

INTERDEPENDENCE AND THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES, LEADERSHIP STYLE, AND SITUATIONAL CONTEXT IN A MILITARY ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: This paper examines the role and interdependence of leadership competencies, leadership style, and context (situational factors) within a military organization, proceeding from the assumption that context is not a static backdrop but an active moderator of leadership. The initial premise is that the competency profile of managers directs their inclination toward either a more directive or a more participative leadership style. Strategic, interpersonal, and adaptive competencies are conducive to transformational and participative leadership, whereas procedural and control-oriented competencies correlate with transactional and directive approaches. Under conditions of high complexity, dynamism, and accelerated technological change, effective leadership emerges through the integration of traditional military values and contemporary leadership models, that is, through the functional combination of directive and participative approaches in accordance with situational factors (time and risk, phase of the operation, maturity and cohesion of the unit, cultural context, and legal framework). Through an analysis of relevant theoretical approaches, it is demonstrated that the appropriate alignment of competencies and leadership style, together with the ability to adapt to situational demands, contributes to cohesion, morale, safety, successful task execution, and a positive work climate. It is concluded that leadership transcends formal positions of power and that leader development cannot be reduced to the adoption of a single style, but rather to the construction of an adaptive repertoire grounded in values, competencies, and doctrine. The proposed approach maximizes

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clarity, speed, and discipline in execution, while simultaneously preserving initiative, learning, and the ethical compass, operationalized through a repertoire of leadership competencies.

Keywords: military organization, leadership, leadership competencies, leadership style, situational factors

Introduction

Leadership is one of the key concepts in the theory and practice of organizational management. In its broadest sense, leadership refers to the ability of an individual or a group to influence the motivation, will, and behavior of others in order to achieve common goals. It is a complex phenomenon that integrates a set of skills, traits, and strategies, enabling leaders to act effectively and inspire others in dynamic and often uncertain conditions.

A military organization represents a specific social institution whose structures, norms, and interpersonal relations are grounded in its fundamental purpose—armed combat (Atanasievski, 2016). Within classical organizational theory, the military is predominantly viewed as a mechanistic organization, characterized by a pronounced hierarchy, a high level of process formalization, task specialization, and a strictly defined chain of command. Command and control ensure that a unit functions as a coherent whole: different components perform their tasks in a coordinated, rapid, and disciplined manner, whereby the norm of subordination implies that orders issued by superiors are binding on subordinates.

At the same time, the contemporary security and operational environment—shaped by globalization, accelerated technological change, and shifting political and socio-economic conditions—has altered patterns of leadership. Although hierarchy, discipline, and standards remain unquestioned, modern military practice increasingly relies on the principles of mission command, situational adaptation, and the encouragement of initiative. Leaders are expected not only to implement orders and procedures, but also to develop the creative capacities of personnel, cultivate trust and communication, and build a positive work climate that fosters learning and innovation.

In this context, leadership competencies become a fundamental determinant of the selection and application of leadership styles. Cognitive competencies (strategic thinking and decision-making), interpersonal competencies (communication, teamwork, influence), ethical and socio-emotional competencies (emotional intelligence, self-regulation), as well as adaptive competencies, shape leaders' inclinations toward variants of more or less directive or participative leadership styles. Conversely, the adoption of a particular leadership style, in turn, activates and strengthens specific leadership competencies. Context (the situation) moderates all of these relationships, as certain situations require different combinations of styles and competencies in order to achieve desired outcomes.

Proceeding from the above, the aim of this paper is to analyze the interdependence of leadership competencies and leadership styles through the prism of the de-

cision-making context (situation), and to elucidate the implications of this relationship for cohesion, morale, safety, operational readiness, and organizational performance, with particular emphasis on military organizations. The research is based on the descriptive method and content analysis of relevant scientific literature, as well as doctrinal, normative-legal, and other available documents. The expected contribution of the paper lies in providing a foundation for the development of a conceptual framework for aligning leadership competencies and styles with the requirements of contemporary operations and command principles, thereby enhancing personnel development and the long-term sustainability of military organizations.

The Concept and Importance of Leadership

Leadership is the process of influencing the motivation, will, and behavior of others in order to achieve common goals, transcending formal management and being grounded in vision, values, and culture (Northouse, 2018). This foundational definition of leadership highlights four of its key elements: influence (as the essence of the process), vision, values and culture, inspiration and motivation, and finally the ethical dimension as a source of trust and integrity.

The first key element defines leadership as a relationship of influence, rather than merely a position or title. The mechanisms of influence include:

- legitimacy and competence (people follow those whom they believe know the way);
- meaning and identity (belonging to a shared vision and values); and
- reciprocity and trust (the willingness to invest effort because the leader invests in people).

Through these three mechanisms, leaders mitigate resistance to change and ensure organizational “fit” between technological innovations and people’s readiness for them, which is also evident in successful examples of human resources process automation (Damnjanović et al., 2024).

The second element of leadership is the leader’s vision. Vision represents a compelling image of a desirable future that provides direction and meaning, in alignment with generally accepted values and the culture of the community. Values function as a normative compass, defining what is and is not acceptable, while culture represents a set of shared assumptions and patterns of behavior that “program” everyday decisions. Leaders shape organizational culture—an environment of openness, learning, and teamwork—which positively correlates with innovation and long-term stable performance (Schein, 2010). According to Schein (2010), culture exists on three levels: artifacts (visible practices and symbols), espoused values (what is stated to be important), and basic underlying assumptions (what is truly important because it is repeatedly enacted).

Inspiration and motivation enable people to work not because they have to, but because they want to. They mark the transition of followers from “must” to “want,” that is, from mere compliance to genuine commitment and initiative. In practice, this results in greater creativity, responsibility, and long-term sustainability of performance. A team

that wants to complete a task seeks better solutions, proposes ideas, and remains committed even without external pressure. The essence of leadership lies precisely in the ability to inspire and motivate followers to exceed expectations through a clearly communicated purpose and direction of action (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In this regard, Bass and Riggio (2006) explain how leaders motivate followers to surpass expectations through the “Four I’s”:

- Idealized Influence – personal example and integrity;
- Inspirational Motivation – a clear, demanding, and meaningfully articulated vision;
- Intellectual Stimulation – encouraging learning, questioning the status quo, and innovation;
- Individualized Consideration – tailored development and support for each member.

The ethical dimension of leadership denotes consistency in fair treatment, transparency, and accountability (Brown & Treviño, 2006). According to Brown and Treviño (2006), leaders act as role models: people learn by observing leaders (social learning) and follow signals regarding what is rewarded and what is sanctioned. Trust, ethical standards, and perceptions of fairness increase engagement and loyalty. In this sense, it is essential to have clearly developed standards, protected channels for whistleblowing without retaliation, transparency in decision-making, and leadership that applies rules equally to all. Consistent ethical practice further operates through the channels of trust and fairness to sustain productivity, which indirectly contributes to the reduction of organizational risks (Damjanović et al., 2023).

Under conditions of accelerated digitalization, global competition, and uncertainty, leaders must anticipate trends, make decisions rapidly, and maintain the momentum of change (Kotter, 1996). These demands are further intensified in the military context. Namely, although it is an indisputable fact that the military is a highly formalized and hierarchical system, with a clear chain of command and discipline, grounded in its primary purpose—armed combat (Atanasievski, 2016), the execution of assigned tasks in contemporary conditions nonetheless requires balance: alongside the unquestionable principles of subordination, situational adaptation and professional initiative are increasingly affirmed. Consequently, the quality of leadership in the military decisively depends on the level of development of leadership competencies, which determine the application of an appropriate leadership style at the right time and in the right manner.

Leadership Competencies

For a comprehensive understanding of the concept of leadership, it is necessary to consider three fundamental elements that define a successful leader: leadership abilities, skills, and competencies (Northouse, 2018). These interrelated elements constitute the foundation of effective leadership and determine a leader’s capacity to successfully guide teams and organizations through complex environments.

Leadership abilities are innate or acquired predispositions that enable a leader to perform specific functions effectively, such as the capacity for strategic thinking, analytical problem-solving ability, emotional intelligence, mental capacity for information processing, the ability to learn and adapt quickly, as well as natural predispositions for leadership (Goleman, 2000).

Leadership skills represent specific learned techniques and practical knowledge that can be developed and improved through practice and training, such as communication techniques, negotiation skills, conflict management, task delegation, presentation skills, and techniques for motivating employees (Katz, 1974).

Leadership competencies constitute a comprehensive set of knowledge, abilities, skills, and behaviors that enable a leader to perform their role successfully. These include professional knowledge in the field of operations or business, knowledge of organizational processes, understanding of strategy and management, demonstrated leadership experience, measurable results in practice, as well as certifications and formal qualifications (Boyatzis, 2008).

The key differences among these three concepts are reflected in their nature, modes of acquisition, measurability, application, and development (Day et al., 2014). By nature, abilities represent predispositions for success, skills are learned practical knowledge, and competencies are demonstrable through results. In terms of acquisition, abilities are partly innate and partly developed, skills are acquired through learning and practice, and competencies are built through experience and education. With regard to measurability, abilities are assessed through potential, skills can be directly tested, and competencies are measured through performance. In application, abilities define development potential, skills enable everyday functioning, while competencies determine overall effectiveness. In terms of development, abilities can be enhanced to a certain extent, skills can be acquired relatively quickly, whereas competencies require long-term development.

These three elements are interrelated in that abilities form the basis for the development of skills, skills contribute to the construction of competencies, and competencies, as the broadest concept, encompass both abilities and skills (Mumford et al., 2000). Thus, unlike innate abilities, leadership skills—as a component of leadership competencies—can be developed through experience, training, and introspection. The development of leadership skills through experience is one of the key factors for achieving success in leadership. Through practical application, learning from mistakes, mentoring, teamwork, and adaptability, leaders can continuously improve their skills and become more effective in their work.

Understanding the differences and relationships among leadership abilities, skills, and competencies is crucial for leader development (by focusing on the right areas of development, selecting appropriate learning methods, and enabling more effective career planning), for organizations (through better leader selection, more effective development programs, and more precise performance evaluation), and for educational institutions (by designing relevant programs, focusing on key areas of development, and balancing theory and practice) (Bass & Bass, 2008). In practical application, selection processes assess abilities, verify skills for immediate readiness, and evaluate competencies for demonstrated results. In personnel development (skills), natural abil-

ities are identified, necessary skills are purposefully developed, and comprehensive competencies are built; in evaluation processes, progress in skills is measured, the development of abilities is assessed, and demonstrated competencies are evaluated (Yukl, 2013). By developing leadership skills through structured training programs, practical experience, and self-reflection, leaders can acquire new knowledge, develop specific skills, and enhance their leadership abilities, that is, leadership competencies. These competencies ultimately determine leaders' success in guiding teams and organizations.

In the context of a military organization, leadership is directly linked to mission execution, the preservation of life and health of personnel, discipline, and unit cohesion. Therefore, leadership and leadership competencies are of particular importance and must be viewed through the specific requirements and conditions of command and control at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.

In contemporary military doctrine, the topic of leadership and leadership competencies has been most comprehensively and consistently elaborated within the United States Army and systematically published through a series of Army Doctrine Publications (ADP). These publications provide a concise and authoritative framework, defining a common language, principles, and standards that guide planning, training, and the employment of forces. The primary reference framework for understanding leadership in the U.S. Army is Army Doctrine Publication ADP 6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession (U.S. Department of the Army [DA], 2019a). In addition, ADP 6-0: Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces (DA, 2019b) links leadership with command and decision-making in complex, multidomain environments.

The document ADP 6-22 (DA, 2019a) establishes the foundations for leadership development and ethical standards and serves as a reference material for training, leader development, and the establishment of a unified understanding of leadership within the military. Emphasis is placed on developing effective leaders who are capable of leading, developing, and inspiring soldiers, while applying ethical principles and professional conduct.

Instead of the triad "abilities–skills–competencies" commonly found in general management literature, ADP 6-22 (DA, 2019a) primarily distinguishes between leadership attributes and leadership competencies. "Skills" are viewed solely as applicable, trainable techniques of command and leadership, developed and evaluated through standard processes and training. These "skills" are inseparable from leadership competencies and attributes. Rather than leadership abilities, the characteristics that enable effective action under pressure are defined as leadership attributes:

- Character – values, ethics, and discipline; integrity in decision-making; responsibility and care for people;
- Presence – professional military bearing; physical fitness; self-confidence and resilience under stress;
- Intellect – mental agility; sound judgment; innovation; interpersonal tact; and domain expertise.
- Leadership competencies represent a set of doctrinally defined behaviors that enable a leader to reliably accomplish mission objectives within a given operational environment:

- Leads – leads people, builds trust, extends influence beyond the chain of command, leads by personal example, and communicates clearly and in a timely manner;
- Develops – creates a positive environment and fosters esprit de corps, pursues self-development, develops others through mentoring and training, and sustains and professionalizes the profession;
- Achieves – delivers results through planning, preparation, execution, and assessment; sets priorities, manages resources, and mitigates risk.

The document ADP 6-22 (DA, 2019a) distinguishes between what a leader is (attributes) and what a leader does and achieves (competencies). Attributes enable action, while competencies operationalize it. These two dimensions are inseparably connected: attributes enable and guide competencies, whereas competencies manifest as visible, measurable behaviors in task execution.

Whether leadership is viewed through the triad of “competencies–abilities–skills” or through leadership attributes and competencies, the common understanding of both approaches is that leadership competencies are defined as a set of knowledge, skills, and measurable behaviors that lead to results. They represent what a leader knows and is capable of doing (measurable behaviors and abilities). Leadership style is the manner in which these competencies are applied in a given situation. The best results are achieved when competencies, style, and context are aligned.

Leadership Style

The literature recognizes several types of leadership that differ in their approaches, methods, and effects on team members. Understanding these styles is essential for identifying how leaders can most effectively motivate and guide their followers.

At a basic level, leadership styles can be divided into two main groups: directive and participative. In addition, there is the transformational style, which cannot be strictly classified into either of these two categories.

Directive approaches are characterized by a high degree of control and a low level of subordinate participation in decision-making. The most frequently cited examples of this approach in the literature are autocratic, transactional, and bureaucratic leadership styles. Autocratic leaders make decisions without consulting team members. This style can be effective in situations that require rapid decision-making, but it may lead to dissatisfaction and reduced motivation among employees (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). The transactional style is characterized by leaders who use rewards and punishments to motivate team members. This style relies on clearly defined goals and expectations. Although it can be effective in achieving short-term objectives, transactional leadership may limit creativity and innovation (Bass, 1990). The bureaucratic style, in highly regulated environments, requires strict adherence to rules and procedures, with leaders often being highly directive in practice.

Participative approaches to leadership are characterized by a higher degree of team member involvement and shared decision-making. This group includes democratic, participative, and servant leaders. Democratic and participative leaders involve

team members in the decision-making process. Creativity and innovation are encouraged, as team members feel that their contributions are valued. Research indicates that the democratic style can increase employee satisfaction and engagement (Gastil, 1994). Servant leaders place the needs of their followers first. This style focuses on the development and well-being of team members, which can lead to stronger team cohesion and increased loyalty (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership is often associated with positive organizational outcomes.

Transformational leaders (transformational leadership style) inspire and motivate their followers to achieve more than is expected. This style focuses on change and development, both at the individual and organizational levels. Transformational leadership has been associated with higher levels of team satisfaction and performance (Bass, 1985). The transformational style does not belong strictly to either the directive or the participative category. Rather, it represents a “third dimension” oriented toward vision, inspiration, and change, and it may manifest through more or less directive or participative behaviors depending on the context.

The described leadership styles have different effects on team dynamics, motivation, and performance. Understanding these styles enables leaders to adapt their approach to the situation in order to achieve the best results within their organizations. Situational leaders adjust their leadership style according to team needs and situational demands. This approach recognizes that no single leadership style is suitable for all situations, and that leaders must therefore be flexible and adaptable (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969).

In the military context, leadership style is largely determined by the character and nature of the military organization, which makes it specific. Leaders make decisions under conditions often characterized by high risk and time pressure (decision-making under stress, sometimes with incomplete information), a clear hierarchy and accountability (chain of command), rules and law (adopted doctrines that constrain available options), standardization, interoperability, and other factors. Consequently, leadership style in the military is predominantly directive. However, the contemporary environment—characterized by high levels of complexity, dynamism, and technological innovation—requires, for successful leadership, the integration of traditional military values with modern leadership models, that is, a combination of leadership styles. Therefore, the most effective leaders consciously adjust their style according to the situation, as well as the level and condition of the team.

In accordance with ADP 6-0 (DA, 2019b), Mission Command provides a framework in which leadership styles are unified through command—that is, directive leadership combined with delegation and disciplined initiative. Commanders clearly (directive) prescribe the “what and why” (commander’s intent, key tasks, desired end state, and constraints) and delegate the “how” through mission orders and the disciplined initiative of subordinates. This approach presupposes a culture of learning and adaptation, including After Action Reviews (AAR) and iterative adjustment of plans through fragmentary orders (FRAGO), without developing entirely new plans. Within this environment, according to ADP 6-22 (DA, 2019a), leadership competencies and attributes are concretized through behavior, that is, through a leadership style in which the leader is sufficiently directive to provide direction and boundaries, and sufficient-

ly participative to empower the unit's expertise and agility. Thus, Mission Command functionally connects (and balances) different leadership approaches through a combination of intent, mission orders, and disciplined initiative.

The practical ability of a leader to change and adapt their style largely depends on their competencies; at the same time, consistent application of a chosen style reciprocally develops specific competencies. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a strong, bidirectional interdependence between leadership style and leadership competencies: leadership competencies enable a particular style to function effectively, while the chosen style, in turn, activates and strengthens specific competencies.

Interdependence of Leadership Competencies, Leadership Style, and Situation (Context)

Leadership competencies and leadership style are mutually conditioned and deeply intertwined; therefore, they should not be considered separately or outside the context in which decisions are made. In practice, competencies and style operate synergistically and in a situational manner.

Leadership competencies enable a particular leadership style to function effectively. A directive approach requires clear communication of expectations, speed in assessment and decision-making, and the assumption of responsibility. Without these elements, a directive style easily deteriorates into crude command-giving and micromanagement (Yukl, 2013). A participative style, by contrast, demands emotional intelligence, active listening, facilitation of discussion, and the establishment of decision-making frameworks. In the absence of these competencies, teams may become trapped in endless debates and discussions (Goleman, 2000). Following the logic that competencies enable style, a leader must first establish the "foundation" (communication, decision-making, emotional intelligence) and only then choose the appropriate degree of directiveness or level of participation (Yukl, 2013).

Leadership style, in turn, activates and strengthens specific leadership competencies. A directive style, characterized by rapid orientation, decision-making under pressure, and clearly defined roles, activates competencies such as decisiveness, prioritization, crisis communication, and time management (Yukl, 2013). Transactional leadership emphasizes operational and control-oriented competencies. A participative style, focused on involving team members in problem-solving and decision-making, activates competencies such as facilitation, co-creation, integration of diverse perspectives, and trust-building (Vroom & Jago, 1988). Transformational leadership activates competencies related to vision, motivation, and change (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Context, that is, the situation, moderates all of these relationships, as different situations require different combinations of styles and competencies in order to achieve results.

Building on the premise that leadership competencies and leadership style cannot be meaningfully examined separately or outside a situational framework, the military environment further emphasizes the operational necessity of this interdependence. The preceding sections of the paper highlighted the relationship between competen-

cies, style, and performance as it functions within real decision-making contexts. The military context intensifies this relationship due to time pressure, uncertainty, and the high consequences of decisions. For this reason, the principle of “foundation before style” is not merely a didactic recommendation but an imperative: without clear communication, rapid and ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence, and situational awareness, directiveness devolves into micromanagement, while participation collapses into “analysis paralysis” (Goleman, 2000; Yukl, 2013). Leadership style represents the manner in which a leader applies these competencies within a specific context. If the foundational competencies are underdeveloped, style is reduced to tone and personal impression, without a reliable impact on outcomes. When competencies are well developed, leaders can consciously adjust their approach—becoming more directive or more participative, mentoring-oriented, or development-focused—in accordance with the situation, while remaining aligned with professional intent and standards. In other words, competencies enable the selection and switching of leadership styles without loss of control over direction and outcomes. Mission Command explicitly requires this balance: a clear articulation of the “what and why” (directive) combined with the intelligent delegation of the “how” through delegated authority and disciplined initiative (participative) (DA, 2019b). When competencies are well developed, leaders can be as directive as necessary to ensure direction and boundaries, and as participative as useful to unlock team expertise, while remaining ethical, prudent in risk assessment, and swift in decision-making. In this way, the essential outcome is achieved: alignment among competencies, style, and context, which consistently leads to superior results.

Conversely, the choice of and persistence in a particular leadership style gradually feed back into the competencies themselves (Day et al., 2014). The behaviors produced by a given style shape organizational climate, routines, feedback mechanisms, and opportunities for practice, thereby strengthening certain competencies while neglecting others. This creates a feedback loop: style → behaviors/climate → feedback → modification/strengthening of competencies → confirmation or correction of style (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Leadership style initially shapes organizational climate, particularly trust, cohesion, and psychological safety for learning. At the same time, style determines what is practiced most frequently. A more directive approach strengthens operational discipline, ensures adherence to standards, and enhances clarity of communication, whereas a more participative approach promotes the development of others and extends influence over attitudes, decisions, and behaviors beyond one’s formal line of authority.

Feedback mechanisms guide the speed and direction of learning. Their timely and high-quality application accelerates correction and competency development, whereas their absence entrenches existing patterns (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

In summary, leadership style functions as a lever for competency development (Day et al., 2014). Aligning style with principles of clear objectives and iterative learning generates a positive feedback loop that gradually expands the portfolio of leadership competencies. This approach is consistent with the “leads–develops–achieves” model (DA, 2019a).

Finally, it is essential to recognize that the context (situation) of decision-making and leadership is not merely a backdrop, but an active moderator that shapes how teams are led, whom and how influence is exerted, and which competencies develop most prominently in practice. Time pressure and risk, the level and phase of operations, unit (team) maturity and cohesion, cultural context, and legal frameworks represent situational factors that significantly influence leadership competencies and the selection of leadership style (DA, 2019a; DA, 2019b).

When urgency and danger are high, a combination of directive and transactional styles comes to the forefront: brief, unambiguous commands, rapid decisions, and clearly defined control points reduce cognitive load and execution errors (Goleman, 2000; House, 1971). Nevertheless, to preserve initiative and prevent the “stifling” of the team, it is crucial that every directive includes a concise “why” (intent and success criteria), along with only the minimum necessary supervision. This balance between clarity and autonomy enables the “achieves” competency (rapid decision-making and execution under pressure) to be strengthened, while simultaneously preserving “leads” and “develops,” as personnel retain an understanding of the objective and the freedom to adapt actions in real time (DA, 2019a; DA, 2019b).

The closer and more direct the contact with the adversary, the greater the need for directiveness and rapid, unequivocal tasking. In such situations, every second counts and errors in interpretation are costly. Conversely, in staff planning and preparation phases, participative and transformational approaches are more effective, as solution quality depends on diversity of perspectives, creative tension, and co-creation of plans (Vroom & Jago, 1988; Bass & Riggio, 2006). This transition between contact and preparation shifts the focus of competencies: during contact, “achieves” (tempo and decisiveness) dominates, while during planning and rehearsal, “leads” and “develops” are strengthened through vision-driven guidance, shared understanding, and skill-building (DA, 2019a; DA, 2019b).

The maturity, competence, and cohesion of a unit strongly condition the required level of structure and supervision. For less mature or newly formed teams, it is more effective to establish clear procedures, short feedback intervals, and more frequent instructions, as this reduces uncertainty and accelerates standard formation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). As maturity and trust increase, transitioning toward greater delegation, autonomous problem-solving, and inclusion in decision-making becomes optimal, as it frees personnel capacity and accelerates learning through responsibility (Yukl, 2013).

In culturally diverse environments (national, multinational, or intersectoral teams), expectations, attitudes toward authority, tolerance for uncertainty, and decision-making patterns vary. Consequently, there is an increased need for explicit agreements on terminology, processes, and signals, as well as for standardization of basic procedures, so that different styles can function together without loss of cohesion. In such environments, leaders consciously build a shared language and trust as the foundation for effective execution (Hofstede, 2001; DA, 2019b).

Legal frameworks, international humanitarian law, and broader civil–military relations impose real constraints on leadership style and decision-making processes. Even when situations demand speed, decisions must remain lawful and proportional,

and key steps must be documented and justified in accordance with procedures. In practice, this disciplines the “achieves” competency through legal and ethical constraints, while simultaneously stimulating “leads” and “develops,” as teams learn to anticipate legal consequences, understand reputational risks, and adapt tactics without compromising objectives (DA, 2019a; Krulak, 1999).

All of these moderators operate together as a system of levers. Time and risk determine the degree to which leaders narrow or expand space for initiative; the level and phase of operations alter the balance between command and consultation; team maturity dictates the extent of delegation; coalition contexts require more explicit agreements and standards; and legal and reputational frameworks set clear boundaries for legitimate action. When leaders consciously recognize these factors and adapt their style accordingly, the repertoire of leadership competencies not only remains balanced but progressively expands through experience, feedback, and collective learning.

Practical Implications Across Levels of Command

At the tactical level, where situations are typically characterized by a high tempo, direct contact, and limited time and information for decision-making (DA, 2019a; DA, 2019b), a predominantly directive leadership style with transactional elements ensures speed and clarity. It is essential that each order incorporates a concise explanation of the “why” in order to preserve initiative (Goleman, 2000; House, 1971). Key competencies at this level include decisiveness under pressure, crisis communication, prioritization, and real-time risk management (DA, 2019a). Implementation instruments include the commander’s intent at the task level, clearly defined control points, short After Action Reviews (AAR) conducted immediately after execution, and Fragmentary Orders (FRAGO) for rapid plan adjustment (DA, 2019b). Expected effects include a reduction in errors, maintenance of operational tempo, preservation of cohesion under stress, and the achievement of the minimum necessary supervision alongside disciplined subordinate initiative (DA, 2019a; DA, 2019b).

At the operational level, which is characterized by the planning and coordination of multiple tactical actions, interoperability, and staff work, a combined participative–transformational leadership style is recommended during planning and preparation phases, complemented by a more directive style during the transition to execution and the management of decision points (Vroom & Jago, 1988; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Key competencies include building shared understanding, guiding multidisciplinary teams, integrating diverse perspectives, and managing inter-unit relationships (DA, 2019a). Implementation instruments consist of a formalized planning process, the commander’s intent and success criteria, standardized terminology, interagency and multinational standard operating procedures, regular AARs, and iterative FRAGOs (DA, 2019b). Expected outcomes include higher-quality decisions due to diverse perspectives, improved interoperability, and faster adaptation during execution.

At the strategic level, where multidomain environments, civil–military relations, legal and reputational risks, and international humanitarian law are prominent (Krulak, 1999), the most effective approach is a transformational–participative leadership style

in the formulation of vision, intent, and boundaries of action, combined with clear directive definition of legal, ethical, and reputational constraints. Key competencies include strategic communication, ethical reasoning, reputational risk management, and coalition leadership (DA, 2019a). Implementation instruments encompass the doctrinal foundation of mission command, explicit policies of legality and proportionality, transparent documentation of decisions, and structured engagement with civilian actors. Expected outcomes include legitimacy, sustainability, and coherence of strategic intent across all levels, while preserving space for decentralized initiative during execution (Krulak, 1999).

Leadership effectiveness across different levels of command is enhanced by adapting leadership style to the specific requirements of each level. At the tactical level, speed and clarity are paramount, whereas the operational level requires a participative approach to ensure higher-quality decisions, complemented by directive leadership in critical situations. At the strategic level, the focus should be on vision, the definition of boundaries of action, and legal and reputational consistency.

Integrating concise explanations of intent (the “why”), maintaining open communication channels, standardizing terminology and procedures in multinational environments, and documenting key decisions all contribute to aligning leadership competencies, leadership style, and context. This alignment results in improved performance across all levels of command. Leader development, therefore, entails the formation of an adaptive repertoire grounded in values, competencies, and doctrine.

Conclusion

In the contemporary environment, characterized by high complexity, dynamism, and accelerated technological change, leadership in a military organization is neither a set of isolated skills nor the selection of a single “correct” style. Rather, it represents a continuous integration of leadership competencies, stylistic preferences, and situational demands. Context is not a passive backdrop but an active moderator: it simultaneously constrains and enables initiative, sets the boundaries of legitimate action, and redirects emphases within the repertoire of leadership competencies.

The military context does not reject the distinction between directive and participative leadership; on the contrary, it refines and functionally integrates it through clearly defined intent, success criteria, and boundaries of action. When these elements are clearly articulated, leaders can confidently vary styles and tools. In contact with the adversary, directiveness and tempo are emphasized, whereas in planning and preparation phases, greater participation and transformational elements ensure decision quality. In this way, the false “either–or” dilemma is avoided and replaced with an “both–and” capability—namely, acting rapidly and lawfully, disciplined yet adaptive, centralized in intent and decentralized in execution.

The prerequisite for such flexibility lies in stable foundational competencies: situational awareness, ethical reasoning, meaning-oriented communication (the “why”), decision-making under pressure, and trust-building. When these foundations are firm-

ly established, leaders can consciously calibrate and sequence leadership styles in accordance with time and risk, the level and phase of the operation, unit maturity and cohesion, as well as coalition and cultural environments. It is precisely this calibration that transforms leadership style from a personal inclination into a professional tool adapted to context, rather than the reverse.

This approach maximizes clarity, speed, and discipline while simultaneously preserving initiative, learning, and the ethical compass. Clear intent and short feedback loops reduce errors and accelerate adaptation. Standardized terminology and training mitigate cultural differences in multinational and interagency settings. Selective delegation and accountability at the lowest feasible level foster personnel development and system resilience. In this manner, the “achieves” competency remains firmly aligned with mission discipline, while “leads” and “develops” ensure the unit’s long-term capacity to learn faster than the pace of change.

The boundaries of such flexibility are defined by legal frameworks, international humanitarian law, and broader civil–military relations. Even when speed is required, decisions must remain lawful, proportional, and transparently justified. This necessitates careful choice of language, consistent documentation, clear escalation pathways, and the deliberate retention of certain decisions at higher levels of command.

For organizations, the implications are clear: leader development cannot be reduced to the adoption of a single leadership style, but must focus on shaping an adaptive repertoire grounded in values, competencies, and doctrine. This entails:

- selection and training processes that place greater emphasis on intent and situational judgment under uncertainty, rather than mere procedural compliance;
- exercises and simulations that systematically integrate tactical, operational, and strategic levels, as well as diverse national and organizational cultures, to foster shared understanding and interoperability;
- structured feedback mechanisms (AARs, mentoring, developmental evaluations) that recognize and reward not only disciplined execution but also thoughtful, doctrinally grounded initiative;
- program modules for the development of key competencies (situational awareness, ethical reasoning, strategic communication, crisis decision-making) integrated across all stages of career development;
- continuous training and professional education for commanders and staffs, with a focus on articulating intent, standardizing terminology, and applying combined leadership styles in realistic scenarios.

Such an approach integrates traditional military values with contemporary leadership models and enables the practical bridging of directive and participative approaches in accordance with situational demands.

In conclusion, advantage in contemporary operations does not stem from rigid adherence to a single leadership style, but from the ability to rapidly interpret context, clearly articulate intent, and consciously select, combine, and adjust approaches during action. The interdependence of competencies, leadership style, and context enables calibration in line with time, risk, unit maturity, and culture, while preserving clarity, speed, discipline, initiative, learning, and an ethical compass.

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S u m m a r y

This paper analyzes the interdependence and role of leadership competencies, leadership style, and situational context within a military organization, demonstrating that effective leadership is not the selection of a single “correct” style, but rather the continuous integration of competencies, stylistic preferences, and environmental demands. Context is treated as an active moderator that simultaneously constrains and enables initiative, sets the boundaries of legitimate action, and redirects emphases within the repertoire of leadership competencies.

The purpose of the paper is to clarify how competencies, leadership style, and context mutually condition one another and how they are calibrated in practice across different phases of action. The approach is based on a conceptual synthesis of relevant leadership models and doctrinal insights, combined with a comparative examination of directive and participative approaches in planning, preparation, and execution.

Key findings indicate that leadership flexibility relies on stable foundational competencies, such as situational awareness, ethical reasoning and judgment under uncertainty, meaning-oriented communication, decision-making under pressure, and the deliberate building of trust. Clear intent, success criteria, and boundaries of action enable leadership styles to be consciously selected, combined, and adjusted during execution. Short feedback loops, standardized terminology, and rehearsals reduce friction in multinational and intersectoral environments, while selective delegation with accountability at the lowest feasible level fosters personnel development and system resilience. At the same time, the limits of flexibility are ensured by legal frameworks, international humanitarian law, and civil–military relations.

The organizational implications point to selection and training processes that place stronger emphasis on intent and situational judgment under uncertainty rather than mere procedural compliance; to training and exercises that systematically integrate different echelons and cultures in order to achieve shared understanding and interoperability; and to feedback mechanisms that equally recognize disciplined execution and thoughtful initiative.

In conclusion, advantage in contemporary operations derives from the ability to rapidly interpret context, clearly articulate intent, and consciously calibrate leadership style in accordance with time, risk, unit maturity, and culture, thereby simultaneously maximizing clarity, speed, and discipline while preserving initiative, learning, and an ethical compass.

Keywords: *military organization, leadership, leadership competencies, leadership style, situational factors*

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