

Leadership Competencies: Are we all saying the same thing?

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In the course of developing an Army leadership competency framework focused on the Future Force (up to year 2025), the authors examined several existing U.S. military and civilian leadership competency frameworks. We attempt to link the core constructs across the frameworks and identify similarities and differences in terms of their content and structures. We conclude that leadership competency modeling is an inexact science and that many frameworks present competencies that mix functions and characteristics, have structural inconsistencies, and may be confusing to potential end users. Recommendations are provided to improve the methods and outcomes of leadership modeling for the future.

Table 1 represents many of the traits and characteristics commonly found in leadership competency frameworks. At first glance it may appear to be a comprehensive framework for leaders. It includes values (principled, integrity), cognitive skills (inquiring, thinking), interpersonal skills (caring, enthusiastic, communicating), diversity components (tolerance, respect, empathetic), and change orientation (open-minded, risk taking).

Table 1
Sample Leadership Competencies

Inquiring	Thinking	Communicating	Risk Taking	Principled
Caring	Open-Minded	Well Balanced	Reflective	Committed
Confident	Cooperative	Creative	Curious	Empathetic
Enthusiastic	Independent	Integrity	Respect	Tolerance

Surprisingly, this is not an established leadership framework but rather a list taken from a 4th grade student profile guide. While a simplistic example, it illustrates both the universality of the competency concept and the potential confusion when associating a simple list of traits and processes with leadership.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

This, of course, is the \$64,000 question (maybe it's now the Who Wants to be a Millionaire question?). As the Armed Forces face a rapidly evolving and complex future threat environment, it is crucial that leadership in these organizations be well defined, described and inculcated. Part of this challenge includes establishing a common language for discussing leadership concepts and ensuring consistent assessment, development, reinforcement, and feedback processes are in place for maintaining leadership across our forces.

So, again, what is leadership? Apparently, decades of research, dozens of theories, and countless dollars haven't completely answered this question. If it had, then we wouldn't have vastly different visions of leadership and leadership competency across similar organizations. Or would we?

An acceptable definition of leadership might be 'influencing, motivating, and inspiring others through direct and indirect means to accomplish organizational objectives.' Defining leadership is an important first step toward establishing how it should be conducted within an organization. However, a simple definition is insufficient for describing the nature, boundaries, contexts, and desirable manifestations of leadership. Enter the evolution of competencies.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF COMPETENCIES?

Behavioral scientists and organizational development professionals seek to improve individual and group work processes through the application of systematic procedures and research-based principles. Job analysis techniques, and to a lesser extent competency modeling, have long been used to establish the requirements of jobs and positions throughout organizations and provided input to selection, training, and management practices. Knowledges, skills, abilities, other characteristics (KSAOs), tasks and functions, and more recently competencies have become the building blocks of leadership selection and development processes. Competencies have become a more prevalent method of identifying the requirements of supervisory, managerial, and leadership positions, rather than job or task analysis techniques, because they provide a more general description of responsibilities associated across these positions (Briscoe and Hall, 1999).

Employees want information about what they are required to do (or confirmation of what they think they are supposed to do) in their jobs or positions. The operative word here is 'do'. They typically do not want to know what they are supposed to 'be'. This simple representation of leadership requirements helps us establish a context for evaluating leadership competencies and frameworks/models. Those that are stated only as traits, characteristics, or in attribute terms are, in our estimation, less valuable than those that are stated in task, function, and behavioral terms. However, models that address both aspects of leadership may prove to be more valuable to more individuals.

The purpose in establishing competencies for leaders should be to better define what functions leaders must perform to make themselves and others in their organizations effective. Many competency definitions include reference to clusters of knowledges, skills, abilities, and traits that lead to successful performance (Newsome, Catano, Day, 2003). Yet competency labels are typically expressed in either process or functional terms. This can lead to confusion as to what competencies actually represent for leadership and organizations. Competency frameworks or models should serve as the roadmap to individual and organizational leader success. The value of competencies is in providing specific or at least sample actions and behaviors that demonstrate what leaders do that makes them successful. Therefore the end goal of all frameworks or models should be to provide measurable actions and behaviors associated with leadership functions. Functions are a step removed from this goal, while KSAOs, traits, and attributes are yet another step removed.

Leadership competency modeling has been in vogue for several decades but the methods for developing these models and the content are as varied as the organizations for which they have been developed. Briscoe and Hall (1999) identify four principal methods for developing competencies and Newsome, Catano, and Day (2003) present summaries of competency definitions and the factors affecting their outcomes.

COMPONENTS OF COMPETENCIES

The components of competency frameworks are seemingly as varied as the competencies themselves. Competencies are generally no more than labels that require additional detail to communicate how they relate to leadership and behavior. This detail may come in the form of definitions, elements or subcomponents of the competencies, and behaviors, actions or other indicators of manifesting the competency or elements. More detailed frameworks may include hierarchies of competencies or elements based on levels of leadership or other distinctions. In some cases, it's unclear what the higher order labels (e.g., Leading Change, Performance) should be called.

We must also preface our discussion by admitting it is not completely fair to judge any frameworks by a high level, surface comparison of the labels and definitions/descriptions of the competencies and components. We did use as much of the definitions and description of the framework components as possible in making our comparisons. A more accurate analysis of these frameworks would involve an elemental analysis of each framework construct that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is this high level aspect of the framework that, in some sense, sets the stage for the acceptance and comprehension of the framework by the intended audience.

NOW, ON TO THE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORKS

We wish to thank the Center for Strategic Leadership Studies at the Air War College for inspiring this paper with their extensive presentation of military and civilian leadership issues. If

you are not familiar with their website (<http://leadership.au.af.mil/index.htm>), we encourage you to explore it.

We chose to review leadership frameworks from the four major services, the Coast Guard, and the Executive Core Qualifications that apply to senior civilian leaders within the federal government. Table 2 presents overview information for the frameworks that includes the service entity, sources for the frameworks, and components that we investigated. Initially, we sought to determine the similarity of constructs across the frameworks. In the course of this comparison we also recognized variation in the types of constructs represented within a particular framework, overlap among the components, and different levels of detail across the frameworks. We discuss each of these as well.

Table 2
Overview of Competency Frameworks

Service	Coast Guard	Army	Marine Corps	Air Force	Executive Core Qualifications	Navy*
Source	COMDTINST 5351.1	Field Manual 22-100	USMC Proving Grounds	AF Senior Level Management Office	Office of Personnel Management	ereservist.net; Naval Leadership Training Unit
Components Framework	3 Categories, 21 Competencies	Be, Know, Do: 7 Values, 3 Attributes, 4 Skills, 12 Different Actions at 3 Levels of leadership (Direct, Organizational, Strategic), Performance Indicators	11 Principles, 14 Traits	3 Main areas, 24 Competencies at 3 Levels of Leadership (Tactical, Operational, Strategic)	5 Areas, 27 Competencies	4 Guiding Principles, 5 Areas, 25 Competencies

* the Navy leadership competency framework is currently in revision and a copy of the most recent version was not available at the time of publication. Four guiding principles are highlighted, two of which are also considered main areas.

Definitions of leadership or leadership competency for the frameworks we investigated are as follows:

Coast Guard – leadership competencies are measurable patterns of behavior essential to leading. The Coast Guard has identified 21 competencies consistent with our missions, work force, and core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. (COMDTINST 5351.1)

Army – influencing people – by providing purpose, direction, and motivation – while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization. Leaders of character and competence act to achieve excellence by developing a force that can fight and win the nation’s wars and serve the common defense of the United States. (FM 22-100, 1999).

Marine Corps – no definition found, seemingly defined by the principles and traits.

Air Force – leadership is the art of influencing and directing people to accomplish the mission. (AFT 35-49, 1 Sep 85).

Navy – no definition found, can be inferred from four guiding principles: professionalism, integrity, creativity, and effectiveness.

Civilians – no definition of leadership found for the ECQs. All core qualifications have definitions.

At the most basic level, the frameworks can be compared on the sheer number of components and structures that comprise them. Hardly a detailed or enlightening comparison, they nonetheless vary from the 24 components of the Coast Guard framework to the 34 components of the Navy framework. The Coast Guard, Air Force, ECQ, and Navy frameworks present essentially two levels of framework components, although the Navy seems also to be considering 4 guiding principles in their conceptualization. The Army and Marine Corps presentations are not technically competency-based frameworks, but are still appropriate for comparison with the others. The Army and Air Force frameworks also provide specific guidance related to level of leadership and application of components.

In Table 3 we attempt to link similar constructs across the 6 frameworks. This table presents a more detailed treatment of similarities and differences across the services. Again, we used the definitions and descriptions in making our links but in many cases the complexity of the definition or description made it difficult to completely represent how the component is related to others or distinguished from others in this table. We reiterate the goal of this comparison is to show, at a relatively broad level of abstraction, how these frameworks compare to one another.

Bold text in Table 3 represents the main competencies or the highest level of each framework for those that clearly included such a distinction (Coast Guard, Air Force, Navy, and ECQs). Across rows, we attempt to group similar constructs among the frameworks for comparison. In several cells within the same framework, we have grouped constructs that we feel are also similar enough to consider them part of the same construct. The most prevalent example of this is related to the value construct. Therefore, while there are 41 rows in our table, this doesn’t necessarily equate to 41 unique constructs of leadership across the six models.

The constructs that appear to have the greatest concurrence across the six models (represented in 4 or more frameworks) are performing/executing/accomplishing mission; vision/planning/preparing; problem solving/decision making; human resource management;

process/continuous improvement; motivating/leading people; influencing/negotiating; communicating; team work/building; building/developing partnerships; interpersonal skills; accountability/service motivation; values; learning (including components of adaptability, flexibility, awareness); and technical proficiency. Other constructs that are common across 3 of the frameworks are driving transformation/leading change; strategic thinking; diversity management; mentoring/developing people (distinct from team building); and physical/health/endurance.

There were six additional constructs that were represented in two of the frameworks but the authors caution that much of the agreement between these constructs is due to the extreme similarities in the Navy and ECQ models (overlap on 6/14). These constructs are external awareness; political savvy/working across boundaries; customer service/focus; conflict management; resource stewardship; financial management; tactical/translating strategy (same construct?); leveraging technology/technology management; looking out for others; developing responsibility/ inspiring/empowering/exercising authority; leading courageously/combat/crises leadership; assessing/assessing self; personal conduct/responsibility; demonstrating tenacity/resilience; and creativity and innovation. Unique constructs, at least on the surface of the models, appear to be entrepreneurship (defined in terms of risk taking), integrating systems (akin to systems thinking); emotional (attribute); inspiring trust; enthusiasm; and followership.

Table 3
Leadership Competency Components Compared

Coast Guard	Army	Marine Corps	Air Force	Navy	ECQ
Performance	Executing; Operating	Ensure assigned tasks are understood, supervised, and accomplished	Leading the Institution; Driving Execution	Accomplishing Mission; Effectiveness	Results Driven
Vision Development and Implementation	Planning/Preparing		Creating and Demonstrating Vision	Vision	Vision
				External Awareness; Political Awareness	External Awareness
			Thinking/Working Across Boundaries		Political Savvy
Customer Focus					Customer Service
			Driving Transformation	Leading Change	Leading Change
Decision-Making and Problem-Solving	Mental; Decision Making; Conceptual	Make sound and timely decisions; Decisiveness; Judgment	Commanding; Exercising Sound Judgment	Decisiveness/Risk Management; Problem Solving	Problem Solving; Decisiveness
Conflict Management					Conflict Management
			Applying Resource Stewardship	Resource Stewardship	
				Financial Management	Financial Management
Workforce Management Systems; Performance Appraisal			Attracting, Developing, and Retaining Talent	Human Resource Management	Human Resource Management
			Shaping Strategy	Strategic Thinking	Strategic Thinking
	Tactical		Translating Strategy		
Management and Process Improvement	Improving	Initiative	Driving Continuous Improvement	Continuous Improvement	
					Entrepreneurship (Risk Taking)
				Leveraging Technology	Technology Management
			Integrating Systems		
Working with Others	Motivating	Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities	Leading People and Teams	Leading People; Working with People	Leading People
Influencing Others	Influencing		Influencing and Negotiating	Influencing and Negotiating	Influencing and Negotiating
Respect for Others and Diversity Management				Leveraging Diversity	Leveraging Diversity
Looking out for Others		Know your Marines and look out for their welfare			

Coast Guard	Army	Marine Corps	Air Force	Navy	ECQ
Effective Communication	Communicating	Keep your Marines informed	Fostering Effective Communications	Oral Communication; Written Communication	Oral Communication; Written Communication
Group Dynamics		Train your Marines as a team	Fostering Teamwork and Collaboration	Team Building	Team Building
		Develop a sense of responsibility among your subordinates	Inspiring, Empowering, and Exercising Authority		
Mentoring			Mentoring	Developing People	
			Leading Courageously	Combat/Crisis Leadership	
	Building; Developing		Building Relationships	Partnering	Building Coalitions/Communication; Partnering
	Emotional				
Self	Interpersonal	Tact	Personal Leadership	Professionalism	Interpersonal Skills
Accountability and Responsibility		Dependability		Responsibility, Accountability, Authority; Service Motivation;	Service Motivation; Accountability
Aligning Values	Loyalty; Respect, Duty, Selfless Service; Honor, Integrity, Personal Courage	Bearing; Courage; Integrity; Justice; Unselfishness; Loyalty; Set the example	Leading by Example	Integrity	Integrity and Honesty
Followership					
Health and Well Being	Physical	Endurance			
Personal Conduct		Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions			
Self Awareness and Learning; Leadership Theory	Learning	Know yourself and seek improvement	Adapting	Flexibility	Flexibility; Continual Learning
Technical Proficiency	Technical	Be technically and tactically proficient; Knowledge		Technical Credibility	Technical Credibility
			Inspiring Trust		
			Demonstrating Tenacity		Resilience
		Enthusiasm			
	Assessing		Assessing Self		
				Creativity and Innovation	Creativity and Innovation

In answer to ‘are we all saying the same thing?’ we respond with a simple mathematical exercise. Among the 41 constructs represented in Table 3, 20 are included in three or more frameworks, 15 are included in two, and six are unique to a single framework. Too close to call? In about half the cases, the frameworks appear to be saying the same thing but there are also significant differences in terms of what is included, or at least the level at which it is included in the leadership framework. There are some very obvious differences in terms of labels of leadership constructs as indicated by the within row groupings in Table 3.

CRITIQUE OF THE FRAMEWORKS

The true value of our efforts is to point out aspects of each of the frameworks that could be improved. While each of the organizations included in this analysis is unique, we believe that the nature and purposes of these organizations is similar enough that there should be great similarities in how leadership is defined, described and displayed within them.

The first test we submitted the frameworks to was whether or not they used a consistent representation of the labels of their components across all those components. Only the Air Force and Army models passed this test. The Coast Guard, Navy, and ECQ frameworks mix processes (decision making, influencing and negotiating, problem solving), functions (mentoring, management and process improvement, financial management), and characteristics (health and well being, flexibility, integrity and honesty). The Marine Corps principles and traits were more difficult to evaluate, but one could argue that several traits are actually KSAs (decisiveness, judgment, knowledge).

The second test was one of independence of components within a framework. The Coast Guard framework includes performance appraisal and workforce management systems – certainly related; and self awareness/learning and leadership theory (defined in terms of learning about leadership). The Army framework includes mental and conceptual aspects on the attribute and skill dimensions, respectively. There also appears to be some overlap among the twelve skill dimensions (developing/building/improving; executing/operating). The Air Force framework may potentially overlap on commanding and exercising sound judgment, and many of the other identified components seem closely related to other components (inspiring trust and influencing/negotiating; building relationships/mentoring). The Navy and ECQ frameworks had similar overlap within them (problem solving/decisiveness; leading people/working with people). Several Marine Corps principles and traits overlap (make sound and timely decisions/decisiveness; seek responsibility and take responsibility for actions/initiative).

The most common confounding in the frameworks is the mixing of processes or techniques to perform work and the functional areas of that work. For example, all organizations include decision making, problem solving, or judgment at some level in their frameworks. With the exception of the Army and Marine Corps, they also include functional areas such as workforce management, financial management, and conflict management that obviously require these processes or techniques to perform them.

Next we examined the extent to which each of the frameworks provide behavioral examples or actions associated with the competency or components. As an illustration of the variety of definition and behavior content and detail, we provide information from each competency framework relevant to the construct of decision making/decisiveness/sound judgment in Table 4. The results indicate the different ways the services say the same thing.

Table 4
Competency Framework detail for the Construct of Decision Making/Decisiveness/Sound Judgment

Source	Competency Label	Definition/Description	Behaviors
Air Force	Exercising Sound Judgment	Developing and applying broad knowledge and expertise in a disciplined manner, when addressing complex issues; identifying interrelationships among issues and implications for other parts of the Air Force; and taking all critical information into account when making decisions	None found.
Army	Decision Making	Involves selecting the line of action intended to be followed as the one most favorable to the successful accomplishment of the mission. This involves using sound judgment, reasoning logically, and managing resources wisely.	(Partial list of performance indicators) Employ sound judgment and logical reasoning. Gather and analyze relevant information about changing situations to recognize and define emerging problems. Make logical assumptions in the absence of facts. Uncover critical issues to use as a guide in both making decisions and taking advantage of opportunities. Keep informed about developments and policy changes inside and outside the organization. Recognize and generate innovative solutions.
Coast Guard	Decision Making and Problem Solving	None found.	Learn to identify and analyze problems under normal and extreme conditions. Learn to consider and assess risks and alternatives. Use facts, input from systems, input from others, and sound judgment to reach conclusions. Learn to lead effectively in crisis, keeping focus on key information and decision points. Commit to action; be as decisive as a situation demands. Involve others in decisions that affect them. Evaluate the impact of your decisions
ECQ	Decisiveness	Exercises good judgment by making sound and well-informed decisions; perceives the impact and implications of decisions; makes effective and timely decisions, even when data is limited or solutions produce unpleasant consequences; is proactive and achievement oriented.	(Embedded in example qualification and capability narratives)

Source	Competency Label	Definition/Description	Behaviors
Marine Corps	Decisiveness	Decisiveness means that you are able to make good decisions without delay. Get all the facts and weight them against each other. By acting calmly and quickly, you should arrive at a sound decision. You announce your decisions in a clear, firm, professional manner.	(Suggestion for improvement) Practice being positive in your actions instead of acting half-heartedly or changing your mind on an issue.
Navy	Decisiveness /Risk Management	Exercises good judgment by making sound and well-informed decisions; perceives the impact and implications of decisions; makes effective and timely decisions, even when data are limited or solutions produce unpleasant consequences; is proactive and achievement oriented. (Identical to ECQ)	None found.

Competency models/frameworks are intended to establish what leaders should be or do to achieve organizational goals. Decisiveness means little to leaders without accompanying information about what decisiveness accomplishes, how it is enacted, and why it leads to organizational goals. Most of the frameworks provide definitions of competencies and components to further understanding. Simply defining decisiveness, much like defining leadership, does little other than to provide an alternative set of words for the label. What is truly valuable is the description of how decisiveness is manifested in the organization. The more concrete and concise the description of actions and behavior associated with competencies, the more likely these competencies will be accepted, understood, and demonstrated.

FINAL WORDS

The most important considerations in developing and establishing leadership competencies should be how they will be used to influence leadership assessment, selection, development, and performance management processes. Even the best framework of leadership has no value if it is not used productively by that organization. Redundancy, missing components, buzzwords, and inaccurate descriptions of effective behavior in doctrine are insignificant if they are not used. Well developed, comprehensive, prescriptive models of organizational leadership will be wasted unless leaders understand, embrace, and apply the features of the framework/model and organizations integrate them into succession planning, training and development, and multi-rater feedback systems.

Shippmann, et al. (2000) conducted a review of competency modeling procedures compared with job analysis procedures. In general, competency modeling procedures were rated as less rigorous than job analysis procedures. However, competency modeling was felt to provide more direct information related to business goals and strategies. Competencies may also be more appropriate for describing successful leadership behaviors in future terms. This could be a critical factor for the organizations studied as future threats and environments remain dynamic and uncertain. These strengths should be exploited by these organizations and not lost

on confusing framework structures, unexplained redundancy in components, and incomplete examples of how competencies are manifested for success.

There are many sources for recommendations on how to implement or improve sound competency modeling procedures (Cooper, 2000; Lucia and Lepsinger, 1999). We would like to highlight a few of their suggestions based on our findings.

1. Define leadership and establish the boundaries on what is and isn't considered in your organizations leadership framework.
2. Use a consistent representation of tasks, functions, actions and behaviors that leaders perform.
3. Seek to eliminate redundancy in competencies and elements and clearly indicate how actions and behaviors are linked to competencies or elements.
4. Involve behavioral scientists as well as leaders at all levels of the organization in development and vetting of the model/framework.
5. Seek to validate competencies through organizational results.

We would also like to point out that some of the frameworks that we investigated are undergoing change. We were not able to gather the pertinent information related to where each service is in refining, updating, or extending their framework but we do know there are efforts underway in the Army and Navy to modify their leadership frameworks and models.

Looking back to our elementary school student profile, perhaps we can take solace in the recognition that our current students are our future leaders. Providing them with a roadmap for student success serves to assist them in their development and gives us a method for tracking their progress. Communicating the meaning of those competencies labeled in Table 1 will help them determine how they should behave, and help the rest of us assess, develop, and reinforce those behaviors. Reducing the redundancy, improving the detail, and providing behavioral examples of the competencies will assist in this effort.

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