

Navigating into the Military Leadership Landscape

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Abstract: Military leaders significantly influence national and global history. Through a standardized, hierarchically defined management structure, the military cultivates values and rules reinforced by education, discipline, and experience. Armed Forces operate under strict discipline, structured power, and a collective demand for commitment and efficiency, while adapting to ever-changing challenges. Military leadership involves managing human resources under pressure, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, and relies on personal traits such as credibility, determination, and role-modeling. This study investigates the military leadership landscape through four leadership theories—charismatic, transactional, transformational, and servant leadership—across five dimensions: personality, vision, influence, personnel management and care, and responsibility in decision-making and risk-taking. A quantitative survey was distributed across three branches of the Armed Forces. Findings indicate that transformational and servant leadership elements predominate. Understanding modern military leadership benefits researchers and military leaders, encouraging further investigation.

Keywords: Military leadership, Charismatic leadership, Transactional leadership, Transformational leadership, Servant leadership

1. Introduction

The Armed Forces (AF) are a unique organization, with characteristics that differentiate them from other public or private entities. Their uniqueness stems from the role they play in the field of national defense and security, as well as from the structure, operation and multidimensional requirements and needs which they are called upon to satisfy. Strict discipline, hierarchically structured power and the collective demand for commitment and efficiency in carrying out their mission as well as adaptation to ever-changing conditions and modern challenges are the basis for their performance.

The ever-changing conditions are often characterized by the acronym VUCA which stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. It emerged in the military world, especially in the US Army, in the early 1990s and then entered the vocabulary of modern management (Alexa, 2024, p. 305). Even though many contrary opinions were appeared it deserves its value and in recent research studies has embraced resilience generated by robustness and agility.

A considerable number of studies have been conducted on various leadership theories, both traditional and contemporary, in order to determine the characteristics of effective and successful leaders, to identify patterns of their behaviour and recognize their leadership styles, while there are a limited number of studies that explore military leadership and the strategy applied in the ever-changing environment. Many research studies about leadership in the Army utilize the internationally validated instrument Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), the flexibility of which cannot be questioned since it has been used in thousands of military (e.g. Narváez, et al., 2020) and civilian studies (e.g. Batista-Foguet, et al., 2021). It assesses the transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership theories, and these three theories are the main components of the full-range leadership model (Avolio & Bass 2002). Other recent research studies connect leadership styles to commander performance evaluations, especially the transformational and transactional leadership under stressful and uncertain conditions (Babos, et al. 2024), leadership to the roles of a military leader (Fratila, 2022), and the quality of the leadership competencies of first-level military leaders to behavioural dimensions like tasks, change and relations (Meerits & Kivipold 2020). However, studies exploring military leadership under multiple contemporary theories remain limited. This research examines whether charismatic, transactional, transformational, and servant leadership are present in military leadership model, focusing on five critical dimensions of leadership execution: personality, vision, influence, personnel management and care, and responsibility in decision-making and risk-taking.

2. Military Leadership and its Characteristics

Leadership “can be characterized as an enigmatic concept, maybe is hard to define but it touches and is of interest and practiced by everyone and quite often is used interchangeably with other concepts such as command and management” (Horn & Walker 2008). There are many definitions and models of leadership and

“some of its classes include motivation and influence, leadership as a set of personal attributes or traits, leadership as management, leadership as a system of authority, leadership as a relationship with subordinates, leadership as a set of roles” (Spicker 2012).

Concerning the military leadership, it seems that sometimes adopts the trait-based approach, the transformational approach or other approaches congruent with the above mentioned leadership classes, but quite often it differentiates in accordance with the level of hierarchy. Leaving aside the authoritarian leadership model and having in mind to shed light on the contemporary leadership theories applied in the military context, charismatic, transactional, transformational and servant leadership were taken into account.

According to the charismatic leadership, leaders have a vision, a sense of mission, are willing to take personal risks to achieve that vision, are sensitive to follower needs, exhibit extraordinary behaviors while their followers tend to give them power when they attribute heroic or extraordinary leadership abilities (Robbins & Judge 2024), or they recognize their charisma, behaviours values-driven, symbolic, or emotion-laden (Antonakis et al. 2016).

Transactional leadership, which is also called managerial leadership, focuses on short-term goals, procedures and policies that are favor-structured, assignment specific tasks to employees, motivation through the reward and punishment, opposition to change and inflexibility (Jaqua & Jaqua 2021).

The transformational leadership theory consists of 4Is: intellectual stimulation (leaders stimulate their followers to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways and finding solutions to problems); individualised consideration (leaders pay special attention to each individual follower's needs for achievement and growth by acting as a coach or mentor, accepting individual differences, and encouraging a two-way exchange communication); inspiration motivation (leaders motivate and inspire their followers by providing meaning and challenge to their work, involve followers in envisioning attractive future states, create clearly communicated expectations, demonstrate commitment to goals and the shared vision); idealised influence (leaders serve as role models for their followers, are admired, respected, and trusted, are considered as having extraordinary capabilities, persistence, and determination by their followers) (Bass & Riggio 2006).

Transformational leaders are distinguished by their risk taking, goal articulation, high expectations, emphasis put on collective identity, self-assertion, and vision while their followers have a positive attitude and effective performance (Ehrhart & Klein 2001).

According to the servant leadership theory (Greenleaf 1997), the role of the servant leader is to serve followers, the role of the follower is to become wiser, freer, and more autonomous and the outcomes expected are the follower satisfaction, development, commitment to service and societal betterment (Barbuto & Wheeler 2006). In addition, servant leadership changes the focus of the influence, which is generally considered the key element of leadership, by emphasizing the ideal of service in the leader–follower relationship (van Dierendonck 2011).

Leadership in the field of AF is multidimensional and is shaped by a set of interrelated structural elements that make up its execution model. According to this model and the multi-year experience of one of the present study researchers, effective leadership in the military context is based on five fundamental dimensions: the leader personality; the vision that guides his actions; the ability to influence and inspire subordinates; the rational administration and care of personnel; the responsibility in decision-making and risk-taking.

Northouse (2021) states that key personality traits associated with effective leadership are self-confidence, integrity, and determination. In the context of AF, the leader's personality is not limited to his individual behaviour, but is manifested in his ability to operate under conditions of increased pressure, uncertainty and operational intensity, while maintaining stability, adaptability and insight.

The execution of AF mission demands from their leaders to communicate their vision, inspire and motivate their followers and enhance their commitment toward that vision. Indeed, the vision “reinforces the sense of purpose and commitment of subordinates, acting as a catalyst for mobilization and alignment of personal goals with the goals of the organization” (Bass & Avolio 1994) and strengthens the cohesion, loyalty, and psychological resilience of the leaders in the long run.

Communication plays a vital role to the military leaders and it is not limited to transmit information but to influence and persuade. In fact, the influence of a leader is associated with the use of different strategies and tactics, adapted to the requirements and the goals of each organization (Yukl 2013). In the military environment of the AF the leader's influence is not exercised exclusively through his hierarchical position, but is reinforced by trust, personal prestige, consistency of words and actions and high levels of emotional intelligence.

Administration and personnel management are fundamental dimensions that link the functional and human sides of leadership. Effective administration includes the rational management of resources, the allocation of tasks, decision-making and ensuring efficiency. Staff care incorporates psychological support, professional development and maintaining of the moral cohesion of the team. But leadership “goes beyond formal management, as it involves caring, mobilizing and supporting team members, especially under conditions of increased fatigue, risk or uncertainty” (Kotter 1996).

Taking responsibility, the ability to make decisions and risk-taking under pressure are key traits of the military leaders and their effectiveness in threatening turbulent and high risk circumstances reflects not only technical proficiency, but also ethos, courage and mission awareness, elements that shape the ability to assume responsibility and high risk decision making besides the robustness and agility of the leader. These five fundamental dimensions of military leadership constitute the framework on which the evaluation of the four selected leadership theories placed for the purpose of the present research study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodological Approach

The selected research approach was a survey as “it provides a quantitative description of trends, attitudes, and opinions of a population, or tests for associations among variables of the sample of a population and helps researchers answer questions such as descriptive, questions about the relationships between variables and questions about predictive relationships between variables over time” (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The main aim of this survey was to investigate the military leadership landscape by taking into consideration four leadership theories (charismatic, transactional, transformational, servant) and five leadership dimensions (personality, vision, influence, management and personnel care, and responsibility of decision making and risk-taking). These five dimensions were selected as the basis of investigation, firstly by taking into consideration basic management and leadership principles of military leadership and secondly, as they constitute components of the four selected leadership theories through which the military leadership model was identified.

The survey was mainly conducted by the following questions: 1. What is your general evaluation about the applied leadership model in the AF; The sub-question of which is: **1a.** What are the frequency and variation of scores on the applied leadership model in the AF for officers and non-commissioned officers? **2.** Do leadership theories such as charismatic, transactional, transformational and servant consist part of the applied leadership model in the AF? The sub-question of which is: **2a.** Which of the four leadership models prevails over the others in the leadership model applied in the AF? **3.** Is there a correlation between the opinions and perceptions of officers and non-commissioned officers regarding the leadership model applied in the AF? The main hypotheses were:

H1: There is no difference in the perception of the appropriateness of leadership model applied in the AF between officers and non-commissioned officers.

H2: The leadership model applied in the AF is related to charismatic, transactional, transformational and servant leadership.

H3: Transformative and servant leadership are more likely to have a greater impact on the leadership model applied in the AF.

A quantitative approach was selected based on the self-reported views of military leaders. A literature review of leadership theories, relevant articles, white papers, unclassified official forms and reference documents constituted the basis for the construction of the theoretical framework. The questionnaire as quantitative approach instrument has “many advantages such as economy and speed in data collection, standardized analysis and comparable results, and anonymity assurance” (Bryman 2016). In addition, quantitative approach “concentrates on measurable variables and quantified data capable of giving objective analysis of social phenomena and amenable to statistical analysis; it facilitates generalization by minimizing bias; it addresses the need for timely research in rapidly evolving environments like the disruptive, volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous –DVUCA environment” (Lim 2024).

3.2 Sample, Data Collection and Analysis

The sample participants belong to the AF, a hierarchically structured organization, which includes the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. The criterion for the participants’ inclusion was the specific hierarchy level (officer or

non-commissioned officer) with an equal participation rate in the survey of 50% and without gender discrimination.

The selected data were across all military branches rather than focusing on one specific branch and this increases the trustworthiness of the research and analysis. Data were gathered during the period from March 2025 to May 2025. The questionnaire was distributed through online survey, all responses were anonymized and stored securely, voluntary participation was emphasized and declared consent was obtained from all participants.

The questionnaire for data collection was consisted of three parts. The first part concerned demographic data of the respondents: gender, category (officer, non-commissioned officer), branch (Army, Navy, Air Force), and total years of service (professional experience). The second part was consisted of the general evaluation of the applied leadership model. The third was consisted of 35 items (seven items per leadership dimension) with a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) for all constructs except demographics. Officers and non-commissioned officers constituted the independent variable and the four leadership theories (charismatic, transactional, transformational and servant) dependent variables.

Data analysis was conducted with the SPSS Version (30.0). Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used to summarize data, answer research questions and test the hypotheses.

4. Results and Findings

The reliability and internal consistency of the items were examined using the Cronbach’s Alpha Index. The Cronbach’s α was 0.922, which demonstrates an extremely high level of reliability (values > 0.9 are considered excellent), confirms the consistency of the items and the measures' accuracy in capturing the intended constructs. A pilot testing and expert views were taken into consideration for the items development.

The total number of questionnaire respondents was 142, of two distinct hierarchical levels (officers and non-commissioned officers) of the AF with an equal participation rate in the survey of 50%. The demographic characteristics of the research sample were: the percent of 10.6% consisted of females and 89.4% of males, and that was expected to happen due to the limited number of females in the permanent staff of the AF. The participants were from all three branches of the AF (Army, Navy, Air Force) with a corresponding rate of 64.8%, 17.6%, 17.6%. It was also expected, due to the significantly larger number of those serving in the Army compared to the other branches. Most respondents had 21 and more years of military service (69.7%), from 11 to 20 years (21.1%) and from 0 to 10 years (9.2%).

Data gave answers to the main research questions and support the relative hypotheses.

Concerning the first main research question (general evaluation of the applied military leadership model) the points of view of the respondents are interpreted at the following two tables. The Table 1 describes the total frequency and percentage and the Table 2 their distribution between the two categories, officers and non-commissioned officers.

Table 1: General evaluation of the applied military leadership model

Description of evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
Completely unsuitable	3	2.1
Partially unsuitable	28	19.7
Neutral	24	16.9
Partially suitable	71	50
Completely suitable	16	11.3
Total	142	100

Table 2: General evaluation of the applied military leadership model per category

Description of evaluation	Officers		Non-commissioned officers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Completely unsuitable	1	1.4	2	2.8
Partially unsuitable	19	26.8	9	12.7

Description of evaluation	Officers		Non-commissioned officers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Neutral	7	9.9	17	23.9
Partially suitable	39	54.9	32	45.1
Completely suitable	5	7	11	15.5
Total	71	100	71	100

According to the Table 1, the majority of the respondents consider the applied leadership model at least suitable, with 50% rating it as “Partially Suitable” and an additional 11.3% as “Completely Suitable.” Overall, 61.3% of the sample expressed a positive view of the leadership model.

According to the Table 2, concerning the officers, the majority (54.9%) evaluates the model as "Partially Suitable", while only 7% consider it "Fully Suitable", forming a moderately positive total of 61.9%. A slightly more positive attitude is observed among non-commissioned officers where 45.1% evaluate the model as "Partially Suitable" and 15.5% as "Completely Suitable", forming an overall positive percentage of 60.6%. Concerning the neutrality, non-commissioned officers present a higher percentage (23.9%), which may reflect a reserved attitude or lack of familiarity with all the aspects of the applied leadership model.

Concerning the second main research question (evaluation of the applied military leadership model under the consideration of the four leadership models), descriptive statistical analysis was applied in order to find out the basic distribution of participants' responses for each of the four contemporary leadership theories/models examined: charismatic, transformational, transactional and servant leadership.

Table 3: Average and standard deviation of the four leadership theories

Leadership theory/model	Average	Standard Deviation
Charismatic	3.89	0.80
Transactional	3	0.59
Transformational	3.95	0.83
Servant	3.95	0.86

It is evident that the models of transformational leadership and servant leadership are rated higher, with an average of 3.95, which indicates the presence and recognition of modern, human-centered leadership approaches within the AF.

The servant leadership model presents the greatest dispersion (standard deviation = 0.86), which demonstrates the existence of divergent views regarding the intensity of its application.

On the contrary, the transactional leadership model has the lowest mean (3.00) and the smallest standard deviation (0.59), which indicates convergent views and limited application of corresponding leadership practices.

Charismatic leadership is recorded at an intermediate level, with an average of 3.89, indicating that “characteristics such as personal influence and inspiration are valued by the participants, without however emerging as dominant traits of the leadership model” in the specific organization (Conger & Kanungo 1998).

The descriptive statistical analysis forms the basis for the further application of inferential statistical methods, with the aim of investigating whether the observed differences between the means are statistically significant.

The Repeated Measures ANOVA is the method used to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the means of the four leadership models rated by the same participants. It is appropriate when each participant rates multiple variables, as this is the case in the present study. Furthermore, it allows the investigation of whether any of the leadership theories is statistically significant than others. The application of this analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the four leadership theories [F (3.139) = 90.379, p < 0.001]. The F-index is the basic statistical measure in the analysis of variance and larger values indicate stronger differences between the groups. The p-value indicates the probability that the result is due to random variation. When it appears p < 0.05 the difference is considered statistically significant. At the present analysis (p < 0.001), the probability of random error is less than 0.1%, which enhances the reliability of the result and confirms the existence of significant differences between the leadership theories.

Since the same participants evaluated all four leadership theories (within-subjects analysis), the influence of external individual differences (such as gender, age, or professional experience) is reduced. This “enhances the validity of the statistical analysis, as it allows for more precise isolation of differences” attributable to the leadership theories themselves (Tabachnick & Fidell 2013).

The results of the analysis confirm that the evaluation of leadership theories varies significantly, depending on the characteristics identified in each theory. Participants evaluated the four theories differently, with one or more of them statistically outperforming or not.

Transactional leadership was evaluated negatively compared to the other theories, which is consistent with the findings of the descriptive statistical analysis, strengthening the validity of the conclusions.

After identifying statistically significant differences in the means of the four leadership theories through the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), Pairwise Comparisons Analysis was performed between all theories. This analysis allows the identification of individual differences between pairs, highlighting which theories outperform or underperform compared to the others. A difference is considered statistically significant when the corresponding p-value is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), which indicates that the probability the difference due to random variation is less than 5%.

The results of the analysis revealed that transactional leadership differs statistically significantly from all other theories, with the largest deviations recorded compared to transformational (+0.949) and servant leadership (+0.950). On the contrary, no statistically significant difference was found between transformational leadership and servant leadership ($p = 0.965$). This finding suggests that participants “perceive the two theories as similar”, which reinforces the view that both are based on common human-centered principles, emphasizing staff empowerment and support (Eva et al. 2019).

Concerning the third main research question (Is there a correlation between the opinions and perceptions of officers and non-commissioned officers regarding the leadership model applied in the AF), Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was applied. MANOVA is a “statistical technique that allows for the simultaneous examination of differences between groups on more than one dependent variable” (Tabachnick & Fidell 2013). In the context of the present study, it was used to determine whether officer or non-commissioned officer, as an independent variable, affects the overall perception of the four leadership theories, the dependent variables of the analysis. The MANOVA results showed that the overall effect of the independent variable (officers - non-commissioned officers) on the four dependent variables (leadership theories) is not statistically significant ($p = 0.079$). Consequently, no substantial differentiation is documented in the perceptions of the two groups, which indicates a relative homogeneity of opinions, regardless of hierarchical position.

However, since the p-value approaches the statistical significance threshold ($\alpha = 0.05$), it was deemed appropriate to apply a complementary Between-Subjects Effects Analysis (Univariate Tests or Between-Subjects Effects Analysis), which allows the examination of the effect of the independent variable on each dependent variable separately. The F-statistical index and p-value for each model is summarized in the Table 4.

Table 4: Impact analysis of respondents per leadership model

Leadership theory/model	F	p(Sig.)
Charismatic	5.022	0.027
Transactional	0.134	0.715
Transformational	4.129	0.044
Servant	2.406	0.123

This univariate approach revealed statistically significant differences in respondents' perceptions of charismatic ($F = 5.022$, $p = 0.027$) and transformational leadership ($F = 4.129$, $p = 0.044$), with officers rating them significantly higher compared to non-commissioned officers. The values of the F statistic reflect the size of the difference between the groups, while the corresponding p values confirm the statistical significance of the differences ($p < 0.05$).

In contrast, no statistically significant differences were found in the ratings for the two leadership theories, transactional ($F = 0.134$, $p = 0.715$) and servant leadership ($F = 2.406$, $p = 0.123$), as the p-values exceed the established significance threshold ($\alpha = 0.05$). This finding suggests that the ratings of the two groups do not differ substantially with respect to these specific theories/models.

This is consistent with previous findings showing that senior executives (officers) often recognize and prioritize leadership characteristics related to vision, inspiration, and personal influence (Bass & Avolio 1994). This may be “linked to the increased degree of administrative responsibility and strategic involvement” that characterizes the role of officers compared to non-commissioned officers (Yukl 2013).

5. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Before turning to the conclusions flowing for the present effort, some limitations and suggestions for further research should be noted. One of the limitations is size of the sample, and another is the absence of random sampling and the existence of convenience sampling which hinders generalization.

Suggestion for further research are: the use of qualitative and mixed methods research approach; the enlargement of the size and diversity of the research sample, with the aim of ensuring greater representativeness in terms of the sectors, units and geographical areas and creating the possibilities for generalization of results; the research expansion in order to include a critical and often underrepresented part of the military organization, the conscript soldiers; investigation of the changes in personnel attitudes and perceptions over a long period of time and especially during the periods of institutional changes or reforms; comparative studies with corresponding military forces of different countries or security forces, with the aim of identifying best leadership practices focusing on innovation, emotional intelligence, flexibility and agility.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This research study sought to investigate the military leadership landscape through the lens of four leadership theories (charismatic, transactional, transformational, servant), where leader personality, vision, influence, managerial skills and personnel care, responsibility in decision making and risk-taking constituted the basis for military leadership to successful achievement of its mission in an ever-changing world.

At the present research, the existence of transactional leadership, “in which reward and punishment dominate as the main means of achieving goals and ensuring functionality” (Burns 1978; Bass 1985) has been significantly downgraded, which means that military leadership of nowadays has adopted a human-centered approach and leaves aside its authoritarian character. Additionally, the leadership model applied in the AF, primarily characterized by the elements of transformational and servant leadership. The prevailing role of transformational leadership over the transactional leadership, which is often called authoritarian leadership, is congruent with a research in the public relations leadership where the focus groups participants prefer transformational leadership to transactional (Aldoory & Toth 2004). As public relations leadership takes place in a constantly changing, turbulent environment enforces the comparison with military leadership which activate in a VUCA environment. Moreover, previous research has highlighted the conditions under which transactional and transformational leadership operate: transactional in stable, predictable environments and transformational in crises and ever changing environments. The prevailing role of servant leadership is also apparent at another research where servant leadership has incremental predictive validity over transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership through a meta-analysis based on 130 independent studies (Lee, et al., 2020).

The present study emphasizes the importance of the four leadership theories that have been encompassed the leadership model applied in the AF by pinpointing the presence of modern, human-centered leadership approach and their navigation to their relevant VUCA environment. As the VUCA environment is normal to the military leaders’ life, it seems necessary for them to pay attention to near-and longer term future needs, create the appropriate ground for leading in future ambiguity and be able to adapt whatever it comes (O’Gorman, 2015). Additionally, even though military “is traditionally seen as an authoritarian organization” (Brænder & Holsting 2020) its leadership values do not develop in isolation from the society and are being influenced by the experience of people who belong to the military organization. Military leaders perform in an organization where ethics of action and patriot mind and the adoption of the contemporary leadership theories are evident. Furthermore, they make crucial decisions, mostly under intense pressure and with serious consequences (Fratila 2022). Therefore it seems suitable to the AF to incorporate “elements of a network-based structure and value innovation, flexibility and horizontal commands rather than keep exclusively their hierarchical structure” (Gøtzsche-Astrup, et al. 2021).

Findings of this research can be seen as an indication that may be a way to further develop military leadership to integrate values of openness to new solutions, flexibility and agility where leaders could be characterized as agile learners and be able to excel in unfamiliar circumstances.

Ethics Declaration: An ethical clearance was required. Approval of permission to conduct this research dated the 3rd of April 2025 was issued by the National Bioethics Committee of the country to which the AF belongs.

AI Declaration: No AI tools were used.

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