



*Research Article*

# Character-based Leadership Components at the Combat Battalion of the Czech Land Forces

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## Abstract

The military presents a specific environment for leadership study due to its extreme conditions. It remains unclear which character strengths are conducive to leadership efficacy in this context, especially as perceived by an officer's followers. The previous research has mainly used quantitative approach, while other methods were underused. This study deals with the question of what character traits of an officer are most valued by their subordinates. Participants ( $N = 40$ ) are from active-duty personnel of the 44<sup>th</sup> Light Motorized Battalion of the Land Forces of the Army of the Czech Republic. Data were gathered using three open-ended questions on an officer's character. It was found that soldiers most frequently report *Justice, Honesty, Decisiveness, Humanity, Dependability, Purposefulness, and Willingness* with regard to an officer's character strengths. These results imply traits that might compose the character-based leadership in military setting.

**Keywords:** character-based leadership, military officers, follower's perspective, open-ended questions.

## Introduction

Leadership is a tool that enables people to achieve common goals in a more efficient way than if they try to do so separately. In fact, some tasks are even impossible to fulfill individually. Rather than process of leading people by one person, it can be viewed as process of following one person

by others, i.e., followership. At the end of the day, it is mostly followers' behavior that finally determines whether leadership is efficient or not (Dixon, 2008).

When investigating the cornerstones of an efficient leadership, military environment is often utilized due to its naturally high demands on serving personnel. Hannah et

al. (2009) argue that in such an extreme context that puts people in the face of high physical, mental, or material risk, leadership becomes uniquely contextualized. Yet, many of the findings from this context are subsequently translated and utilized in civilian life, as demonstrated by Fiedler's (1955, 1966) contingency model of leadership, which has its origins in military studies. As changes in modern warfare require front-line soldiers to operate in small cohesive units and their leaders to make the right decisions in complex and often dilemmatic situations with higher levels of autonomy (Řehka, 2018), Michelson (2013) suggests that an officer's character, "who they are as a person", matters more than ever before. Under these conditions, the concept of character-based leadership, defined in this paper as "leadership process at which leader is followed due to their character traits as perceived by their followers", gains importance.

### Literature Review

Although character might be reasonably considered a critical aspect of leadership, determining which character traits are conducive to its efficacy is yet subject to research. Matthews et al. (2006) compared developing military leaders from United States Military Academy and Royal Norwegian Naval Academy. Both groups rated as five of their top seven strengths *Honesty, Kindness, Industriousness, Curiosity, and Hope*. Matthews (2011) also examined commander after their return from combat deployments. Traits that they marked as most contributing to success in combat were *Honesty, Persistence, Bravery, Capacity to love, and Teamwork*.

Gayton and Kehoe (2018) conducted a study of Australian Defense Force junior officers. Besides *Leadership*, their strongest personal strengths were *Integrity, Trustworthy, Good Judgment, and Team Worker*. Participants were also asked to rate five top strengths of their subordinates. Mean profiles of both groups significantly overlapped; significant differences were registered only for *Trustworthiness* (ranked

higher among junior officers' strengths) and *Wisdom* (ranked higher at their subordinates). Obe, Walker, and Thoma (2018) researched character traits of junior officers from twelve branches of service of the British Army. On average, highest scores were reported for *Fairness, Honesty, Perseverance, Teamwork, and Curiosity*.

In the recent study of Czech Army officers (Heřman et al., 2022), cadets and soldiers serving in reconnaissance units rated *Fairness, Honesty, Teamwork, Leadership, Perspective, Creativity, Love of Learning, and zest* highest in officers they perceive as excellent. The strong correlation between officers' profiles in all the groups ( $r_s = .82-.86$ ) suggest that perception of character-based leadership may remain stable throughout a soldier's career. As the mean relationship between a leader's and a follower's self-reported traits was negligible ( $r_s = .18$ ), it is reasonable to assume that the perception of a leader's character is not necessarily a projection of an individual's own traits or desires, and subordinates might tend to follow similar leaders regardless of their self-image. Multiple regression models aimed at proposing a combination of character traits that contribute to the officer's perceived efficacy most frequently involved *Fairness, Honesty, Kindness, and Social Intelligence*, while *Forgiveness* was negatively associated with these parameters.

Most of the existing research on military leaders' character traits, including all of the above-mentioned studies, is based on the classification of Values in Action Institute on Character (VIA). This taxonomy was created by Peterson and Seligman (2004) and comprises of 24 character strengths, described in *Character Strengths and Virtues Handbook* (CSV). Using this framework, there was conducted extensive research in Norwegian Army (Boe & Bang, n.d., 2017; Boe, Bang, & Nilsen, 2015a, 2015b) to identify traits that are specifically important for their officers. However, the authors also found that the *VIA Inventory of Strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) only weakly predicts character traits displayed under field conditions (Bang et al., 2015) and that leadership efficacy is better predicted by

others' rating of a leader's character compared to a self-report. Therefore, they extracted selected strengths from CSV and created new items to measure them from the perspective of an officer's subordinates (Bang et al., 2016). Their latest study (Bang et al., 2021) has shown that the mean score of "military" character traits outperforms general mental ability with regard to prediction of academic and military performance.

### **Research Question**

Although VIA model seems to insufficiently capture the specifics of military character-based leadership, other methodological approaches are rarely utilized. Molen (2010) collected data on the most frequently mentioned strengths of U.S. Army officers who have experience with deployment, using a qualitative survey. However, his content analysis finally focused on identifying character traits as defined by VIA. There are recently published papers on character strengths of a leader as reflected in military core values (Heřman, Ullrich, & Mikulka, 2021), insignias, and memoirs (Heřman, & Ullrich, in press), but qualitative methods are still generally underused in research on this topic, even though they have a great potential to deepen our understanding of it and temper the content and construct validity of its models.

The present study strives to expand knowledge on character-based leadership by using complementary qualitative methodology in order to investigate it without reducing to a specific theoretical framework. Drawing on a sample of the Czech Land Forces personnel, it is aimed to deal with the following question: What character traits of an officer are most valued by their subordinates?

### **Design and Methodology**

#### **Sample**

Participants ( $N = 40$ ) were recruited from active-duty personnel of the Army of the

Czech Republic. A sample of 40 soldiers was recruited from the 44<sup>th</sup> Light Motorized Battalion of the Army of the Czech Republic. This combat unit is designated for convoy protection, quick offensive operations, reconnaissance, and headquarters defense, being the only of its kind in the Czech Land Forces (Ministry of Defense, n.d.). Except one female, all of the participants were male (97.5%). By the time when the data collection took place, most of them were in a partner relationship (87.5%) and almost half of them had children (47.5%). Regarding the proportion of leaders and followers, the sample was not significantly unbalanced, with 23 participants (57.5%) having the function of squad, platoon, or company commander/deputy commander and 17 participants (42.5%) being assigned to a non-command function. 65.0% reported experience with being deployed abroad and 30.0% have served on airborne post in the past.

The mean age of participants was 29.4 years ( $SD = 4.0$ ), ranging from 21 to 37 years. No significant differences between the subgroups of participants with/without airborne experience and command/non-command function were registered. The number of years served in the army ranged from 0 to 17 years ( $M = 6.2$ ,  $SD = 3.7$ ).

### **Measures And Procedure**

The present study builds on qualitative design and methodology. For the data collection, the following three open-ended questions (further on also referred to as abbreviated in the brackets) were administered:

Question 1 (Q1): *In your opinion, what characterizes an officer that has a good character?*

Question 2 (Q2): *In your opinion, what are the best character traits that an officer can have?*

Question 3 (Q3): *What do you perceive as character traits of your officer?*

All of these questions focus on the same thing – valued character strengths of an

officer – while using different perspectives. Q1 operationalizes character-based leadership in the military as a set of characteristics that can be registered by an external observer. Q2 focuses directly on important character strengths of an officer as perceived by their subordinates. While Q2 is rather hypothetical, Q3 is behavioral-based, assessing participants' personal experience with a current leader. Phrase "in your opinion" in Q1 and Q2 is intended to eliminate avoidant answers such as "That is up to everyone's perception."

The data were collected face to face in pen-and-paper form in December 2021. The three questions were presented to participants in the beginning of a test battery, which further included other measures that are not evaluated in this paper. The number of three questions was chosen to adhere to the principle of triangulation, i.e., increasing the validity of qualitative research outcomes by using three or more methods or sources of data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007), while maintaining low time requirements.

### Analysis

The pen-and-paper data were first converted into digital form. Answers as "see question 1" were replaced with literal quotation of the items they referred to. However, these kinds of answers only occurred several times. Next, content and frequency analyses were performed. Content analysis was inspired by the *grounded theory* of Glaser and Strauss (1967). As the central category of "valued character traits of a leader" was given a priori, the coding was executed on the *open* and *axial* level, aiming to identify separate categories of particular traits. Expressions were clustered into categories based on their synonymity and authors' expert knowledge on the topic of character traits. By *comparing and contrasting*, the terms with similar but not identical meaning (e.g., "honesty" and "integrity") were differentiated in this step, too. Phrases describing certain traits without naming

them (e.g., "He treats everyone the same.") were handled as relevant strengths (e.g., *justice* in this case). On the other hand, vague mentions of unspecified strength-related behavior (e.g., "...according to how he decides in a stressful situation.") were not considered as traits.

To estimate the relative importance of identified traits, the categories were further ordered by their absolute frequencies in the data, obtained by the method of *simple enumeration*. If a participant described one strength using several synonyms or phrases (e.g., "honest" and "straightforward"), it was counted as one answer. Final designation of each category was determined based on the frequency and/or the aptness of selected expression, with *in vivo* coding often used.

### Ethics

All participants of the present study were of the age of the majority. Their participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any stage. They were informed of the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their data, which were secured by anonymizing the test batteries. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions, and it was explained how to get acquainted with the results once they are available. The study was approved by the unit's commanding officer. It was conducted under the supervision of representatives of the University of Defense, which is a guarantee of the research for the Chief of the General Staff of the Army of the Czech Republic.

### Results

All addressed participants confirmed their consent to participate in the research and submitted their data. As illustrated in Table 1, the mean length of responses generally tends to decrease throughout the questions. Most notable differences are present at soldiers who have served on airborne post in the past and express themselves more briefly compared to those without their experience.

**Table 1: Mean length of responses**

This table presents the mean number of words used by listed subgroups of the sample when answering Question 1, 2, and 3.

| Subgroup     | Question 1 | Question 2 | Question 3 |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Command      | 11.9       | 7.8        | 6.0        |
| Non-command  | 12.2       | 6.8        | 5.6        |
| Airborne     | 9.3        | 6.5        | 5.0        |
| Non-airborne | 13.1       | 7.8        | 6.1        |
| Deployed     | 12.3       | 7.7        | 5.8        |
| Undeployed   | 11.4       | 6.9        | 6.5        |

*Note.* Titles in the left column refer to the following subgroups of participants: Command = having a function of squad, platoon, or company commander/deputy commander. Non-command = assigned to a non-command function. Airborne = having served on airborne post in the past. Non-airborne = having not served on airborne post. Deployed = having experience with being deployed abroad. Undeployed = having no experience with being deployed abroad.

The following sections describe the results of content and frequency analysis of individual questions and then all of them merged together.

#### ***Signs of a good character in a leader***

Among the characteristics of an officer that has a good character as reported by participants, *Justice* ( $f = 16$ ) clearly dominates. Some participants refer to it as “fairness” or “impartiality” and describe it as treating everyone equally and not using double standards. Other frequently mentioned traits include *Honesty* ( $f = 7$ ; syn. straightforwardness, directness, truthfulness), *Decisiveness* ( $f = 6$ ), and *Dependability* ( $f = 5$ ; syn. responsibility). There also occurs a broader cluster of positivity, optimism, and sense of humor ( $f = 4$ ), valued at the officer.

Participants also described a few behavioral characteristics of a leader they perceive as having a good character. One of those is setting an example ( $f = 5$ ) by following what they require of their subordinates. They also appreciate standing up for their people ( $f = 4$ ) and taking care of them ( $f = 3$ ). Moreover, there were several mentions addressing officer’s social skills: “is a support to people,” “people come to them to get advice,” “contributes to building good relationships,” and “connects people.”

#### ***Best character traits of a leader***

In responses to Q2, highest frequencies of particular traits were registered. Besides *Justice* ( $f = 23$ ), *Decisiveness* ( $f = 12$ ), and *Honesty* ( $f = 9$ ), being the most significant ones again, *Purposefulness* ( $f = 7$ ) was notable, described as that a leader “cares about the task completion”. Next, there occurred two clusters of different attributes of the same trait – *Willingness* ( $f = 6$ ; incl. helpfulness, approachability, openheartedness) and *Humanity* ( $f = 6$ ; incl. empathy, perceptiveness, comprehension). In a given context, the latter can be defined as “being considerate of followers’ emotions and needs”.

Other valued characteristics of a leader were dominated by intelligence ( $f = 7$ ; incl. cleverness, sensibleness, judgment), standing up for their people ( $f = 5$ ), and trustworthiness ( $f = 5$ ).

#### ***Perceived character traits of participants’ own leaders***

Contrary to two previous questions, the most frequently perceived strength of participants’ own leaders is *Humanity* ( $f = 10$ ), followed by *Justice* ( $f = 9$ ) and *honesty* ( $f = 8$ ). In this case, *Decisiveness* ( $f = 5$ ) was

surpassed by the cluster of *Willingness* ( $f = 6$ ; incl. helpfulness, approachability, openheartedness). Besides *Dependability* ( $f = 5$ ) and *Purposefulness* ( $f = 4$ ), some participants also appreciate *industriousness* (syn. sense of duty;  $f = 4$ ) of their leaders.

Among the valued abilities of a leader, besides intelligence ( $f = 7$ ), participants value officers who can motivate others and are motivated themselves ( $f = 6$ ). It is worth mentioning that part of the sample further reported negatively perceived traits of their

leaders as well. However, these are not discussed, as the present study focuses on the positive form of character-based leadership.

### Summary

Table 2 displays the most frequently reported character traits of a leader across the whole dataset.

**Table 2: Most frequently reported character traits of a leader**

This table presents absolute frequencies ( $f$ ) of character traits as reported by participants in Question 1, 2, 3, and altogether.

| Character trait          | Question 1 | Question 2 | Question 3 | Total |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------|
| Justice                  | 16         | 23         | 9          | 48    |
| Honesty                  | 7          | 9          | 8          | 24    |
| Decisiveness             | 6          | 12         | 5          | 23    |
| Humanity <sup>a</sup>    | 3          | 6          | 10         | 19    |
| Dependability            | 5          | 5          | 5          | 15    |
| Purposefulness           | 3          | 7          | 4          | 14    |
| Willingness <sup>a</sup> | 2          | 6          | 6          | 14    |

*Note.* Most of the frequencies were computed as a sum of synonymous terms and descriptions of the traits, while some of the listed traits are rather clusters of their various attributes.

<sup>a</sup>Includes perceptiveness, comprehension, and empathy.

<sup>b</sup>Includes approachability, openheartedness, and helpfulness.

Besides the above-mentioned traits, other generally valued strengths were *Positivity* ( $f = 12$ ; incl. optimism, sense of humor) and *Courage* ( $f = 9$ ; syn. fearlessness). Summing up the previous sections, other characteristics of an officer that do not fall into the category of character traits, yet they were frequently reported by participants, include intelligence ( $f = 16$ ), standing up for the subordinates ( $f = 10$ ), setting an example ( $f = 8$ ), motivating ( $f = 8$ ) and being trustworthy ( $f = 7$ ). Part of the sample also appreciates when the leader possesses self-confidence ( $f = 6$ ; syn. self-assurance, self-reliance, assertiveness) and informal authority ( $f = 4$ ) but also considers different opinions and perspectives ( $f = 6$ ) and admits their own mistakes ( $f = 4$ ).

### Discussion

The final list of the most frequently mentioned character traits may be a specification of what “setting an example” and “being trustworthy” means in particular to a leader. Top leader’s strength identified in this study, *Justice*, may fulfill these principles in the sense of being fair to followers by keeping the same rules as them and treating all of them equally. While some authors handle the terms *Honesty* and *Integrity* as interchangeable, in the present study, they are distinguished. While *Honesty* is mostly bound to interaction with other people, in which sincerity, openness, straightforwardness, truthfulness, and others of its aspects can be shown, integrity is more related to being fair to oneself when “no one is watching”, and as such, it has

more in common with fairness, i.e., *Justice*. Although *Courage* was not as frequent as other top strengths, it constitutes a necessary prerequisite of *Decisiveness*, when understood as the ability to make quick and right decisions even under stressful conditions. In practice, clusters of *Humanity* and *Willingness* attributes may be related to each other, as individuals who are willing to help others are those who are usually also able to be aware of others' needs. Leaders who demonstrate these qualities will also probably be those who take care of their followers. Similarly, *Purposefulness* and *Dependability* may often occur together as both of these traits are outcome-focused.

*Decisiveness* ranked higher in the first two hypothetical questions on officer's character than in responses to strengths perceived at participants' own leader. Conversely, *Humanity* and *Willingness* ranked just the opposite way. The reason for that might be that the latter two are more associated with followers' positive emotions, while *Decisiveness* of a leader rather preserves them from experiencing negative consequences of critical situations. When it comes to reported officer's characteristics other than character traits, it is interesting that intelligence ranked first in both Q2 and Q3, while in Q1, it was mentioned marginally. The same phenomenon occurs for trustworthiness, which was notably emphasized in Q2 but not in the other two questions. One possible explanation is that these two characteristics are valuable, yet it takes followers longer time to recognize them at the leader.

Although not consistently appearing as significant in the previous research, *Justice* is by far the most frequently reported strength of an officer in the present study. With regard to *Honesty*, there is an estimated consistency between the previous findings and our results. *Humanity* and *Willingness* as understood in this paper resemble Peterson's and Seligman's *Social Intelligence* and *Kindness*, respectively. *Perseverance*, frequently figuring amongst leader's top strengths in other studies, might be partially associated with *Purposefulness*, as VIA (n.d.) relates it with

persistence toward goals. Conversely, *Decisiveness* and *Dependability* constitute suggested traits of a leader, which CSV (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) does not capture.

A trait that was repeatedly reported as one of the officers' top strengths but is almost completely missing in the present results is *Teamwork*. There are at least two important things to be considered when interpreting this discrepancy. First, even though the participants did not literally mention it, standing up for the subordinates might be considered as a demonstration of *Teamwork* by the officer. Second, it is possible that *Teamwork* constitutes such a foundational principle of the military that participants may not think of emphasizing in relation to leadership.

The present results display interesting similarities with the recent study of Czech Army officers' character strengths (Heřman et al., 2022). Pairing responses to questions used in the present study (in brackets) with regression models of perceiving an officer as having a good character (Q1), being successful (Q2), and being a leadership example (Q3) from the latter study, reveals remarkable overlaps. Regarding the signs of a leader that has a good character, *Justice/Fairness*, *Honesty*, and *Humor* are shared. As for the leader's excellence, *Justice/Fairness*, *Humanity/Social Intelligence*, *Willingness/Kindness*, and *Perseverance/Purposefulness* are common. With regard to the perception of leadership example, *Justice/Fairness*, *Honesty*, *Humanity/Social Intelligence*, and *Willingness/Kindness* are present in both studies. These findings support the idea of character-based leadership as a set of particular traits of a leader that emerge as important despite using different methodologies.

### ***Limitations and future directions***

The chosen research design naturally generates results that can serve as a basis for hypotheses but cannot be generalized. It also cannot prove the causal effect of identified variables on leadership. However,

considering its primarily exploratory focus, the latter fact does not decrease the value of obtained outcomes that can complement the findings of quantitative and experimental studies. Nevertheless, without further examination, it is possible to apply them only to a limited extent. In this context, uniqueness of the present sample also must be considered, as soldiers of 44<sup>th</sup> Light Motorized Battalion are not representative even of the Czech Army, not to mention other countries' armed forces, given the fact that nations differ at least in several basic dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

The data collection that took place at a single point of time cannot capture possible development of followers' perception of a leader's traits. In accordance with the current emphasis on item response theory (Lord, 1952), i.e., taking into account that items may function differently for different people, it is obvious that similar or even identical responses to open-ended questions might actually have a different meaning to individual participants as well. Moreover, the research of human memory has previously revealed plenty of cognitive biases related to recalling memories of the past (Schacter, 1999). Considering that mapping of important character traits of a leader in the present study is based on participants' mental representations of leaders, it is reasonable to assume that they will more or less deviate from reality, while this distortion can never be fully removed. It is also true that some of the character traits of a leader might be generally less available to extrospection. However, it is questionable how important they are for leadership practice, considering the problematics of their measurement and objective evaluation of their development.

Future research on this topic first requires replications across different contexts. If the same questions are used, it can be specified in formulation of Q2 that the participant is asked to state positive traits of their immediate superior, which was not completely clear in the present study. Furthermore, it is desirable to quantify the relative importance of particular strengths and their relation to leadership efficacy. For

internal comparison of character-based leadership components, a forced-choice method with even-numbered response scale can be utilized. As a criterion of leadership efficacy, the annual evaluation score of a leader and their team can be applied. In case of a quantitative study, desirability should be always measured, as it frequently causes bias in military studies when not controlled.

## Conclusion

The present study achieved its aim. Character traits of a leader that are most frequently reported by their followers among selected Czech Army personnel are *Justice, Honesty, Decisiveness, Humanity, Dependability, Purposefulness, and Willingness*. Although it was not a primary focus of the study, several other characteristics of effective leaders that do not fall into the category of character traits were identified, most notably intelligence, standing up for the subordinates, setting an example, motivating, and trustworthiness.

These findings contribute to the existing research by suggesting specific components of character-based leadership generated by using more inclusive methodological approach. Considering that many of the findings from military studies are subsequently translated to other areas of society, the results provide valuable insight into what effective leadership may be associated with in general. With regard to the selection and development of leaders, organizations may profoundly benefit from deeper knowledge of character traits that are important for their followers, whose behavior finally determines the efficacy of a leadership process in any context. For future research on this topic, replications across different contexts can be recommended.

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