# PRINCIPLES-BASED LEADERSHIP AND ITS IMPACT ON MILITARY ORGANIZATION EFFECTIVENESS

**Cristian DRAGOMIR***, **Lucia BOROTA****

***"Henri Coandă" Air Force Academy, Braşov, Romania**

****Romanian Air Force, Bacau, Romania**

*This paper explores the significance of principles-based leadership in the military organization, emphasizing its strategic role and impact on organizational effectiveness. The study analyzes key components of military leadership, such as responsibility, influence, and vision, and underscores the importance of coherence between ethical values and operational decisions. Furthermore, the paper discusses the main factors that influence leadership efficiency and identifies major challenges that military leaders face in today's complex security environment. Additionally, the paper includes a practical guide for developing character and principled leadership, offering concrete strategies for military leaders. The findings highlight the relevance of a principled approach as a foundation for sustainable and effective leadership in the armed forces.*

***Key words:** leadership, efficiency, decision-making, military, principles, discipline.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in the military is more than a matter of hierarchy or formal authority, it is a complex process grounded in responsibility, ethical judgment, and strategic vision. In an environment characterized by unpredictability, discipline, and high operational demands, the presence of principled leadership becomes not just desirable, but essential. Leaders must operate under significant pressure, make decisions with far-reaching consequences, and maintain the cohesion and morale of their teams, often in high-stakes situations.

This paper explores the role of principles in shaping effective military leadership, examining both the foundational elements and the challenges leaders face in contemporary military settings. By analyzing the impact of values such as integrity, responsibility, and professionalism, the study aims to

highlight how principled leadership enhances decision-making, fosters trust, and contributes to institutional resilience.

In addition to the theoretical analysis, the paper includes a practical guide to developing character and ethical conduct, focusing on actionable steps that leaders can take to enhance their influence, adaptability, and moral authority. By integrating both conceptual and applied perspectives, the study aims to offer a comprehensive view of how principle-based leadership can serve as a pillar of operational success and institutional trust.

## 2. SHORT HISTORY ON DEFINING LEADERSHIP IN THE SPECIALIZED LITERATURE

Because the term leadership is so commonly used or misunderstood, it is important to begin by defining what it means. unfortunately, the use of the term leader has been popularly expanded to include almost anyone, whether in the upper management of an organization or in a politically occupied position [1].

There are many ways to complete the sentence: "*Leadership is . . .*". In fact, as Ralph M. Stogdill, one of the leading theorists of this phenomenon, pointed out in a research journal dedicated to leadership, there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are researchers

who have tried to characterize it [2]. It can be likened to defining the words democracy, love, or peace. Although each of us intuitively knows what we mean by such words, they can have distinct meanings for different people.

The large number of definitions issued for this field suggests that, despite decades of research conducted in this regard, finding a common definition for the term "leadership" has proven to be very difficult. However, each of the definitions provides certain elements of what the term leadership means and tends to describe certain qualities of the leader. For the sake of illustration, we will reproduce below some of the representative definitions of leadership and we will try to reach a consensus on what leadership entails, based on the comparison of key constitutive elements.

Stogdill, in the same research journal above mentioned, defines leadership as "*an interaction between members of a group. Leaders are agents of change, people whose actions affect other people more than their actions affect them. Leadership occurs when a group member changes the motivation or skills of other members of the group*".

Gibson, Ivancevich and Donnelly define leadership as the process by which an individual influences the behavior of others to achieve the proposed objectives

without exercising any form of coercive influence. According to them, leadership is "*an attempt to use non-coercive influence in motivating individuals to achieve the same objective*" [3].

A third definition that we present is that described in the Meriam-Webster Dictionary, in which leadership is defined as "*the position or orientation of a leader or the ability to lead the members of a group*" [4].

Another interesting definition of leaders and leadership can be found in a paper written by Jennifer M. George and Gareth R. Jones, where leadership is defined as "*the influence exerted by one member of a group or organization on other members in order to achieve its common objective*"[5].

Despite the multitude of ways in which leadership has been conceptualized, the following components can be identified as central elements of the phenomenon (Fig. 1.):
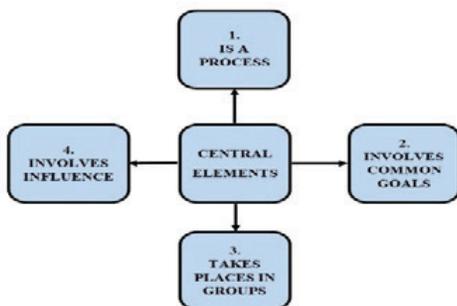


**Fig. 1.** Central elements of leadership

Based on the components illustrated in the figure above, the following definition of leadership could be formulated: "*Leadership is a process by which a single individual influences a group of people to achieve a common goal*" [6].

Defining leadership as a process means that it is not a trait or characteristic that resides in the leader, but rather can be seen as a transactional event that occurs between the leader and followers. The process implies that a leader's actions will affect others but that the leader, in turn, will be affected by followers.

Leadership involves focusing on shared goals. Leaders direct their energies toward individuals and, in doing so, try to accomplish something together. Shared means that leaders and followers have a mutual purpose.

Groups are the context in which leadership manifests itself. It involves influencing a group of individuals who have a common purpose, which can be expressed either through a small task group, a community group, or a large group that encompasses an entire organization.

According to Wright, leadership theories are important because they help to outline different points of view and delimit various ideas. Bergman is the one who states that the multitude of theories provides the foundation upon which specifications for leadership competencies can be

built. The main research studies refer to the characteristics of the leader, the situations in which leaders operate, the behaviors and skills that leaders use, the perceptions of followers and combinations of these, as well as other factors.

## 3. INCREASING EFICIENCY AND MANAGING CHALLENGES AS STRATEGIC GOALS IN MILITARY LEADERSHIP

Leadership based on principles implies the conscious adoption of a set of values and moral standards that consistently guide a leader's decisions and actions [7]. In the military environment, these principles take on a special significance, as they lie at the intersection of personal ethics, institutional discipline, and strategic imperatives. Exercising leadership in such a context requires more than formal authority, it demands moral credibility, strategic clarity, and personal balance.

Leaders guided by strong principle are not only defined by their hierarchical position, but by their ability to positively influence behaviors, foster initiative, and cultivate a climate of trust. Their legitimacy is reinforced by the alignment between what they say and what they do, especially in situations marked by uncertainty or adversity. These leaders become true models of conduct, offering stability and

moral direction to those under their command.

Military leadership is structured around a set of traits and competencies aimed at influencing, taking responsibility, and directing the team towards institutional objectives. Influence is based on trust and consistency, responsibility reflects the leader's ability to manage resources effectively, and vision provides unity and purpose. In all these dimensions, moral and professional principles represent the core anchor of military leadership.

From a strategic perspective, principles are not abstract ideals, but practical tools for navigating complexity and pressure. They provide the leaders with a framework for consistent and ethically grounded decision-making, reinforcing institutional cohesion and enhancing organizational performance.

Leadership, as previously presented, is commonly defined as the process of influencing, motivating, and guiding personnel toward mission accomplishment in ways that enhance efficiency and minimize risk [8]. At tactical and operational levels, leaders must develop personal qualities and operational competencies that allow them to effectively command troops [9]. These leaders are expected to act in accordance with a core set of values such as honor, integrity, loyalty, and courage, serving as behavioral

benchmarks and directly impact group cohesion and operational effectiveness.

On the other hand, strategic level leadership assumes that individuals have already proven themselves through all previous stages of command and now possess the advanced capabilities required to manage military institutions. These leaders are responsible not only for strategic vision and institutional performance, but also for identifying and mentoring future officers with the potential to serve in higher command positions.

Modern military leadership is increasingly confronted with a complex and dynamic environment, demanding leaders to demonstrate not only strategic vision, but also operational efficiency. The ability to achieve results with limited resources, under pressure and in uncertain contexts, becomes a decisive factor for success. Therefore, analyzing the variables that influence leadership effectiveness, along with identifying and addressing the challenges encountered by military leaders, is essential for strengthening institutional performance and resilience.

Leadership efficiency in a military context is closely linked to both the professional competence of leaders and their capacity to build trust and motivate subordinates [10]. The application of principled leadership, based on integrity, responsibility, and fairness, cultivates discipline and operational cohesion. In addition, efficiency is shaped by the leader's ability to adapt quickly, communicate clearly, and maintain a high level of decision-making quality under pressure.

Another important determinant is the alignment of personal leadership style with the organizational culture and the nature of the mission [11]. Leaders who can calibrate their actions in accordance with the situational demands, while remaining anchored in a solid value system, tend to perform better. Furthermore, emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills contribute significantly to team performance, particularly in stressful or conflictual scenarios.

Military leaders face multiple challenges, from the management of intercultural teams to the need to integrate new technologies and deal with hybrid threats. One major challenge is the growing complexity of military operations, often requiring joint action with other institutions or even multinational forces, which necessitates enhanced coordination skills and strategic diplomacy [12]. Moreover, generational differences and the changing expectations of young military personnel may cause friction within hierarchical structures, thus requiring a flexible and inclusive leadership approach. Leaders

must also navigate bureaucratic inertia, ethical dilemmas, and the psychological impact of long deployments, all while maintaining the operational effectiveness of their units [13].

## 4. DEVELOPING CHARACTER AND PRINCIPLES-BASED LEADERSHIP IN THE MILITARY ORGANIZATION: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

The path to principle-based leadership in the military is not accidental—it must be intentionally cultivated through sustained character development, education, and practical application.

Effective leadership begins with knowing oneself, therefore by embracing self-reflection and self-discipline, leaders are able to regularly reflect on their values, motivations, and behavior. Keeping a personal leadership journal or seeking honest feedback from peers and subordinates can enhance self-awareness. Practicing self-discipline in small, everyday decisions builds the foundation for ethical behavior in stressful environments.

Leading by example in a consistently way is much needed because principle-based leadership is credible only when leaders align their words with their actions. Every decision, gesture, and attitude sends a message. Maintaining consistency between stated values and operational conduct reinforces trust and inspires others to uphold the same standards. Military leadership is not limited to issuing orders, it also requires the ability to influence behavior and motivate personnel.

A military leader's influence is built on three key factors: formal authority, professional competence, and personal charisma [14]. While authority stems from the hierarchical position held, competence and charisma are developed and, in some cases, earned over time. These are essential for maintaining effective relationships with subordinates. Although respect can be enforced through rank and institutional status, the ideal is for it to be earned. True respect arises when leaders inspire their teams through personal example and the manner in which they face and manage challenges both personal and organizational. By demonstrating calm, fairness, and resilience, leaders become role models, capable of motivating and guiding their units not through fear, but through authentic leadership.

In an age of growing immorality, promoting ethical decision-making becomes essential. Military leaders must be trained not only to make fast decisions, but also to make the right ones under pressure. Case-based discussions, moral dilemma simulations, and open dialogues about ethical challenges should be embedded in leadership development

programs. Encouraging the question "*What is the right thing to do?*" must become part of the organizational culture.

Responsibility and accountability are core pillars of principled leadership in the military. In environments where decisions carry serious consequences, the ability to take ownership of actions, outcomes, and even failures is what distinguishes a leader from a mere functionary.

At the individual level, leaders must set the tone by assuming full responsibility for their decisions and for the performance of their teams. This includes recognizing mistakes, correcting course without shifting blame, and treating failure as an opportunity for growth.

At the organizational level, a culture of accountability is built by ensuring that expectations are clearly defined and communicated, that feedback is ongoing and constructive, and that ethical breaches or incompetence are addressed transparently and consistently. A responsible culture avoids both micromanagement and authoritarianism, it empowers personnel to act autonomously within well described parameters, while also reinforcing the understanding that freedom of action comes with a duty to justify one's choices.

Institutionally, the military must support accountability not only through disciplinary systems, but also by fostering psychological safety and ethical mentorship. Leaders should create an environment where subordinates feel safe to admit mistakes, ask questions, and take initiative without fear of disproportionate punishment or reputational harm. In such an environment, accountability is no longer synonymous with fear, but with professionalism and integrity.

I would also like to mention empathy and emotional intelligence which are often underestimated in military leadership, yet they are essential for building cohesion, trust, and resilience. In environments with a high level of pressure and stress, emotionally intelligent leaders are able to de-escalate tension, communicate effectively, and offer support without compromising discipline or standards. In order to developing emotional intelligence, it requires intentional effort through self-reflection, feedback, and training focused on interpersonal skills. Empathy does not mean weakness; it reflects the strength to listen actively, understand diverse perspectives, and make balanced decisions that consider both mission success and human impact. Leaders who demonstrate empathy foster loyalty and openness, making their teams more adaptable and committed. In modern military contexts, where complexity and human factors

are deeply intertwined, emotional intelligence is not optional, it is strategic.

Military leadership requires ongoing development grounded in three key pillars: formal education, practical training and experience, and self-directed learning (Fig. 2).
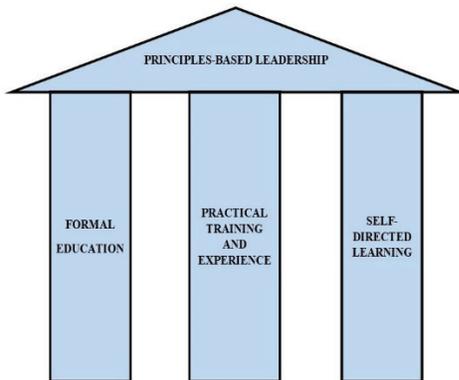


**Fig. 2.** The three pillars of principles-based leadership

These elements intertwine to create a leader who is not only tactically and strategically competent but also adaptable in fast-changing operational environments. In the Romanian Armed Forces, leadership development is structured through academic military education, foundational and advanced leadership courses. Beyond the classroom, participation in multinational exercises, NATO missions, and joint operations provides leaders with essential exposure to real-world challenges and collaborative decision-making.

Continuous learning enables leaders to think critically, respond quickly, and act with precision in diverse scenarios [15]. It also prepares them to operate in international environments, where success depends on cross-cultural communication, language proficiency, negotiation skills, and an understanding of allied military cultures. Modern leaders must be multidisciplinary, innovative, and agile. In a world of hybrid threats and multinational coalitions, leadership excellence depends on a lifelong commitment to personal and professional growth.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Military leadership based on solid principles serves as a strategic advantage in a context marked by operational complexity and organizational pressures. Leaders who internalize and apply values consistently not only increase the effectiveness of their commands but also strengthen institutional trust and credibility.

The challenges faced by military leadership today require a balanced approach that combines discipline, adaptability, and emotional intelligence, all anchored in a clear values-based system.

The practical guide included in this study outlines the core elements necessary for building principles-based leadership, such as accountability, example-based influence, emotional intelligence, and

a commitment to lifelong learning. These recommendations are not abstract ideals but actionable paths toward more coherent, respected, and resilient leadership.

By cultivating character as intentionally as competence, modern military institutions can prepare leaders who are equipped not just to command, but to inspire, protect, and evolve alongside the ever-changing demands of defense and security.

## REFERENCES

[1] D. R., Kolzow, *Leading from within: building organizational leadership capacity*, Warner Books, 2014, Available at https://www.iedconline.org/clientuploads/downloads/edrp/leading_from_within.pdf, accessed on 25 Feb.2025;

[2] R. M. Stogdill, *Handbook of leadership*, New York Free Press, 1974, Available at https://archive.org/details/stogdillshandboo0000stog/page/n3/mode/2up, accessed on 12 March.2025;

[3] J. L. Gibson, J. M. Ivancevich, J. Jr. H. Donnelly, R. Konopaske, *Organizations: Behavior, Structure, Processes*, Irwin McGraw-Hill, 14th ed., Boston, 2011, Available at https://dl.motamem.org/organizations_behavior_structure.pdf, accessed on 12 March.2025;

[4] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/leadership;

[5] J. M. George, G. Jones, *Understanding and Managing Organizational Behavior*, Ediţia 6, Upper Saddle River, NJ, Prentice Hall, 2012, Available at https://www.academia.edu/33133235/UNDERSTANDING_AND_MANAGING_ORGANIZATIONAL_BEHAVIOR_SHARED_BOOK_and_DOCUMENT_For_Educational_purposes_, accesed on 25 Feb.2025;

[6] P. G. Northouse *Leadership: Theory and Practice,* 4th ed., Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, 2007, Available at https://www.academia.edu/30456341/Book_Leadership_Theory_and_Practice, accesed on 13 Feb.2025;

[7] S.R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership*, New York, RosettaBooks LLC, Electronic edition, 2009 Available at https://rudyct.com/servant-l/Principle-Centered%20Leadership%20(Stephen%20R.%20Covey,%20Stephen%20Covey)2018.pdf, accesed on 25 Feb. 2025;

[8] C. Trocan, Scribd Inc., *Leadership-ul – preocupare constantă în armatele ţărilor membre NATO şi în Armata României,* 2015, Available at https://www.scribd.com/, accessed on 25 Feb. 2025;

[9] C. Mostoflei, P. Dutu, *Liderul militar în România,* Ed. Universităţii Naţionale de Apărare „Carol I",

București, 2007;

[10] P. Dutu, *Leadership și management in armată,* Ed. Universității Naționale de Apărare „Carol I", București, 2008;

[11] R. Roberts, *Twelve Principles of Modern Military Leadership,* NCO Journal, Army University Press, May 2018, Available at https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2018/May/12-Principles-Part1/, accessed on 10 March 2025;

[12] C. Zisu, A. Mihalcea, *Leadershipul și liderii în era digitală,* Agenția Media a Armatei, 2019, Available at https://presamil.ro/, accessed on 12 March 2025;

[13] Shivane, *Military Leadership Challenges: Navigating Complexities of 21st Century,* Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, 2023, Available at https://cenjows.in/, accessed on 11 March 2025;

[14] A. Rizescu, *Socializarea profesională și comunicarea în organizația militară,* Army Academy, 2006, Available at https://www.armyacademy.ro/reviste/1_2006_ro/a4.pdf, accessed on 8 March 2025;

[15] C. Buța, *Educarea liderilor – factor decisiv în conducerea eficientă a organizațiilor,* Gândirea militară românească, 2019, Available at https://gmr.mapn.ro/, accessed on 10 March 2025.