, to be in a leadership role; how they view the performance of others filling roles similar to theirs; and what advice they offer about leading.

Several features of the setting in which Lao Village Chiefs operate make exploring their ideas worthwhile and consequential. First, recurring calls for decentralizing authority and resources to the village level have been followed by contradictory policies. Second, although officially defined as “administrative” rather than “governing”, the Party has promoted an ambiguous “active administration.” Third, despite the predilection of a centralized state to define the Village Chief as implementer of its policies, villages have shown they are able to modify, reject or delay policy initiatives. Fourth, a Village Chief is simultaneously a voice of the villagers who elected him and whose continued respect he relies on, and an instrument of the Party able to punish him as disloyal or untrustworthy. Finally, the state has an interest in villages that might be animated by Village Chiefs to contribute to economic development and poverty reduction. Taking these together, the Village Chief resides in “entrenched ambiguity” between the state’s motivations and rhetoric and the world of the village.

Leadership-as-practice and implicit leadership theory are useful in addressing the effects of this institutional and contextual ambiguity. Leadership-as-practice

⁶See Thammavong (2007) for a rare study of everyday leading in Laos.

shifts attention from leader traits and qualities to how leading may emerge in specific settings. “The foundation of the leadership-as-practice approach is its underlying belief that leading occurs as a practice rather than from the traits or behaviors of individuals... It is thus concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience.” (Raelin, 2016: p. 3).

From a leadership-as-practice perspective many of the activities these Village Chiefs described themselves engaging in can lay the groundwork for the emergence of elements of leading that go beyond “administering”. These include identifying resources, mobilizing attention to an issue, building trust, giving feedback, encouraging participation and using what is learned from experience (Raelin, 2016: pp. 6-7; See also Raelin, 2019).

Applying leadership-as-practice ideas to Village Chiefs does not imply they either aspire or expect to be leaders. One Village Chief told us, “Party tells the district, the district tells Village Chief, and the Chief must get the villagers to move in that direction”. Emergence is a function of, “the actual workings of practice rather than through individual a priori intentions.” (Raelin, 2016: p. 6). “Individuals become involved in leadership practice as part of their coping with everyday activities, and they are not necessarily aware of them or of the contextual factors driving and shaping them.” (Takova, 2021: p. 2). Participation in activities to accomplish something is what is critical.

Joe Raelin, a co-creator of the leadership-as-practice field, argues, “it is critical to capture how the actor sees it in their current, immediate world. A good place to start in such social research, though not exclusively, is through the use of ethnography.” (Raelin & Robinson, 2022: p. 704). Since our interest is in the pattern of views about leading and leadership across settings, leadership-as-practice concepts, helpful in setting the stage for this study, are not used as conceptual or methodological guides.

Implicit leadership theory provides a valuable analytic tool. It draws attention to “images that everyone holds about the traits and behaviors of leaders in general.” (Schyns *et al.*, 2011: p. 398). As Vogel and Werkmeister write, implicit leadership theories, “are implicitly held assumptions about traits of leaders, with ‘theories’ referring to everyday theories of people rather than to academic theories developed by scholars.” (p. 167). The sources of ideas about leading include the broader social landscape, culture, and gender as well as elements of the specific setting, such as perceived expectations of followers (Alabdulhadi *et al.*, 2017). An individual may not be aware of the images. “Implicit leadership theories are, by nature, not necessarily conscious to those who hold them.” (Schyns *et al.*, 2011: p. 398). Moreover, images implicitly held may or may not match those of superordinates or followers, the subculture or the broader institutional environment (c.f., Junker & Van Dick, 2014; Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021: p. 169).

5. Research Design

Research in Laos, especially in social spheres, is carefully monitored and con-

trolled. Studies asking sensitive questions are unlikely to be permitted (Creak & Barney, 2018: p. 6; Singh, 2014: pp. 10-12). A non-profit association facilitated district-level agreement to undertake this research. It was given without asking for changes, but with the admonition not to deviate from what was agreed to. A district official accompanied the research team on the second day. She listened to the first two interviews, then sat apart, texting on her mobile and did not return the following day.

We employed the following thirteen questions across 15 villages to explore what “leading” means.

Q1. Successes

Please describe your most important successes.

Q2. Motivation

What motivates you to do the work you do?

Q3. Leader

What do you think it means to be a “leader”?

Q4. Being Effective

In your opinion, what is most important for someone to lead effectively?

Q5. Learning and Role Models

a. Describe where and how you learned about being a leader.

b. Who are your important role models for leading?

Q6. Challenges

a. What is most challenging about being a Village Chief?

b. What are the main reasons people want to be a Village Chief?

c. What are the main reasons people do NOT want to?

Q7. Mistakes

a. What mistakes have you made? (“Mistakes” refers to actions that cause something not to be successful or do harm)

b. What mistakes do you see others making?

Q8. Advice

a. What advice can you give to help Village Chiefs have a positive impact on their villages? (Please provide as many suggestions, guides and examples as possible)

b. What is the ONE suggestion you would give to other Village Chiefs to be more successful?

This study differs from others, such as the three cited above, that use ethnographic case studies to understand the Village Chief role. The strength of a case study is in observing practices in a specific village setting in depth and over time. The strength of a survey, and this is the first we know of for Lao Village Chiefs, is identifying patterns at a point in time across a number of villages⁷.

Drawing a representative sample was not an option and staff of the facilitating non-profit association were asked to identify fifteen villages an hour or so by car in different directions from the center of Vientiane. Though far from ideal from a methodological perspective, it is not unreasonable to expect these results apply

⁷Parallel interviews have been conducted in Cambodia and Thailand in a long-term project focused on both village chiefs and individuals working in INGOs.

to other lowland villages with similar characteristics⁸.

Interviews were held over several days, conducted where village business is transacted, either in an office or around tables in an open area. Most included just the interviewers and the Chief or Vice Chief. In a few instances others were in the area, and once several villagers listened attentively, though seeming to have no affect on the Village Chief. Initial concerns that interviewees would be uncomfortable and give highly scripted responses were unwarranted as they appeared accommodating, at ease, and ready to talk.

Questions did not elicit cautious or mechanical responses. They were sent ahead to interviewees and most came to the interview with notes, but their use varied. None read from them. Some referred to the notes, others glanced occasionally, and in two instances they were ignored. Despite the facilitating organization's advice not to use names or identify villages, all were agreeable, and some eager, to have pictures taken with the research team following the interview. This comfort may have been a combination of questions being accepted at the district level, not asking about Party or government, and the informal conduct of the interviews.

The research team consisted of a Lao, a Thai and an English speaking Westerner. Interviews were in Lao. Lao Loum speak a dialect familiar to the Thai researcher from northeast Thailand (Isan). He and the Lao researcher also speak English. The Thai researcher asked questions and provided a simultaneous translation of responses into English. The second researcher typed this verbatim into a tablet, both stopping to ask for clarification as needed.

Interviews were preceded by casual conversation and general information about the project, with clarifications given as needed. A question about their most important successes was asked first as an evocative subject to begin with. Questions about challenges and mistakes were asked toward the end with the expectation that by then a level of comfort would be established.

Case, et al. point out that, "Lao has no equivalent word to the English term leadership, at least no term that is commonly understood and applied" (p. 182). Rural farmer representatives viewed *phu nam*⁹, often used to refer to a leader, as inappropriate for them because they are not Party officials. Interestingly, Case et al. believe confining *phu nam* to Party officials results from deliberate, long-term efforts by the state to maintain its authority (p. 181). Because the Village Chief is a public official and must be a member of the Party, we elected to use *phu nam* to refer to "leader". This raised no concerns.

6. Results

Results are organized by themes used to describe patterns of responses and are accompanied by illustrative comments. Themes were developed from the verba-

⁸Lao Loum ("Lowland Lao") are about 2/3s of the country's population, with ethnic Lao being the largest component (Osborne et al. 2020).

⁹This is roughly translated as, "The person who takes others along." It is different from *hua na*, which means "boss" or "director".

tim record. First, for each question all of the points made by a respondent were listed, eliminating clear redundancies. Next, a researcher pulled together the responses made by all 15 interviewees, placing those with highly similar content in the same group. These preliminary groupings were given to a second researcher for review. The agreed groupings are the themes reported in the tables.

All 15 interviewed are male. **Table 1** shows that their ages range from late 30s to early 60s. The average tenure as Chief is 10.7 years and Vice Chief 8.9, ranging from three years to 20 for Chiefs and six months to 20 for Vice Chiefs. Four had less than a high school education, seven attended or completed high school, and three attended or completed college.

Seven of the ten Chiefs were previously Vice Chiefs, while four of the five Vice Chiefs had been in the role for at least seven years. It was evident some have busy schedules, which may explain why five Chiefs assigned the interview to a Vice Chief.

Table 1. Demographics of 15 village chiefs and vice chiefs.

Position	Age (estimated if not stated.)	Years in Position	Education
Vice Chief, education and culture	50 s	8	7 th grade
Village Chief	53	7	5 th grade
Village Chief	58	17	6 th grade
Village Chief	50 s	7 (with break)	High school
Village Chief	About 50	3	Some university in (in Thailand)
Village Chief	50 s	About 11 (with a break)	High school
Village Chief	Early 60 s	20	High school
Vice Chief, education and culture	Late 40 s/early 50 s	7	College
Village Chief	Early 50 s	5	Some college
Village Chief	Early to mid 40 s	11	High school
Vice Chief, education and culture	Late 30 s	.5	High school
Vice Chief, Security	63	20	Unknown.
Village Chief	60	16	High school
Vice Chief, administration	Late 50 s	9	High school
Village Chief	About 60	10	Primary school

Interviewee successes, the first question, are summarized in **Table 2**¹⁰. Infrastructure improvements are mentioned by 11 of 15, with six focusing on roads (e.g., Earth road but can use in the rainy season). The rest are for schools, meeting halls, and water and electricity systems¹¹.

“Keeping the Village Peaceful” uniformly means maintaining a safe, conflict-free

¹⁰Only themes with five or more responses are summarized.

¹¹Parentheses are illustrative interviewee responses, either as quotes or paraphrases.

environment (e.g., The village is very peaceful; no conflict). “Pride of the Position” references having villager trust and respect (e.g., ‘Many people respect me’) and no opposition. “Getting Resources for the Village” is money from various sources for use in the village.

Table 2. Question 1: Successes (51 Responses).

I. a. Improvements in the Village Infrastructure (11)	IV. a. Awards and Recognition (3)
I. b. Keeping the Village Peaceful (9)	IV. b. Carrying Out Government Policy (3)
II. a. Pride of the Position (8)	V. a. Being a Good Role Model. (2)
II. b. Getting Resources for the Village (8)	V. b. Helping Villagers Understand Policies/Rules. (2)
III. Helping Village Economy (4)	Ungrouped Responses (3)

Table 3 shows “Village Support and Trust” and “Helping the Village” are key motivators. Support and trust refers to villagers electing and retaining them (e.g., “Proud that villagers love me so much”). “Helping the Village” is the drive to make the village a better place (e.g., Lives in the village and there are problems he wants to address).

“Use Knowledge and Skills” is being pushed to use what they have on behalf of the village (e.g., “I studied. Others in the village don’t have that capacity”). Four responses in “Responsibility to Country and Society” reflect a desire to serve while two point to the difficulty of declining (e.g., Can’t keep saying “no” to the party).

Table 3. Question 2: Motivation (49 responses).

I.a. Villager Support and Trust (11)	IV. a. Others Aren’t Willing or Able (4)
I.b. Helping the Village (11)	IV. b. Policy, Administration and Rules (4)
II. Use Knowledge and Skills (6)	IV. Influence of Family (3)
III. Responsibility to Country and Society; Duty (6)	V. Peace and Harmony in the Village (2).
	Ungrouped Responses (3)

“Good Personal Qualities and Character” is overwhelmingly the most important in determining what it means to be a leader, with sincerity, fairness and honesty most frequently mentioned (e.g., “Be honest and fair”), as shown in **Table 4**. “Sacrifice for the Village” defines a leader as someone who puts personal interests aside (e.g., Thinking about things for the village, not for self). Three of six in “Loyalty to Party and Country” view a leader as someone who follows the Party (“Cannot make your own policy”), and two as loyal to the nation. Three in “Good Implementer” reference agreeing to and implementing policies, while two highlight being adaptive in converting policies into action (e.g., Makes adjustments as needed to get things done). Four of six in “Knowledge” mean general knowledge, two a high school education and the ability to read and write. “Ability and Cleverness” is being strategic (e.g., Knows who in the village is good to work with, and who is not).

Table 4. Question 3: “Leader” (79 responses).

I. Good Personal Qualities (15)	V. a. Responsible for Solving Village Problems (4)	VI. a. Has Ideas About How To Develop The Village (3)
II. Sacrifice for the Village (7)	V. b. Gets Villagers to be Responsible and Work Hard (4)	VI. b. Gets the Villagers to Work Together (3)
III. a. Loyalty to Party and Country (6)	V. c. Good Decision Maker (4)	VI. c. Open minded (3)
III. b. Good Implementer (6)	V. d. Listens to and Understands Villagers (4)	VI. d. Good Communicator (3)
III. c. Knowledge (6)		VI. e. Trusted and Respected by Villagers (3)
IV. Ability and Cleverness (5)		VII. Protects Common Property (2)

As seen in **Table 5**, effectiveness is defined primarily by three themes. “Think and Solve Problems” emphasizes thoughtfulness (e.g., “Have brains”), planning, analyzing and step-by-step processes. “Know the Village/Learn from villagers” is understanding what matters to the villagers (e.g., What are the issues “for the villages and not for self”) This includes having an open mind and accepting criticism.

Table 5. Question 4: Effectiveness (55 responses).

I. a. Think and Solve Problems (11)	III. a. Able to Make Decisions (3)
I. b. Know the Village/Learn From Villagers (11)	III. b. Work Hard and be responsible (3)
I. c. Behavior that Gets Villager Respect and Trust (11)	III. c. Learn from Experience (3)
II. a. Get Help From Outside the Village (5)	IV. Follow the Party and the Government (2)
II. b. Have and Share Knowledge (5)	Ungrouped Response (1)

“Behavior that Gets Villager Respect and Trust” means being a positive role model, cooperative and a good communicator (e.g., Being able to talk with and be understood by every kind of person). The next two themes associate effectiveness with getting outside help (e.g., Knows how to cooperate with many agencies) and sharing knowledge (e.g., Learn and share with the villagers).

Question 5a, summarized in **Table 6**, asks about sources of their ideas about leading. Two are most important. The first is “Workshops, Trainings and Short Term Classes” (e.g., How to get the youth to work for the country. How to get elderly to participate and to pass on cultural traditions)¹². In contrast, “Personal Experience” credits their direct experience for lessons about leading (e.g., “First improve his family, and then share with the village”). Interestingly, the media and public schools are each mentioned only once.

“From Different People” refers to elders, parents “smart people” and friends (e.g., “How to do traditional culture; how to connect with people...”). “Study Tours” are to other villages or to nearby provinces. “Longer Courses” includes administration, law, “politics”, and land issues. “Interactions with the Government” includes contacts with officials as well as discussions about reports filed.

¹²Other topics mentioned include laws, regulations and their implementation; land rights; political theory; Lao history; how to get villagers to work for the village or the country; dealing with conflict; women’s issues; and family law and family violence. In some cases these are organized by an NGO.

Table 6. Question 5a: Learning Sources (47 Responses).

I. a. Workshops, Trainings and Short Term Classes (10)	II. From Different People (8)
I. b. Personal Experience (10)	III. a. Study Tours (7)
	III. b. Longer Courses (7)
	IV. Interactions with the government (5)

Table 7 shows that the role models in “Current and Past National Leaders” are from Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Of these, four are Lao prime ministers (e.g., “He has good ideas, good concept and good leading”), a president and a former king. Two refer to leaders from Thailand and Ho Chi Minh, while one credits fighters who built the country. Villagers are the next most important role models. Three mention government and Party officials, which is the same as for ordinary people and exemplary individuals.

Table 7. Question 5b: Role Models (27 responses).

I. Current and Past National Leaders—Laos, Thailand, Vietnam (8)	III. b. Government and Party Officials (3)
II. Villagers (4)	III. c. Type of Person Who Is A Good Example (3)
III. a. Other Ordinary People (3)	IV. a. Parents and Family (2)
	IV. b. Other Village Chiefs (2)
	Ungrouped Responses (2)

Table 8 shows that villagers who oppose or criticize are the biggest challenge (e.g., “First is people who do not agree with how I do things, how I implement policy. They are against me”). The next theme “No Resources for Making Improvements” highlights the lack of funds (e.g., A lot of ideas for the village, but no funds to do anything). “So Many Challenges” references the sheer number of issues, including those about which nothing can be done (e.g., “Like a man who cannot see what is on his face”), and includes working without compensation and trying to run a business.

Table 8. Question 6a: Challenges (36 responses).

I. Disagree With Or Don’t Like The Leader (7)	III. b. Improving the Village Economy (4)
II. a. No Resources For Making Improvements (5)	III. c. Villagers Lack of Understanding (4)
II. b. So Many Challenges (5)	III. d. Low Level of Villager Education (4)
III. a. Drug Use in the Village (4)	IV. Getting Villagers to Attend Meetings (3)

Table 9 shows that negative motives are attributed to others interested in becoming a Village Chief. “To Benefit Self or Relatives” is the draw of money (e.g., Protect their relatives. It is a big village and this is possible) as well as the connections, both government and business, the position affords (e.g., There are contacts and chances to do business, “especially to buy and sell land”). Power is the next largest pull (e.g., “Have power and command another person”). Smaller themes attribute more positive motives, including demonstrating the ability to do well (e.g. Can do better than the previous chief).

Table 9. Question 6b: Why Others Want to Lead (33 responses).

I. To Benefit Self or Relatives (12)	IV. Serve the Village (4)
II. To Have Power (7)	V. Support From the Village (3)
III. To Show Ability To Do It Well (5)	VI. Be Respected (2)

As can be seen in **Table 10**, not having the right personality or social skills (e.g., Not very social) and not dealing well with difficult villagers is perceived as most important in turning someone away from being a Village Chief. This is followed closely by having little interest in serving the village or society (e.g., “Lazy about doing that”) or in making sacrifices. “Need to Make Money” combines not receiving a salary with opportunity costs (e.g., Takes away from the money he can make).

Table 10. Question 6c: Why Others Not Want to Lead (43 responses).

I. Dealing With People (9)	Va. Doesn't Have The Ability (4)
II. Not Motivated To Serve The Public (8)	Vb. Prefers Doing Business (4)
III. Need To Make Money (6)	VI. No Time (3)
IV. It is Hard Work (5).	VII. Family Does Not Support (2)
	Ungrouped Responses (2)

Table 11 shows that, not surprisingly, questions about their own mistakes or those of others elicited the fewest responses. Question 7a asks about theirs and the theme “Nothing Serious. Mistakes are Normal” portrays them as part of life and not significant (e.g., If you do things you make mistakes). Serious mistakes would bring consequences (e.g., “If I made these mistakes—a small wife, gambling, drugs, sign something that is against Party policy—I could not be in this position”). “No Mistakes”, although fewer than five responses, is interesting as it defines mistakes as shared rather than individual responsibility (e.g., He takes the plan to the committee before doing anything).

Table 11. Question 7a: Mistakes by Interviewee (24 Responses).

I. Nothing serious. Mistakes are Normal (8)	II. c. Poor Decisions (4)
II. a. No Mistakes (4)	Ungrouped Responses (4)
II. b. Didn't Handle Village Conflicts Well (4)	

Question 7b, the responses to which are summarized in **Table 12**, explores mistakes others make. “Self-gain and Corruption” centers on taking something belonging to the public. Five of the eight responses point to appropriating common property for personal use (e.g., Sells village common land. Claims it is his land). Two were aware of mistakes but wouldn't divulge them.

Table 12. Question 7b: Mistakes by Others (22 responses).

I. Self-gain and Corruption (8)	IV. b. Sees Mistakes But Won't Discuss Them (2)
II. Small Mistakes; Not Important (4)	Ungrouped Responses (2)
III. No Follow-up (3)	
IV. a. Poor Communication and Consultation (2)	

Table 13 shows that the most important advice for becoming a successful Village Chief, captured by the theme “Have Knowledge and Ability”, is having knowledge (e.g., If a course is offered, take it) and abilities (e.g., Know how to write). The next theme points to the ability to explain things to villagers (e.g., Explain which projects village should work on and which they should drop, such as for poverty reduction) and to listening. “Follow Laws and Policies” encourages obedience to rules and regulations (e.g., “Follow the law”). “Sacrifice and Hard Work” urges giving everything to the work and the village, while “Have a Big Heart” is truly caring for the villagers (e.g., “A big heart for the people”).

Table 13. Question 8a: Advice (50 responses).

I. Have Knowledge and Ability (10)	IV. Be Fair (4)
II. a. Communicate and Interact Well with Villagers (6)	V. a. Have support of family and village (3)
II. b. Follow Laws and Policies (6)	V. b. No Corruption (3)
III. a. Sacrifice and Work Hard (5)	V. c. No advice (3)
III. b. Have a big heart (5)	V. d. Be responsible (3)
	VI. Be sincere (2)

The last question, summarized in **Table 14**, requests one piece of advice for someone eager to be a successful Village Chief. The largest of the four themes encourages honesty and avoiding corruption (e.g., “Everything in the light”). Next is a recommendation for openness to information and feedback (e.g., “Hear with both ears”). Ungrouped responses include doing better than the previous Chief.

Table 14. Question 8b: One Piece of Advice (15 responses).

I. No Corruption (4)
II. Listen To Others (3)
III. a. Work Hard. (2)
III. b. Be Sincere (2)
Ungrouped Responses (4)

7. Discussion

Since leadership is not a topic of discussion in Laos it was unexpected that the question, “What do you think it means to be a “leader?” would generate by far the most responses of the thirteen questions¹³. Clearly being a Village Chief in Laos is not inconsistent with holding implicit ideas about what defines a leader.

Personal qualities—sincerity, honesty, being a good role model, friendliness and good manners—are identified by two-thirds as most important, with every respondent referencing them. Listing these personal qualities together with the next four smaller themes produces **Table 15**.

¹³Frequency of responses by question are listed in Appendix A.

Table 15. Qualities of a Leader—Lao Village Chiefs.

Good personal qualities

Sacrifice

Loyalty

Implementation

Knowledge.

How does this compare with ideas about “leader” in other settings? The GLOBE project provides one indicator. Results for middle managers in 61 countries are summarized in **Table 16** (Hoppe, 2007: p. 3). They too gave the highest priority to a personal quality (integrity), but after that the findings diverge. The middle managers didn’t value sacrifice or loyalty while the Village Chiefs include nothing about being inspirational and visionary—elements conventionally seen as the distinguishing elements leading. Combining these differences, the ideas of these Village Chief are more indicative of “administering” than “leading”.

Table 16. Qualities of a Leader—GLOBE Study.

Integrity

Inspirational

Visionary

Performance-oriented

Team-integrator

A more recent study provides another perspective from which to interpret the ideas of leading held by these Village Chiefs. Vogel and Werkmeister compared implicit leadership theories held by 1072 German employees, about half of whom worked in the public sector. Do these public environments shape different implicit ideas about leading than other sectors, and what are the differences? On the one hand, paralleling Village Chief ideas, public sector workers highlighted “rule abidance”, made up of orientation to rules and loyalty to the state. The researchers interpreted this to mean that implicit theories of leading held by public sector employees were formed by bureaucratic systems and institutional and political constraints as well as public scrutiny (p. 175). However, not consistent with these Village Chiefs, a second dimension labeled “progressiveness” consisted of innovation, a future orientation and creativity. Vogel and Werkmeister speculated this unexpected result might be the result of an increasing emphasis in public organizations on the importance of promoting and implementing change (p. 175). Whether from this or something else, Village Chief do not share these implicit ideas.

Where do Village Chief ideas come from? Workshops and trainings and personal experience and observations are most important, followed by people they encounter—often villagers—then study tours and longer courses. The government

organizes most of the workshops, trainings and courses so it and the Party clearly are factors shaping ideas of leading. At the same time the reference is surprisingly indirect. Only one referred to a longer course focused on the skills needed to lead while interactions with the government were the least mentioned of the six sources.

This contrasts with what Case, Connell and Jones found in exploring sources of ideas about leading among representatives of rural farmers in Laos. They identified three factors: government messaging, traditional culture, and contact with international organizations (p. 179). In the end they pointed to the impact of long-term efforts by the government to “carefully to circumscribe the very conceptions of what a leader is.” (pp. 180-181). The indirectness of references to government messages by these Village Chiefs does not appear to reflect this impact¹⁴.

The primary role models for Village Chiefs are past and present national level leaders from Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. These are followed by the villagers, particularly the elderly, and then ordinary people. Only three named government or Party officials. Tappe (2017) observed that after 2000 the state turned to history and nationalism to boost its standing. This included erecting statues of historical figures, beginning with legendary kings and incorporating others from the country’s “liberation struggle”. This effort does not appear to be reflected in these responses.

Results underscore the influence of experience in the village setting in molding how they fill the role. Overwhelmingly the keys to effectiveness are being able to think and solve problems, know and learn from the villagers, and display behavior that earns the trust and respect of villagers. Together this make up about two-thirds of all responses. Turning to motivation, getting the support and trust of villagers and helping the village are by far the most important, with each mentioned by 11 of 15. For advice to others, communicating and interacting well with villager follows knowledge and ability as most valuable, after which is hard work and sincerity.

The importance of experience in the village and what villagers are thought to expect is consistent with a leadership-as-practice perspective in which ideas of leading develop by acting in ways that resonate and unify in a setting. It also reflects the reality of the Village Chief’s ambiguous role and place in the overall system. As administrators with little formal authority to draw on, loyalty to the system is assumed but qualities that appeal to villagers are essential for getting cooperation and being re-elected.

The role being so heavily shaped by observation and practice in village settings raises a question about the fit between Village Chief ideas of success and central government priorities. Keeping peace and order is a priority success,

¹⁴Another possible interpretation is that the role of government in shaping understandings of everything, including leading, is so pervasive that Village Chiefs can’t “see” it. On the other hand, given that we asked about this in two different ways—as general sources and specific role models—it is surprising there were not more references to government or Party.

consistent with their official responsibilities. Unifying villagers around development, another official responsibility, receives less attention. Only four report helping the village economy, such as by setting up a woman's weaving group or increasing the village's sale of vegetables, as a success¹⁵. In the largest success theme, "Improvements in the Village Infrastructure", road infrastructure makes up more than half of responses and there are no references to economic development activities.

Does success in improving village infrastructure contribute to economic development and poverty reduction, and to what extent is it, in the words of the Three Builds, turning villages into "development units"? This depends on what is meant by "development". These ideas of success seem better understood as reflections of what Village Chiefs believe realistic to accomplish given their limited authority and resources. It also may point to limits in the central government's ability to enforce development agendas villagers see as irrelevant to their situation, as was illustrated in "Beleaguered Village Chief".

The attribution of negative motives to others for leading is noteworthy. Overwhelmingly the desire of others to be Village Chief is cast as seeking to benefit them, family and friends, or simply to have power. Although eleven of the 15 respondents described themselves as motivated to help the village, only 4 credited potential aspirants with a similar incentive. This parallels the contrasting views of mistakes made by others. Eight thought their own mistakes normal and inconsequential. Four said they made no mistakes since every decision involves consultation with committees and village meetings. These therefore are collective rather than individual responsibilities. In contrast, the mistakes others make are serious. More than one-third of total mistakes involve corruption and self-gain, and only four view the mistakes of others to be of little consequence.

These negative attributions may reflect opinions about potential competitors, but the wider socio-political setting also appears to be a factor. Almost one-third focused on avoiding corruption when restricted to one piece of advice to other Village Chiefs. Combining this with more than 8 of 15 citing corruption and self-gain as mistakes made by others suggests skepticism about the environment outside of their own villages.

Finally, almost two-thirds of all challenges are from villagers. In contrast to other responses in which villagers are sources of motivation and learning, here they are portrayed as being disagreeable, using drugs, lacking understanding, having low levels of education, and not attending village meetings. These challenges are noted far more often than lack of resources or improving the village economy. Only one Village Chief referred to the absence of a salary. One explanation may be that low education levels, economic hardship and long workdays make it difficult for villagers to comply with policies and rules, or even to attend meetings. Another is that the state policies these Village Chiefs are responsible

¹⁵Consistent with this, we observed few instances of Village Chief initiatives directly supporting economic activity.

for implementing have limited relevance to the issues facing villagers. A third is that, from an implicit leadership theory perspective, the villagers have ideas about leading that don't match what they see in a Village Chief.

These Village Chiefs have many ideas about leading, shaped by personal experience in the village and the practice of doing their work. This is despite the “entrenched ambiguity” of their role and the expectation they will “actively administer” while lacking authority and resources and subject to push back from above and below.

Continued emphasis on villages becoming “development units” rather than “implementation units” could push Village Chiefs beyond “active administration” to incorporate more elements of leading. This would present opportunities and risks. The risks notwithstanding, there are incentives for embracing the change. For Village Chiefs it would reduce a challenge faced by managers in top-down systems everywhere: getting compliance with policies they have no voice in creating and which those they manage often view as irrelevant. (c.f., Zalesnik, 1977) For the state the reward could be villages making more substantial contributions to economic growth and poverty reduction while helping exit Least Developed Country status. Suggestive of this, Case and Sliwa pointed out that simply discussing new ideas of leading pushed rural farmers toward “the alleviation of poverty and the development of sustainable livelihoods.” (Case & Silwa, 2020: p. 554).

8. Limitations and Future Research

Agreement to conduct the research came with restrictions that, if not followed, likely would create difficulties for us and the non-profit association that facilitated our work. Absent these restrictions it would have been valuable to, for example, explore what “development” meant as well as the extent to which they saw themselves engaged in it. Villagers’ “lack of understanding” is a pretext for asking whether this referred to *comprehension* of rules and policies or *acceptance* of them. A more dramatic departure from the restrictions would ask directly how important Party and government messages are to their ideas of leading.

Future research will need to negotiate the boundaries of what can and can't be asked, which is challenging when public officials are the subjects. Trying to meet that challenge is worthwhile if Village Chiefs gain more room to be initiators as part of increasing responsibility for development and poverty reduction at the village level.

An implicit leadership orientation suggests future research explore different perspectives on the Village Chief as leader. One is that held by villagers. How do they see the Village Chief in leadership terms, and how does this match the ideas Village Chiefs hold? Another perspective is that of district, provincial and national level officials. To what extent do their views support or contradict Village Chiefs? Finally, comparison with a role parallel to the Lao Village Chief but in another setting, such as Thailand, would be valuable. It would provide insight

into how much everyday, privately held ideas of leadership are determined by the broad institutional, political and cultural contexts rather than the settings in which the work is done.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Frequency of Responses by Question

1. Successes	51	6. Challenges	36
2. Motivation	49	6a. Why Others Lead	33
3. Leader	79	6b. Why Others Not Lead	43
4. Effectiveness	55	7. Mistakes—Interviewee.	24
5. Learning Sources	47	7a. Mistakes—Others	22
5a. Role Models	27	8. Advice	50
		8a. Advice—One Thing	15