

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MILITARY LEADER OF THE FUTURE OF THE ROMANIAN AIR FORCE

Cristian DRAGOMIR\*, Marian - Valentin BÎNĂ\*\*

\* “Aurel Vlaicu” Air Force Training School, Boboc, Romania  
(dragomir.cristian.safa@gmail.com)

\*\* Protection and Guard Service, Bucharest, Romania (binavali@yahoo.com)

DOI: 10.19062/1842-9238.2019.17.1.1

**Abstract:** *The next generation of air force leaders will need to be aware of the possible career paths to follow in order to build a successful career. For this, they will have to know where to go and which path to take to that goal, given that the starting point is already known. A challenge is that the two variables will have to be identified at the very beginning of an officer's career, as an effect of the fact that the two are strongly interrelated.*

**Keywords:** *leadership, leader development, the conflictual environment of the future, abilities, character traits, values, leader profile.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, military and intelligence organizations have demonstrated that setting long-term strategic goals can be a powerful, deliberate way to lead themselves smartly into the future with finite resources [1]. The phenomenon of civil disturbances, humanitarian crises, the impact of instant communication technologies and network-based warfare methods will combine to create unpredictable and volatile circumstances. Information decentralization undercuts traditional power structures, enabling non-state actors to play a disproportionate role in areas where states formerly held absolute sovereignty [2]. Leaders of air forces using "shelf" solutions will have difficulty in succeeding in this challenging action environment.

In order to create a favorable framework for getting future leaders able to cope with the challenges of the new operational environment by fulfilling the tasks with the most judicious use of resources, increasingly rare, it takes a few adjustments to the process current development of leaders. The air forces must make these changes, now or in the shortest possible time, so that current low-level officers have the chance to develop the necessary features of tomorrow's top leaders.

### 2. THE CONFLICTUAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE FUTURE

Leadership is the key ingredient for successful military efforts, and air force leaders at all levels need to prepare themselves to meet current and future requirements. The security environment is changing at an accelerated pace, increasing the extent and depth of the challenges for which they need to be trained.

Reality confirms that the world has its main features complexity and fluidity, which is why the need for adaptive responses derives. Current and emerging changes in the operational categories of the force categories suggest the need for new prototypes of leadership as well as different, if not more sophisticated, methods for the development of military leaders [4].

Recent technological developments have led to an exponential change in the nature of the war. The amount and availability of data has increased dramatically while communication technologies provide real-time information to decision-makers.

The multitude of changes over the past two decades has considerably expanded the role of the leader, which has made the performance indicators of a complex leadership more numerous. Leaders at all levels are currently facing challenges and pressures that are not specifically addressed in training programs. Consequently, studies on the operational environment (for example, the "*US Air Force Strategy 2020-2030*" conducted under the auspices of the Air Force Research Institute - AFRI) predict that officers will require skill sets that include the ability to drive efficient subunits, problem solving, increased adaptability and wider decision-making autonomy.

The first step in determining these sets of skills needed by strategic level leaders to ensure success in a chaotic and unpredictable operating environment is to recognize the challenges faced by future air force leaders.

The challenges faced by fighters in the 21st century will make the primacy of initiative and flexibility in the decision-making process for lower-level officers. The categories of forces put a great emphasis on the subunits that will have to achieve the success of the mission with increased autonomy and relying to a great extent on individual creativity.

To face this challenge, today's air forces must focus on the deliberate development of their tomorrow's leaders. Developing a group of leaders able to adapt to changing conditions and emerging challenges provide flexibility as the response to enemies, situations and unconventional missions.

In a future where volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) will remain prominent features of the strategic operational environment, the leaders of tomorrow's air forces will face challenges that will certainly be tested for the best in this category of forces.

Demographic, economic, ecological (climate change) and technological crises suggest that the future strategic operational environment will prove even more chaotic than today, more unstable than experienced by previous generations. For future air force leaders to succeed, they need to develop a personalized strategic decision making process that can incorporate the rapid, unpredictable (volatility) changes, unknown circumstances (uncertainty), complicated decision makers (complexity), ambiguity of the situation and potential outcomes (ambiguity). Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous operational environment will persist and will most likely continue to grow in size over the next few decades.

### **3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEADER IN THE FUTURE OF THE AIR FORCE**

The challenge for the air forces in terms of leadership development will be to determine precisely what are the attributes and characteristics they will need to be able to face the conflicting environment of the future.

Through a memorandum addressed to AFRI, US Chief of Staff, General Norton A. Schwartz, called for a study and identification of viable solutions to improve several areas of interest within this category of forces. One of these areas of interest was the development process of the leaders of the Air Force. The team of reunited researchers analyzed and categorized the characteristics identified by high-ranking leaders through the interview method and consultation with literature, and assessed which of these would be appropriate to help the air force leader face the challenges of the future.

AFRI researchers, as part of their work, have used a study previously conducted by RAND Corporation. The RAND team interviewed a group of leaders actively engaged in mission-level missions with extensive experience in asymmetric conflicts and hybrid warfare to determine what are the essential characteristics for pursuing strategic leadership in such an environment operational. The main attributes and characteristics identified included humor, mentoring, communication skills, cognitive abilities, the ability to harmonize actions at all three levels of the armed conflict, the level of integration into society, relationship mode, intercultural and linguistic capabilities, and deep knowledge of organizational theory.

AFRI has changed the categories used to describe the characteristics of the future leaders as follows: cognitive (Visionary thinker and Polymath), interpersonal (Team-Building and Networking, Politically Savvy, Culturally Astute, Skilled Negotiator and Facilitator, Emotionally Resilient) and personal style (Ethically Grounded, Strategic Communicator Mentor and Resource Steward).

Thus, a portrait of the leader can be described as one who thinks in a critical, strategic and creative way to the same extent, in order to be able to respond to current and future challenges to the same extent. The psychological profile of each leader must include the desire for lifelong learning and continuous self-refinement. Through the profession of officer, implicitly a commitment must be made to what life means to study strategy, politics, economics and history.

The leader of the future is the one who proves a good understanding of the political phenomenon. It will need to be able to work successfully in a variety of different organizations or management structures, including by accepting facilitator and negotiator roles. It also has developed those working skills with partners from other services, non-governmental organizations or other countries. In view of the fact that leaders in the position of regional commanders are often in the situation that, in order to achieve the mission's success, to work with people over whom they have no direct authority, the ability to solve problems through persuasion and influence is the key element in obtaining a complete set of negotiation skills.

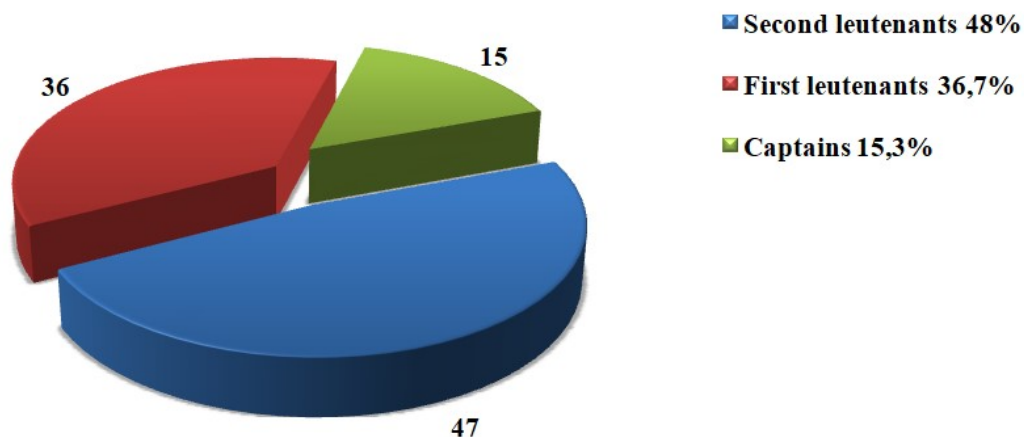
Adaptive capacity will be the result of the challenges and rhythms at which events occur, the enormous amount of data that sometimes turns out to be contradictory and their rapid dynamics. Leaders of the future also have a solid ethic, on the basis of which altruism and modesty become very visible. They devote a whole life to reading, listening, practicing and providing information, being able to use their specific interrelation skills to advise subordinates and colleagues and to develop effective working teams.

Having an outline of a strategic leader image, made by combining the characteristics provided by the experienced leaders we have seen, it was interesting to find out what the image of the leader of the future of the Romanian Air Force is, from the point of view of the young officers of this category of forces, participants in career courses at the Air Force Training School "Aurel Vlaicu".

Thus, we proceeded from a logical premise, namely that the leadership competence of the young officer, a fresh graduate of the "Henry Coandă" Air Force Academy, is different from that of leaders at the top of the military organization. This difference is highlighted by the level of perfection that a leader accomplishes through three pillars, on which personal leadership skills can improve and become successful: instruction, experience and education. In this way, as a general objective, we intend to find out whether there is a shared vision of what it means to be at the level of the lower-level group of students participating in the career courses. The common vision, an essential element of leadership, must be shared, on the one hand, with this category of forces, and on the other hand by the young officers at the beginning of the military career.

For this, as specific objectives in our approach, we proposed identifying the characteristics that an air force leader should display in the context of the challenges created by the evolution of this category of forces, from the perspective of low-level officers present in as a student at the Air Force Application School, identifying the factors that pose challenges for young air force leaders and comparing the results obtained with the elements described in the theoretical framework presented earlier.

The numerical breakdown by grade of trainee officers was as follows: 47 second lieutenants - the entire "Henry Coandă" Air Force Academy 2017, 36 first lieutenants and 15 captains from either the Air Force Staff, or from various combat units in territory. Graphically, the batch structure can be presented as follows:



**FIG.1** Graphic Representation of the Structure of the Responsible Lot

In view of the experience gained in the military career, the captains present at the course fall within a range of 8-10 years, the first lieutenants 3-5 years old and the second lieutenants with an almost nonexistent experience.

The investigative method we used was the one based on the questionnaire. For this purpose, we used a questionnaire built around two common questions, regardless of the specialty or course level. Open-ended questions were formulated to provide the opportunity for respondents to be able, on the basis of experience, where appropriate, of training and their own preparation, to be able to formulate opinions, analyze and issue points of view, supported by arguments, on the issues addressed.

The questionnaire was directly applied to trainee officers, in an organized form, at the completion of the *Leadership* discipline, specific to each course. The application of this instrument reflected the willingness of the young military cadres to communicate, as well as the quality and quantity of information provided (some exhibiting complex problems, others having a higher affective burden).

The data were collected by identifying, within the respondents' answers, the elements included in the disciplines studied and statistically interpreted, and the degree of consensus or number of repetitions in case of identifying the same characteristic in several subjects.

The questions that were analyzed for this study were as follows:

1. *What do you think are the characteristics that the leader of the Romanian Air Force should possess?*
2. *What do you think are the challenges that await the leader of the Romanian Air Force, in terms of the uncertainty, complexity and vulnerability of the conflicting environment?*

The characteristics extracted from the consultation of the three groups led to a total of 105 elements, consisting of abilities, character traits and values which, in the respondents' sense, can be described as descriptive parts of the air force leader portrait.

Thus, all three groups used features with a similar degree of consensus that led to the creation of similar leader portraits. We can state in this regard that the leading portrait, resulting from the interpretation of the elements described by the whole respondent group, represents a small variation of the three portraits taken separately. The elements that make these differences possible are: courage, creativity, competence, patriotism, intelligence, ambition, or emotional intelligence. From the point of view of the experience gained throughout the career and its possible influence on the portrayal of the air force leader, we did not find any significant issues.

The resulting portraits were the result of the combination of a large number of features, with a relatively low consensus rate compared to the one predicted. Therefore, from the comparison of the graphs of the obtained characteristics, we can see that the share of characteristics with a high consensus level is small, being in the margin of maximum 45 percent. Out of the total of 105 recognized characteristics, 23 of them were identified as common to the three groups of respondents, with a consensus rate of up to 41 percent.

The portrayal of the summaries highlights the military leader as a military, empathic specialist who proves adaptability and courage; is a good communicator in expressing his / her own vision, innovative, offering original methods of solving situations, and personal example for highlighting the integrity that characterizes it; devoted, intelligent, inspire confidence and respect through proven effectiveness in decision-making.

From the point of view of the basic values of the Romanian Air Force that should be found in every military leader within this organization, only two of them have been identified at the level of the whole group: integrity, with a consensus of 26 percent and devotion, at a level of 12 percent. This is due to the lack, in the economy of characteristics collected at the level of the state level, of the third value - tenacity.

As in the case of the characteristics relevant to an overall picture of the challenges associated with the conflict environment of the future, in the sense of the whole group of responding officers, we considered to be only those found at least once in all groups as separate entities. A total of 39 aspects related to the possible challenges of leaders in the future of the air force were collected from the questionnaires applied to the learners as a whole group. These were extracted from respondents' answers and related to those presented in the theoretical framework presented earlier.

The analysis of the results revealed that separately, in groups, but also as a whole, the main concern of the young officers regarding the future is to work with people, namely to motivate them. The other concerns of the subjects are related to technological progress, namely the rapidity with which technology is developing and is being used by all the actors worldwide.

Resources are another challenge, especially human ones, due to the lack of staff and specialists. At the same time, financial constraints and procurement policies are reflected in worrying about the outdated infrastructure situation and not exactly clear prospects for change.

An important aspect is one's own, in terms of the need for continuous improvement, fear being related to the inability, in time, to achieve this desideratum. The quality of the subordinates, namely their level of training and preparation, is another concern for the leaders of the future. On the whole, the image of the challenges ahead of the leader in the future of the air forces is similar.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The leadership of military actions remains, in our opinion, the most challenging element of military leadership, and that is why, from this point of view, we are able to strengthen the assertion that leadership is defined as "the art of leading".

Identifying a common leadership portrait highlights the fact that the views of young officers are similar and the training received within the academy has been channeled in the same direction for everyone, regardless of the military specialty. The image of the leader is found in the general framework of skills needed to be a good leader.

However, indecisiveness in the choice of air force specific values denotes a total separation of the group of personal values from that of organizational values, which is undesirable, especially among young officers at the beginning of the military career. For this purpose, it is necessary to intervene in the way the character training program is implemented and the methods used in it are improved, in order to achieve the goal of leadership character, with a starting point in the military academy.

One of the core competencies of leaders is that of working with people. Fear about the inability to work with subordinates and motivate them is justified by the lack of experience, but not acceptable, and for this reason it is desirable to focus more on the practical part of the training, by enhancing those experiences that will contribute to substantiating this competence.

The image of resources, procurement policies, inappropriate future infrastructure is the result of an inappropriate campaign, in the face of the non-involvement of these aspects in the process of building the characteristic foundation, and must be changed into one that has the ultimate goal of increasing self-confidence.

There is currently no concrete formula specifying the way a successful leader can form. Defining a profile for such a leader proves to be a great challenge in terms of selecting those characteristics or cognitive, aptitude and behavioral features that are considered to be indispensable for ensuring success in leadership.

However, the organizational specificity of the Romanian Air Forces, through the missions entrusted to them, can provide the decision-makers with the desired elements, traits and qualities necessary to form a vision of what is to be the leader in the future of this category of forces.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] <https://www.defenseone.com/media/strategic-planning-and-execution-todays-accelerating-pace-change.pdf>;
- [2] David T. Miller, *Defense 2045 - Assessing the Future Security Environment and Implications for Defense Policymakers*, November 2016, p 2, [https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/151106\\_Miller\\_Defense2045\\_Web.pdf](https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/151106_Miller_Defense2045_Web.pdf)
- [3] [https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/151106\\_Miller\\_Defense2045\\_Web.pdf](https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/151106_Miller_Defense2045_Web.pdf);
- [4] Stephen Zaccaro, *Training and Development of Key Leader Skills That Contribute to Effective Leadership in Complex Military Environments*, Washington, DC: George Mason University, 2003, p 1;
- [4] <http://blogs.hbr.org/frontline-leadership/2010/11/leading-in-a-vuca-environment.html>;
- [5] National Defense University (NDU), *Strategic Leadership and Decision Making*, Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1998, Cap. 2;
- [6] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAND\\_Corporation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAND_Corporation);
- [7] Col. Dr. Karen Currie, Col. John Conway, Col. Scott Johnson, Lt. Col. Dr. Brian Landry, Dr. Adam Lowther, *Air Force Leadership Study - The Need for Deliberate Development*, Research Paper 2012-1, Air University Press, Air Force, Research Institute, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama 36112-6026, p.10.