# LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES REQUIRED BY THE LEADER IN THE FUTURE OF THE ROMANIAN AIR FORCE

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*Abstract: The duty of each member of the air force is to do everything possible to improve and at the same time develop professionally so that, throughout the entire military career, he or she can evolve and occupy, successively, the full range of positions and specific functions, from the lowest, specific to the graduates of educational institutions to the highest level, and it is the duty of officers to plan this, being the heads of the service branch.*

*Keywords: leadership, experience, education, leadership competencies, leader professional development.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a first challenge encountered in the process of evaluating the performances obtained by the leaders of any organization, in order to establish the ways to be followed for their further development, is to determine, precisely, the roles, functions or activities performed by them to results in the success of the organization. The next challenge, in order to achieve this endeavor, is to design and build the program, to select the tools and to provide the necessary environment to support the leaders in fulfilling these functions.

The development of leaders, the increase in their performances is all the more important in the current context of volatility, ambiguity and uncertainty, created largely by the changes made both at the global level and within the military organization.

The discussions in this regard should be channeled to the practical side of this activity, and one of the questions we must ask ourselves is "*How can we develop leaders to ensure effective leadership?*".

## 2. IN SEARCH FOR A NEW SET OF LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

From the starting point, represented by the access to the military organization, with the graduation of the Air Force Academy "Henri Coandă" and obtaining the rank of second lieutenant, the development of the acquired competencies, in conjunction with the improvement of the necessary knowledge, is the obligatory way to reach the level of competence imposed by the top level of the military organization. But knowing the road is not enough. The way in which these objectives can be achieved must be considered and several aspects must be considered for this purpose.

One of these has to do with the desire for self-improvement of leaders, with the need to satisfy this, so-called, *thirst for knowledge*, achieved either through formal means or through informal or non-formal means.

If, from an informal point of view, the leaders will have to make use of everything they have learned and sedimented until then, from a formal point of view, the military organization has the obligation to facilitate the creation and the proper functioning of an institutional learning framework, in which officers, from the lowest to the highest rank, can be refined, in order to acquire the competencies necessary to successfully fulfill the roles assigned by the job description.

Knowing the starting point, represented by the accession in the military career, graduating the Air Force Academy courses and obtaining the rank of second lieutenant, but also the finality, occupying suitable functions for the positions at the top levels of the air forces, can help us more easily in the process, pencils of the ways to be followed, for a harmonious professional development, and in accordance with the occupational requirements foreseen to be satisfied.

Having outlined such a road, with clearly established stopping points, it is up to the educational institutions to determine what needs to happen within these *stops*, which are the contents that need to be transmitted but especially what are the methods to be used to maximize the effects imposed through graduate models.

Starting the process of drawing up the model of the graduate, by the categories of forces, has as triggering agent the change of some of the requirements of the beneficiaries, regarding certain behaviors that wish to be observed in their activity.

This is usually done in the annual meetings organized by the military educational institutions, attended by representatives of the military educational institutions, the category of forces and the main beneficiaries, the operational units, working groups whose main purpose is harmonization of the study programs, by agreeing on the contents taught and, if necessary, revising the graduate model.

As a rule, the proposals on the line of the graduate model are submitted by the representatives of the territory of the beneficiary units, because they are the ones who *feel the best pulse*, the need to train the subordinates.

Somewhat in contrast to the ones presented above, as representatives of the military educational institution, we wish to meet the needs of the operational institutions of the air forces and to propose, in this regard, some amendments, regarding the leadership competence described in the model of the graduate. These new amendments are closely linked to the identification of those competencies needed for the leader of the future air forces.

Following a previous study, entitled "*Characteristics that the military leader should possess in the light of the challenges of the future of the Romanian Air Force*" [1], the portrait of the leader of the future of the air forces was drawn. The image obtained was the result of the analysis and summation of the characteristics considered to be suitable by the young officers, fresh graduates of the Air Force Academy "Henry Coandă", and therefore without experience of leading the military structures [2].

The experience gained in the military career, from the point of view of the management, in conjunction with the education, which is achieved during it, are two of the pillars of successful leadership [3]. One way to benefit from them is to consult those who have acquired such qualities, and from the point of view of identifying leadership competencies, the commanders of the units and the large units within the service branch are most able to appreciate our proposals.

Thus, we thought it would be interesting to see if it is possible to identify, at the level of the air forces, a vision regarding what the leadership competencies needed for the leader in the future of this category of forces mean. The common vision, an essential element of leadership, must be shared, on the one hand, by the commanders of the military structures in the Romanian Air Force organization, as direct beneficiaries, and on the other, by the leadership of this service branch, as a deciding factor on the graduate model.

Most leadership application frameworks provide their own definitions of adopted leadership competencies and their components for a more in-depth understanding of these concepts. The simple definition of a competence, however, like the variety of definitions given to leadership, does nothing but present the same thing but with a new set of words. What is really important is how that competence manifests itself within the military organization. The more concrete and concise the description of the actions and behaviors associated with that competence, the more likely it is that this competence will be accepted, understood and, above all, demonstrated.

For the Romanian Air Force, a model of leadership development should be built around the one applied by the United States Air Forces, given the uniqueness conferred to this service branch by the mission entrusted [4]. Providing a roadmap, an orientation map of the leaders of the Romanian Air Force is a key element in achieving success in leadership within this military organization.

For this purpose, as specific objectives in the research project initiated, we set out, as desired, to identify the leadership competencies considered appropriate to be adopted according to the model to be followed by the leaders from the upper level of the Romanian Air Force, to identify the competencies of leadership considered inappropriate for including in the model, completing or revising the examples of behavior used to pencil the model, with the suggestions and recommendations made by the study participants and, as a finality, formulating a set of leadership competencies that could be used as a standard for graduate model development.

In order to validate the competencies, which we proposed to be adopted in the future, we considered that the most appropriate way is to intervene directly with the beneficiary, by consulting the decision elements in the operational units of the air forces.

The choice of subjects, for participating in this consultation, was given not only by the position and nature of the position held, but also by the specialized expertise held in the field of air forces. In addition to these considerations, perhaps the most important quality and the one that brought weight to the tilt of the balance for the selection of the interlocutors, was that of the vast experience in leadership, accumulated throughout the career within the military organization. The term of *extensive leadership experience* we consider that it can define the seniority in the military career of at least 20 years.

Thus, a total number of 75 leadership positions were targeted for interviewing, from group level to service branch ranks [5]. The only exception to this rule was made for the Air Force Training Center for Aviation, the Air Force Training Center for Surface- Based Air Defence, and the Air Force Training Center for Air Surveillance and Electronic Warfare, in terms of their status as institutions for military education, directly involved in the professional development process. As a percentage, the situation is highlighted in FIG. 1.
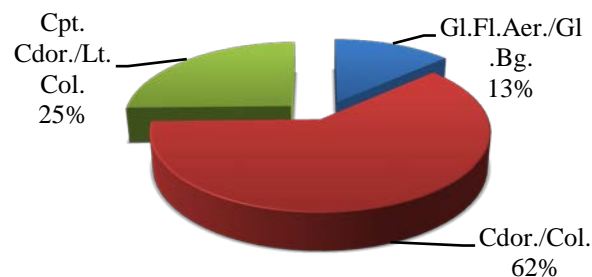


**FIG. 1** The degree of the functions of the survey

In the case of the initiated study, the hypothesis of departure was a simple one, and common at the same time, of a confirmatory type.

This was the initial point of the findings of previous research, regarding the development of leadership competencies at the level of the armed forces of the United States of America and the possibility of adopting a similar one, for use within the Romanian Air Force.

There can be two approaches in deducing working hypotheses: deduction from theory and direct experience. As the theoretical basis regarding the competencies needed for air force leaders is reduced, we have resorted to personal experiences in elaborating the following working hypotheses:

1. The degree of consensus achieved by each competence, separately, in order to be adopted and used within the standard, will have to be 100%;

2. The level of acceptance of the proposed competencies is a relevant one and will highlight the role of experience and education in recognizing the theoretical aspects regarding the development of leadership competencies and the need to apply them within the development of the leaders of the Romanian Air Force.

The investigative method used to carry out this study was that of the questionnaire. In the realized approach, a questionnaire was prepared, built on three levels, corresponding to the three levels of competences, with a total of 25 items.

The initiation of the procedure involved the addressing of a letter of intent that would clarify, quickly and succinctly, the necessity and usefulness of this intervention. The purpose of this letter was twofold: to attract attention but also to motivate them to get involved in this project.

The participants were asked to tick with "X" in the box corresponding to the answer of YES or NO for each of the 25 sub-competencies. Marking a YES or NO answer should highlight whether or not the respondents agree that that competence is deemed necessary for the leader at the top level of the air forces.

At the time of applying the questionnaire, its content was, from our point of view, an easy one to follow, precisely by the simplicity of the preparation and especially by the examples of behaviors, which come as a complement, from the need for a better understanding of the competencies sustained.

The final part of this questionnaire was dedicated to the free expression of the interlocutors, by the invitation to complete or to bring to the attention new aspects, which may not be touched by our formulations.

The questionnaire was delivered in two ways: directly, by applying it in print format, or indirectly, through the military information network INTRAMAN, in electronic format. The subjects of the questionnaire were interviewed, for consultation, between 01.03.2019 and 01.05.2019.

The data were collected by simply counting the answers with YES or NOT accounted for in the questionnaire, and were interpreted statistically, while the degree of consensus or number of repetitions should be followed in case of identifying the same answer to several respondents.

From the total number of 75 respondents concerned, we were able to collect answers from a number of 54. This was due, on the one hand, to the lack of the personnel who occupy the respective functions (15 cases), for different reasons (missions, holidays , secondments to courses etc.), or, on the other hand, due to the impossibility of making contact with the respective respondent (4 cases). There were also situations in which the respondents did not accept the participation, motivating the lack of time required to study the material (2 cases). Comments were recorded in 20% of cases, as suggested by point no. IV from the questionnaire.

In the analysis of the collected data, the aim was to identify those elements that would describe the degree of confirmation / rejection of the working hypotheses.

The choice by the respondents, within an item, of the answer NO, was one of free choice and was not subject to a subsequent request for explanatory explanations. It is worth mentioning that during the survey we did not provide detailed information regarding the previous study, which led to the formulation of these proposals. Table 1 shows the situation of the answers collected from the respondents.

Table 1 Level of acceptance of competencies

| | COMPETENCY | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ethical Leadership | 54 | 0 |
| 2 | Followership | 53 | 1 |
| 3 | Warrior Ethos | 53 | 1 |
| 4 | Develops Self | 54 | 0 |
| 5 | Speaking and Writing | 53 | 1 |
| 6 | Active Listening | 54 | 0 |
| 7 | Develops and Inspires Others | 54 | 0 |
| 8 | Takes Care of People | 54 | 0 |
| 9 | Diversity | 54 | 0 |
| 10 | Builds Teams and Coalitions | 53 | 1 |
| 11 | Negotiating | 49 | 5 |
| 12 | Operational and Strategic Art | 54 | 0 |
| 13 | Leverage Technology | 53 | 1 |
| 14 | Unit, Air Force, Joint, and Coalition Capabilities | 51 | 3 |
| 15 | Non-adversarial Crisis Response | 47 | 7 |
| 16 | Enterprise Structure and Relationships | 54 | 0 |
| 17 | Government Organization and Processes | 50 | 4 |
| 18 | Global, Regional, and Cultural Awareness | 54 | 0 |
| 19 | Strategic Communication | 43 | 11 |
| 20 | Resource Stewardship | 54 | 0 |
| 21 | Change Management | 53 | 1 |
| 22 | Continuous Improvement | 54 | 0 |
| 23 | Vision | 53 | 1 |
| 24 | Decision-making | 53 | 1 |
| 25 | Adaptability | 53 | 1 |

The degree of consensus achieved by each competence, separately, in order to be adopted and used within the standard, must be 100%. In our case it can be observed that a number of 11 competencies have reached the maximum acceptance, and therefore, according to the first working hypothesis, they have qualified for use in the development model. It can also be observed that there were a number of 9 competences that obtained a single negation, a competence with 3, one with 4, one with 5 and one with 11.

If in the case of those who have obtained a single negation we can consider them as isolated cases, individual opinions, which have not been validated by several choices, in the case represented by *Strategic Communication*, the level of rejection (11) is high, in the *Negotiate* (5), *Governmental Organizations* and *Political Processes* (4) and *Unit-level Capabilities, Air Force, Joint Forces and Coalition* (3) is a larger one, but which confirms the existence of a validation of several respondents, aspect of not accepted for choice within the model.

In this context, we considered that the choice of those competencies that registered a single negation, for use within the model, fall within the limitations imposed by the first working hypothesis, and we considered it as an acceptable margin of error.

Regarding the achievement of the degree of consensus, out of a total of 54 respondents, for 41 of them we registered its maximum value, and for the rest of 13 we recorded degrees, as values, in the margin of 72-92%. The consensus obtained is, in our opinion, a good thing in terms of the coherent line between the management factors of the operational units within this service branch and denotes a unity regarding the vision in what is the continuous development of leaders.

Experienced and educated leaders recognize what competencies need to be developed for the future. The collected answers confirm their knowledge of the theoretical aspects regarding the development of leadership competencies and their application in other military organizations and in this sense we could conclude that the second working hypothesis was also confirmed.

The analysis of the recorded comments reinforced our initial conviction regarding the theoretical knowledge of the *leadership phenomenon* by the commanders, and increase the confidence that these, in addition to the practical support of the subordinates development, can be very important factors in the educational process of improving the competencies within the leadership career courses in the Air Force Training School.

In this regard, we consider that the model that can be used as a standard for designing the professional development of air force leaders can be shaped around the 20 leadership competencies that have passed the test of opprobrium and can be presented in the form of three major categories:

1. Personal competency: Embodies Airman Culture (Ethical Leadership, Followership, Warrior Ethos, Develops Self), Communicating (Speaking and Writing, Active Listening);

2. Team competency: Leading People (Develops and Inspires Others, Takes Care of People, Diversity); Fostering Collaborative Relationships (Builds Teams and Coalitions);

3. Organizaţional competency: Employing Military Capabilities (Operational and Strategic Art, Leverage Technology), Enterprise Perspective (Enterprise Structure and Relationships, Global, Regional, and Cultural Awareness), Managing Organizations and Resources (Resource Stewardship, Change Management, Continuous Improvement), Strategic Thinking (Vision, Decision-making, Adaptability).

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

The most important considerations in developing and establishing leadership competencies should be addressed to how they will be used to influence the processes of leadership evaluation, selection, development and performance management. Even the best leadership application framework has no value unless it is used productively by the organization.

In this way, we consider that the framework model of leadership competencies that resulted from the application of the questionnaire is one that could be used as a standard for designing the professional development of air force leaders. Having thus formulated the development framework, in the future, a program for improving the leadership competencies for officers, starting from the bottom, the rank of first leutenant, and ending with the general, can be outlined.

The starting point of this route must be located when entering the military career, upon admission to the "Henry Coandă" Air Force Academy in Brasov, and will have to include indications regarding both the personal development and the monitoring methods of the progress.

Explaining the competencies in the development model will help leaders determine how they should adjust their behavior. At the same time, explaining the competencies will also help other members of the organization, those with responsibility for developing leaders, to understand, develop or strengthen these behaviors.

A possible image of these behaviors can be materialized by the following description of the leader competency within the graduate model of the Air Force Academy:

• Describes the procedures and fundamental values of the Air Force regarding ethical management;

• Explains the value of membership and the roles played by leader and follower within an organization. Adopts the values and standards of the organization, the individual responsibilities as a follower and the role of the individual within it;

• Maintains military bearing or professional etiquette at all times. Places the well-being of colleagues or subordinates before personal needs;

• Explains the importance of lifelong learning, self-assessment, and seeking or incorporating feedback;

• Communicates and formulates the message in a concise, succinct and clear manner to ensure effective communication;

• Listen, paying full attention to the speaker;

• Describe personal contributions and differentiate others' contributions to the effectiveness of the group. Demonstrates the responsibility to help and motivate others to improve their skills and increase their performance, through personal example;

• Explains and demonstrates the concept of teammate. Illustrates the binder that connects all air force members and reflects full security, trust and mutual support both during and outside service;

• Understands the importance of diversity, including mutual respect, thus contributing to the promotion and strengthening of a culture of air forces that values the inclusion of all personnel within the organization. It supports diversity within the Romanian Air Force;

• Define the mission, specify its expectations and direct the team;

• Describes the full spectrum of military operations identified in the concepts of military theory, air force doctrine, and national defense strategy;

• Acknowledges how technology enhances the operational capabilities of air forces, the ability to achieve interoperability with other joint, coalition, interdepartmental and non-governmental organizations;

• Identifies the structural elements of the air forces and the joint and interdepartmental relations; describes how its function and unit fit into the organization and how it relates to the external environment - organizations it supports or is supported by;

• Identifies the factors that influence the defense policy, internal and external; try to understand the cultural and linguistic norms and customs in the areas of interest and is able to recognize the differences between cultures at the regional level;

• Identifies, acquires and conserves the resources (financial, informational, technological, material, energy and human) necessary to accomplish the mission. Follow the deadlines and stages set for the execution of the mission. Uses the resources, as indicated or available;

• It describes the importance of proactively adopting, supporting and leading the process of continuous change and improvement of the air forces. Adopts and supports organizational changes in air forces;

• Identifies and seeks opportunities to improve existing processes and conditions;

• Accepts the value that the vision has in fulfilling the mission and choosing the right paths for the efficient management of the teams and the achievement of the objectives;

• Identifies, evaluates and assimilates information, from multiple sources, according to utility. Apply this information to influence actions and decisions;

• Accepts change and maintains efficiency when faced with changes in the work process, demands or new cultures encountered.

In the same direction, a great responsibility rests with the Air Force Application School "Aurel Vlaicu", in the sense of modifying or redesigning the graduate model in order to meet all the wishes expressed by the answers obtained from the beneficiaries of the educational institutions.

The training programs should be structured in such a way that the desired behaviors displayed by the trainee officers rise to the level expressed by the specified model. The responsibility to do this falls on the shoulders of the instructors in this way, by identifying those contents that will help them design those programs.

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