Leadership Competencies for Future Leaders in Dubai Government Organisations

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Abstract: Leadership is identified as a critical element for the success of an organisation. With the rapid economic development that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has witnessed in the past three decades, leadership is becoming an increasingly significant factor to the development and future of organisations. Leadership plays a pivotal role in aligning organisational vision with long-term objectives, especially in the public sector, where leaders are responsible for leading change, fostering innovation, and improving performance. Preparing future leaders in Dubai Government organisations therefore requires a shift toward advanced competencies that enable leaders to navigate technological disruption, shifting societal expectations, and increasing institutional complexity. This conceptual paper explores the core competencies essential for future government leaders, drawing on contemporary leadership theories and emerging trends in public-sector transformation. This paper discusses digital fluency, strategic foresight, ethical governance, agility, and innovation-driven problem-solving as foundational capabilities for advancing Dubai's long-term transformation agenda. These competencies reflect the evolving nature of public service delivery, where leaders are required to operate in dynamic, interconnected, and digitally-enabled governance systems. Through synthesizing recent scholarly literature and government best practices, the paper examines the leadership competencies most relevant to the future of Dubai Government. It emphasizes the importance of structured leadership development systems in preparing future-ready leaders who can strengthen institutional resilience, enhance organisational performance, and maintain competitiveness across government entities. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by presenting a forward-looking perspective on public-sector leadership, and providing a conceptual foundation for designing leadership programs that strengthen readiness, adaptability, and future competitiveness across government entities.

Keywords: Leadership competencies, Future leaders, Leadership development, Public sector, Digital leadership, Dubai Government

1. Introduction

Effective leadership is vital for the development of organisations (Asiri, 2026). Leadership studies have spanned cultures, decades, and theories (Horner, 1997; Scheepers and Storm, 2019). According to Anos (2025), leadership is an essential factor which determines the success of implementing change in organisations. Leadership in government organisations is undergoing a profound transformation driven by rapid technological progress, evolving societal expectations, and growing complexity in public-sector service delivery. Accordingly, government organisations are placing greater emphasis on developing employees with the right leadership competencies, to ensure a sustainable future-ready leadership pipeline. Future leaders must demonstrate advanced competencies that extend beyond traditional administrative skills, equipping them to manage uncertainty, lead high-performing teams, and support long-term institutional resilience. This study aims to identify the leadership competencies that are required for future leaders in the context of the UAE, and particularly across Dubai Government organisations, which are prioritizing leadership development to prepare future leaders for an increasingly digital and dynamic public sector. Despite this emphasis, leadership competency frameworks across Dubai Government entities remain fragmented and often lack alignment with emerging future-focused capabilities such as digital fluency, strategic foresight, systems thinking, and innovation-driven problem-solving. These gaps underscore the need for a unified, future-oriented leadership competency model designed for Dubai's public-sector context and that supports leaders capable of driving transformation across government. This conceptual paper examines the leadership competencies required for future leaders in Dubai Government organisations. The paper also introduces the competencies required to strengthen leadership readiness, enhance organisational performance, and support Dubai's long-term strategic vision. By addressing existing gaps and presenting a cohesive conceptual perspective, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on public-sector leadership, and provides a foundation for designing leadership development programs that prepare government leaders for future challenges.

2. Leadership for the Future

Leadership is one of the most important topics in society, because of its significant role in the progress of organisations (Asiri, 2026). Leadership is increasingly important as the global business environment becomes

more competitive (Fernandes et al., 2025). Leadership has evolved considerably over the past two decades in response to rapid technological, economic, and societal changes. In both private and public sector organisations, leaders play a central role in shaping strategic direction, managing organisational change, and fostering innovation (Scheepers and Storm, 2019). Traditional leadership models emphasized on command, control, and administrative efficiency are increasingly shifting towards approaches that prioritize agility, innovation, collaboration, and strategic foresight (Northouse, 2022). Future leaders are therefore expected not only to manage effectively, but also to anticipate change, inspire innovation, and lead digital transformation (Eaves et al., 2026). Several leadership theories provide useful insights into these evolving expectations. Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring employees through a shared vision and empowering them to achieve organisational change (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Burns argues that transformational leaders are people who elevate subordinates and themselves to a higher level of inspiration and morals (Bass, 2008). This leadership style encourages subordinates to rise above their self-interest to attain organisational goals beyond stated expectations (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Adaptive leadership emphasizes leaders' ability to respond effectively to complex challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). This approach promotes flexibility, responsiveness, employee empowerment, and commitment to public service values, all of which are essential for sustaining innovation within complex organisational environments (Heifetz et al., 2009). Authentic leadership emphasizes ethical behaviour, trust and transparency (Bass, 2008), while Strategic leadership focuses on long-term organisational sustainability and future preparedness (Northouse, 2022).

3. Leadership Competencies for Tomorrow's Government Leaders

Various studies have investigated the leadership competencies required for future government leaders (Brown et al., 2005; Fernandes et al., 2025; Asiri, 2026). Leaders play a crucial role in organisational success, and there is a need for competent and effective leaders now more than ever to face the threats and challenges of the modern environment (Fernandes et al., 2025). The competencies required of government leaders have expanded beyond traditional managerial and administrative skills. As public organisations operate in increasingly complex and changing environments, future leaders require a diverse set of competencies, including strategic thinking, adaptability, emotional intelligence, innovation, collaboration, ethical judgement, and change management (OECD, 2017). These competencies enable government leaders to respond effectively to emerging challenges, ensuring accountability and delivering public value. Recent studies (Adie, 2024) emphasize leadership competencies related to digital governance, artificial intelligence, evidence-based decision-making, stakeholder engagement and continuous learning, which are becoming increasingly essential as government expand their use of digital technologies. Therefore, future leaders need to not only understand emerging technologies, but also to assess their opportunities and risks to ensure their responsible use within government organisations (Asiri, 2026). Furthermore, contemporary research highlights two competencies that are increasingly essential for future leaders: digital leadership and ethical leadership. Digital leadership has become a critical competency for future government leaders, encompassing the ability to integrate digital tools into organisational processes, guide digital transformation, and foster a culture of innovation and agility (Eaves et al., 2026). According to Asiri (2026), future leaders require strong digital literacy and AI competency in order to understand digital systems, interpret data analytics, manage digital risks and to ensure the responsible use of artificial intelligence in government operations. Together, these elements position digital leadership as a foundational competency for future government leaders, enabling them to manage technological complexity, foster innovation, and meet the evolving demands of modern public-sector transformation. Ethical leadership is also increasingly acknowledged as an essential competency for future government leaders (Jarbandhan, 2021). Ethical leadership is widely defined as the demonstration and promotion of appropriate, fair, and principled behaviour through a leader’s actions, relationships, interactions, communication, and decision-making processes (Brown et al., 2005). This competency requires leaders to act with justice, integrity, fairness, and consistency, ensuring that decisions are guided by clear moral principles rather than personal or organisational bias (Jarbandhan, 2021). Within the context of Dubai Government, ethical leadership represents a foundational future-leader competency, preparing leaders to navigate complex governance demands, build trust, uphold fairness in decision-making, and strengthen workplaces cultures and support long-term success. Collectively, ethical and digital leadership illustrate the evolving expectations placed on future leaders and highlight the need for leadership approaches that are both technically competent and morally grounded. Developing these competencies requires government organisations to adopt broader approaches to leadership development that extend beyond traditional classroom training. Experiential learning, cross-functional assignments, mentoring and coaching, job mobility, and exposure to challenging responsibilities allow emerging leaders to strengthen their skills and broaden their experience. These development opportunities help prepare individuals for more

complex leadership responsibilities while supporting the creation of a sustainable pipeline of future government leaders (Adie, 2024).

4. Leadership Development as Strategic Human Capital Investment

Leadership development is identified as a critical element for an organisation's long-term success (Brungardt, 1996; Day et al., 2014; Asiri, 2026). According to Brungardt (1996), leadership development is defined as each type of growth or development stage in the life cycle that facilitates the expansion in knowledge and skill needed to optimize one's leadership potential and performance (p. 83). Leadership development aims to encourage the transfer of organisational culture and values to future leaders, ultimately resulting in all members collectively sharing in achieving the objectives of an organisation (Day et al., 2014). Organisations with poor leadership are less able to cope with changes in the environment (Adie, 2024). Leadership development represents a major global investment, with organisations globally spending more than $60 billion a year on leadership development programs to enhance human capital and future organisational capability (Training Industry Report, 2024; Bersin, 2020). This trend is visible in the United Arab Emirates, where government organisations collectively invest hundreds of millions of dirhams each year in leadership and executive development programs, particularly through the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (MBRSG, 2024). These programs typically train dozens of leaders per cohort, reflecting a broad governmental commitment to building institutional capability and preparing emerging and mid-level leaders for increasingly complex governance environments. The UAE's investment approach is grounded in the national belief that strong leadership capability is fundamental to enhancing government performance, resilience, and long-term competitiveness. Therefore, leadership development is viewed not merely as a training activity but as a strategic mechanism for cultivating future-ready leaders who can drive digital transformation, foster innovation, and uphold values-based governance. This perspective aligns with human capital theory, which emphasizes that continuous investment in leadership capability is crucial for protecting and improving organisational performance (McKinsey, 2023). Although many organisations are able to identify high-potential employees, research consistently demonstrates that individuals still need structured development pathways to become effective leaders, reinforcing the essential role of competency-based leadership systems (Asiri, 2026).

5. Leadership Development Initiatives in Dubai Government

The Dubai Government Human Resources Department (DGHR) serves as the centralized authority responsible for governing and developing human resources across all Dubai Government entities (DGHR, 2026). Its key responsibilities include developing HR policies, leading HR transformation, integrating human development initiatives, and providing centralized support to government HR departments (Government of Dubai, 2018). Beyond its regulatory role, DGHR prioritizes leadership development across Dubai Government. As the central HR authority, it ensures that government entities adopt structured, future-oriented leadership initiatives that prepare future leaders for complex governance environments (DGHR, 2026). DGHR's leadership development initiatives collectively aim to develop a sustainable leadership pipeline and reinforce institutional excellence across Dubai Government. The following section illustrates these initiatives and demonstrates their contribution to shaping a future-ready government workforce.

5.1 Government Chief Talent Officer Program (G-CTO)

Dubai Government Human Resources Department (DGHR) has introduced several strategic initiatives aimed at building a future-ready workforce capable of leading Dubai's transformation agenda. The most significant of these is the Government Chief Talent Officer Program (G-CTO), which DGHR's executive leadership initiative designed to prepare government talent leaders for the future of work in an AI-enabled environment (DGHR, 2026). Delivered over eight months, the programme provides more than 150 hours of advanced executive learning, innovation workshops, applied projects, executive coaching, and an international learning journey. The programme's first cohort includes 30 participants from 21 government entities, reflecting Dubai's commitment to developing leaders capable of driving workforce transformation across the public sector. The programme enhances participants' strategic thinking, data-driven decision-making, and their capability to design future-focused talent systems built around skills, data, and the responsible use of AI. The G-CTO initiative also supports the Dubai Economic Agenda D33 by positioning HR departments as strategic partners in decision-making and institutional excellence. The project seeks to enhance the capabilities of HR departments across government entities, advance approaches to human capital development, and reinforce Dubai's position as one of the world's most future-ready governments (DGHR, 2026).

5.2 HR Departments Empowerment Project

The HR Departments Empowerment Project is a strategic initiative launched by the Dubai Government Human Resources Department (DGHR) to elevate HR functions from traditional administrative roles to strategic leadership partners within government entities (Government of Dubai Media Office, 2024). The main objective of the initiative is to enhance institutional excellence by improving HR governance maturity, strengthening human capital capability and equipping HR departments with the competencies needed to support Dubai's transformation agenda under D33 (Dubai Economic Agenda D33, 2023). This initiative reinforces the role of HR in shaping future government priorities by promoting proactive workforce planning and building a sustainable pipeline of future leaders.

5.3 Chief Financial Officers (CFO) Program

The Chief Financial Officers (CFO) Programme is a strategic leadership-development initiative launched by the Dubai Government Human Resources Department in collaboration with Emirates NBD and ESCP Business School (DGHR, 2026). The programme is designed to prepare thirty high-potential Emirati leaders for advanced financial leadership roles through a five-month course that integrates interactive training, financial simulations, mentoring, and executive dialogues with international experts. This structured approach plays a pivotal role in strengthening Dubai's pipeline of future financial leaders, by preparing participants with advanced analytical capabilities, strategic financial judgment and the leadership behaviour required to excel in senior government roles.

5.4 1 Million Prompts Initiative

Dubai's 1 Million Prompts Initiative is a large-scale generative AI upskilling programme designed to train one million individuals in prompt engineering and practical AI use (Digital Dubai, 2026). The initiative is led by the Dubai Centre for Artificial Intelligence and aligned with DGHR's future-ready talent agenda, which prepares government employees, students, and professionals with the skills required to use AI tools effectively in communication, decision-making, and service design. By expanding AI literacy across society, the initiative enhances Dubai's goal to build an AI-enabled workforce and accelerates digital transformation across government entities (DGHR, 2026). The initiatives also strengthen Dubai's pipeline of future-ready leaders by equipping them with the analytical skills, digital fluency, and AI-driven decision-making capabilities required to lead effectively in rapidly evolving government environments.

5.5 AI Workforce Transformation Programme (AI+)

The AI+ programme is a government-wide workforce transformation initiative led by Digital Dubai to train 50,000 Dubai government employees with practical artificial intelligence competencies (Digital Dubai, 2026). The programme is delivered in collaboration with the Dubai Government Human Resources Department and the Dubai Centre for Artificial Intelligence, under the umbrella of the Dubai Future Foundation, as part of its commitment to strengthen the future readiness of government talent and accelerate the adoption of artificial intelligence across government operations (Government of Dubai Media Office, 2026). The programme is designed to enable employees to apply advanced technologies effectively in the workplace, improving government efficiency, boosting productivity, and fostering a culture of continuous learning and institutional innovation aligned with Dubai's ambition to lead globally in technology and innovation. This approach also strengthens the development of future-ready leaders who can confidently leverage AI in strategic decision-making and drive innovation across government (Dubai Economic Agenda D33, 2023).

6. Key Challenges for Future Leaders in Dubai Government

Leadership in Dubai Government is evolving within a rapidly changing governance environment shaped by technological advancement, evolving societal expectations, and increasing complexity in public-sector service delivery (UAE Government, 2024). Recent UAE leadership research and government initiatives indicate several persistent challenges that future leaders must overcome to effectively support Dubai's transformation agenda (UAE Government, 2024). Developing the next generation of leaders is therefore viewed as a strategic national priority in the UAE, requiring leaders who can navigate digital transformation, drive innovation and uphold the values of effective leadership (Mathias, 2017).

6.1.1 Digital transformation and AI integration

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, organisations and leaders face increasing pressure to adopt and effectively utilize artificial intelligence (AI), which is steadily entering management, work, and organisational

systems (Tursunbayeva & Gal, 2024). AI-based applications are now supporting employees in daily tasks, analytical decision-making, and collaborative work processes. However, the successful adoption of AI is a complex process, and requires leaders to navigate a range of administrative, organisational, and human-centric factors to achieve effective adoption and meaningful impact. Future leaders in Dubai government must manage the accelerating adoption of digital technologies and artificial intelligence across government operations (UAE Digital Government Strategy, 2025). This challenge goes beyond adopting new tools, as it requires the ability to redesign government services, integrate digital platforms, and interpret complex data. Also, leaders need the capability to manage technological disruption, and anticipate emerging risks while maintaining high service quality and public trust (Tursunbayeva & Gal, 2024). Agrawal et al. (2021) argue that digital transformation often brings substantial changes to work process, roles, task and responsibilities. Consequently, effective change management approaches are crucial for addressing employee resistance and ensuring a smooth transition toward new digital practices (Agrawal et al., 2021). According to Asiri (2026), future leaders require strong digital literacy and AI competency in order to understand digital systems, interpret data analytics, manage digital risks and to ensure the responsible use of AI in government operations.

6.1.2 Talent identification gaps

Weak talent identification systems significantly hinder an organisation's ability to develop future leaders. When high-potential employees are not identified early, leadership pipelines become driven by tenure or seniority rather than capability or future readiness. Cappelli and Keller (2014) argue that strategic talent management is the process through which organisations anticipate and address their need for human capital. It involves ensuring that people with appropriate skills can be promoted into the right positions at the right time. Similarly, Collings and Mellahi (2009) emphasize that identifying key positions and building a pool of high-potential employees are essential for long-term organisational success. In the context of government organisations, strategic talent management extends beyond recruitment to include leadership development, continuous learning, succession planning, mentoring, coaching, and career progression. Without such integrated systems, organisations struggle to cultivate leaders equipped to support future transformation.

6.1.3 Lack of leadership succession planning

It is essential for organisations to establish a strong succession planning practice in order to maintain their growth and continuity in an ever-changing business environment (Ingale, 2024). A lack of structured succession planning remains a critical barrier to preparing future leaders. When organisations do not establish clear succession pipelines, leadership transitions become reactive rather than strategic, resulting in capability gaps when senior leaders retire, change roles, or leave the organisation. According to Kim & Lee (2024), a succession plan is a deliberate and systematic approach designed to ensure leadership continuity in key positions, developing and retaining future leaders. Studies (Kim & Lee, 2024; Ingale, 2024) shows that effective succession planning requires identifying critical leadership roles, assessing future talent needs, and developing high-potential employees through targeted learning, mentoring, and career pathways. Without these systems, organisations face difficulty determining emerging leaders who could be developed, and which competencies are required for future roles, ultimately weakening the leadership pipeline and limiting long-term organisational continuity. Ingale (2024) also argues that succession planning strengthens talent retention and competency development.

6.2 Leadership Resistance to Change

Leadership resistance to change remains a major challenge in preparing future leaders within the public sector. Sometimes leaders may resist engaging with leadership development programs, adopting new leadership models, or learning about emerging digital tools and AI-enabled workflows. This slows down the development of modern competencies and limits organisational adaptability. According to Fernandes et al. (2025), leaders may hold negative attitudes with regards to learning and development initiatives while also being less effective in guiding their followers. Oreg et al. (2018) argue that leaders can resist learning initiatives because of discomfort with new technologies, fear of losing control, or preference for familiar routines. Such resistance limits leaders' ability to demonstrate growth-oriented behaviours and weakens efforts to develop a future-ready leadership pipeline. In a government context, resistance is often amplified by rigid procedures and bureaucratic structures, making it difficult to embed new practices that support future-ready leadership (Fernandez & Rainey, 2017). This aligns with Elliott's (2020) findings that organisational structures, resistance to change, and resource constraints can significantly influence organisational development and change. In addition, Elliott (2009) states that overcoming resistance requires building change readiness through clear communication, and supportive mechanisms. The challenges identified in this paper emphasize the urgent need for a more coherent and

future-focused leadership development approach within Dubai Government organisations. Bureaucratic rigidity, rapid technological disruption, fragmented capability systems, and rising expectations for ethical governance collectively indicate that traditional leadership models are no longer sufficient. These pressures reinforce the need to adopt a unified competency framework that equips leaders with digital intelligence, strategic foresight, agile and innovative thinking, and collaborative governance skills. Together, these competencies provide a structured response to current leadership challenges and establish a strong foundation for long-term capability development and institutional resilience. Dubai Government organisations require capable and effective leaders now more than ever, to confront the complex threats and challenges of the modern world.

7. Conclusion

In spite of the robust international research interest in understanding how leadership competencies are evolving in response to global administrative and technological change, there is still limited work examining the specific competencies required for future leaders within Dubai Government organisations. The rapid transformation of government systems in Dubai, driven by technological advancement, evolving societal expectations, and growing complexity in public-sector service delivery requires a new generation of leaders equipped with advanced, future-focused competencies. By examining the emerging key challenges facing future leaders in Dubai Government and highlighting the need for a more coherent and future-ready leadership approach, this study emphasizes that preparing future leaders in Dubai Government organisations requires a deeper understanding of the behavioural, strategic, and digital capabilities needed to navigate in an increasingly complex governance environment. As Dubai Government continues to advance its innovation-driven public-sector agenda, strengthening the capability of future leaders will require more than technical expertise; future leaders will need to be able to anticipate emerging challenges, respond to uncertainty, and uphold strong standards of governance and public trust. These considerations reinforce the importance of investing in leadership development approaches that support long-term resilience and ensure that government organisations remain capable of delivering effective citizen-centred service delivery in a dynamic and evolving environment.

Ethics Declaration: The present research study relies solely on secondary sources and publicly available literature. As no human participants, personal data, or experimental interventions were involved, formal ethical approval was not required.

AI Declaration: Generative AI tools (ChatGPT) were used only in a limited manner to assist with paraphrasing and idea generation during the writing process. No AI tools were involved in producing the core analysis, arguments, or conclusions. The author takes full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and final content of the paper.

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