



## Barbara Halicka

Student, The Military Faculty of the War Studies University, Warsaw, Poland  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4550-7166>

## Paweł Rafał Ostolski

Lt. Col., PhD, The Military Faculty of the War Studies University, Warsaw, Poland  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0728-6596>

# Military leadership: case studies

## Introduction

Leadership is a research subject which has been and for a long time will be in the centre of scientists' interests around the world, both in the civilian and military environment. As Waldemar Łydka notes, "[m]anagement of organisations, and in particular human resources management, requires managers at all levels to have skills and qualities that ensure effective use of their subordinates' potential."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, he indicates that "poor information resources in national professional publications are a problem, which might be a subject for deeper analysis."<sup>2</sup> The importance of this area of activity is emphasised by Tomasz Majewski, who unequivocally states in his considerations that "[t]he phenomenon of leadership in the army for many years has been both a source of research inspiration and a subject of interest for those commanders who want to efficiently command soldiers."<sup>3</sup> The two above approaches presented by

<sup>1</sup> W. Łydka, *Przywództwo wojskowe*, Warszawa: Wojskowe Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej im. płk. dypl. Mariana Porwita, 2017, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> T. Majewski, Rola przywództwa w dowodzeniu wojskami, [in:] *Współczesne dylematy dydaktyki obronnej*, ed. K. Krakowski, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2015, p. 387.

academic teachers experienced in the field of theoretical and empirical research on leadership gained at the War Studies University, but also from practical experience of commanding troops and leading teams, testify to the fact that there is a need to take on challenges in this area.

Reflecting on the essence of military leadership, it is worth familiarising the reader with the specifics of this type of leadership. Leadership is defined in various publications, and explanations of this term can be found not only in Polish scientific papers, but also in many works in other languages. Some are more business-like in nature, while others are typically military.

According to the views of Michael Armstrong, leadership is defined as the ability to convince others to change their own behaviour. In turn, Leszek Kanarski notes that leadership is the ability to unite people whose priority is to achieve specific goals. Andrew J. DuBrin, on the other hand, points out three basic characteristics of a good leader, such as inspiring, convincing and supporting those who, through the realisation of tasks, are necessary to achieve the goals of the group or organisation.<sup>4</sup>

It is easy to see that DuBrin has highlighted key elements in the essence of leadership that also affect the development of subordinates. When analysing military leadership, we identify adopted elements from the previously mentioned definitions, but transformatively add others that are very relevant to the military leadership aspect of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland. The above brief comparative analysis indicates that this is still a very much alive and viable research area.

A very disturbing and, at the same time, despite the last few years, still valid characteristic of leadership in the Armed Forces was provided by Bogdan M. Szulc in his 2001 research,<sup>5</sup> which was brought to our notice after less than 20 years: “the basic relationship which exists and will exist in command is being lost. It is a relationship between people, between a commander and a subordinate.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in its essence, man loses himself. At this point, we can ask ourselves two questions:

- 1) What are my relationships with other people?
- 2) What could I do to improve my relationship with another person?

Modern armed forces require leaders to possess a variety of qualities and skills, some of which are: availability, responsibility, independence, caring for a good image of the Polish Armed Forces, and the ability to self-educate continuously. Anyone who works with the military and enters their structures for the implementation of their tasks can observe the elements inherent in typical corporate systems, which are also found in the organisational units of the Polish Armed Forces.

<sup>4</sup> See T. Majewski, D. Kurek, B.M. Szulc, *Przywództwo: konteksty, reminiscencje, odniesienia*, Warszawa: Akademia Sztuki Wojennej, 2020, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> See B.M. Szulc, *Przywództwo w dowodzeniu wojskami lądowymi RP*, part 1: *Koncepcja*, Warszawa: Akademia Obrony Narodowej, 2001, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> T. Majewski, D. Kurek, B.M. Szulc, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

Military leadership is a component of command, which is a part of the combat system as one of the main systems in relation to which a high level of readiness is required. This is guaranteed to a large extent by a very well-functioning leadership system in which the commander takes credit; he may not always be fully deserving of it, but he has superbly trained subordinates at the highest level. Then, it is not his merit but the merit of non-commissioned officers and privates who have professional and specialist competences which their superior sometimes lacks. When considering the leadership aspect of command, a legitimate question arises about who today's leaders are and what their role is. Referring once again to the thought of Szulc that in the whole command of the Polish Armed Forces a man loses himself, we can see a very different level of leadership competence among soldiers serving in the structures of the Polish Armed Forces at various levels in different organisational units. This is especially true of some officers with quite significant experience and not necessarily the youngest ones. An additional factor are military ranks which do not always correspond to the expected level of leadership. Therefore, looking at this problem in an individualised manner presents a challenge.

A good research method that has been used to obtain reliable research results is the case study. Most of the researchers dealing with the issue of competencies agree on the principle that the set of competencies held will never be complete and ready, despite education or qualifications. Today's environment of professional functioning requires constant change in the area of soft and hard competencies. It is therefore reasonable to assume that there will never be a commander who would meet all expectations and be perfect for everyone – both their subordinates and superiors. There is a dilemma: is there not a lack of commanders in the Polish Armed Forces today, who have the basic skills and characteristics to be called leaders in the full meaning of this word? We should understand leadership as true leadership at the highest level, not just at a minimum level sufficient to pass exams or meet formal requirements for promotion to the next higher military rank. Being a leader calls for true leadership, not just being an officer occupying a specific duty position. We can apply the same theory to NCOs (non-commissioned officers), who are the first commanders in the way of privates. Therefore, as strange as it may seem, the execution of leadership functions is largely directed to mid-level commanders.

## Case study and discussion

The research was conducted with randomly selected soldiers performing their professional military service in different organisational units of the Polish Armed Forces. The object of the research were the selected characteristics, predispositions, and competencies of leaders. The following are the variables that were adopted for the research process:

- 1) responsibility,
- 2) communicativeness,
- 3) ability to work under pressure,
- 4) care for the team,
- 5) self-presentation,
- 6) professional expertise,
- 7) care for of one's own and the subdivision's image,
- 8) own values,
- 9) patriotism,
- 10) equal treatment,
- 11) care for self-development,
- 12) care for the development of their soldiers.

This is a limited set that includes, in the opinion of the authors, some of the key variables relevant to the issue being addressed.

## The first case

The first case is a representative of the professional private corps with three years of service in the rank of senior private and the age of 23. When asked if he sees leadership competence in his company commander, the soldier gives the following answer: "Yes, he is a responsible commander and has the knowledge necessary for the position. He lacks the communication skills. He has military knowledge, and you can learn from him, but he does not bind the company together. Our relations are based only on tasks from 8.00–15.00."

The next question the soldier is asked, "Do you see leadership competence in your platoon leader?", is answered more broadly:

Yes, he is fully prepared for the role of a commander. He maintains the military hierarchy but binds us together and teaches the principle of one for all and all for one. We are never afraid to go to him with anything. We know when we do something wrong and should be punished, but we are also sure that he will stand up for us. I wish every commander was like that.

The third question in this case asks for self-assessment: "Do you notice leadership competencies in yourself and would like to use them as a leader?" We have a very short answer here: "I see some qualities in myself, but I'm not sure I could handle the responsibility."

The described case allows us to conclude that his company commander is a well-educated man with a sufficient level of expertise required for the position. The subordinate's assessment shows that the commanding officer is a responsible person, but in the eyes of the private he has a problem with soft skills such as communication and

maintaining relationships outside the service. The private sees no action that should be taken by the commander.

A slightly different view of the platoon leader is that he is a man who possesses the qualities of a leader and is able to use them practically. He can maintain the required level of discipline but does not build artificial barriers. On the contrary, his openness, decisiveness, and instilling the principle of shared responsibility in the platoon result in him being perceived as a person to whom you can turn with a problem and who always takes his people's side when necessary. The private emphasises the great responsibility associated with holding a commanding position in the sub-units of the Polish Armed Forces.

## The second case

The second case is a representative of the professional private corps with five years of service, in the rank of private and aged 27. When asked if he sees leadership competence in his company commander, the soldier gives the following answer: "The commander tries to be the commander he was in the old days. He keeps discipline in the unit and tries to train us to be the best soldiers possible, but this desire is not based on cooperation and listening to each other."

When asked another question, "Do you see leadership competence in your platoon leader?", the soldier gives an answer showing an interesting aspect, namely that one's own feelings about a person do not always translate into a biased assessment: "I am not fond of him as a person, but he's fantastic as a commander. He knows how to impart knowledge and control crisis situations. If I could, I would swap him for a company commander."

The third question in this case asks for self-assessment: "Do you notice leadership competencies in yourself and would you like to use them as a leader?" Here we have a very specific answer showing that he is aware of the responsibility of leadership: "I don't know how to spot them in myself. I wouldn't want to have that responsibility on me."

Case two establishes that his company commander is a man with a particular leadership style. He is a commander who uses the method of force and position to achieve the required results and win respect. However, when questioned, the soldier emphasises that he notices in his company commander a desire to impart knowledge and train the subdivision. However, he sees the absence of a key factor for success, which is interpersonal relationships

The assessment of the platoon leader, on the other hand, is quite different. The subordinate, despite difficulties with personal relationships, sees him as a leader and notices the necessary competencies, skills, and qualities. An important element is the fact that the interviewee would swap positions between the platoon leader and

the company commander. This is an indication that the company command level is lacking leadership and that there is a strong need for it.

Thus, it can be concluded that in this company, the commander should use his NCOs' help to develop an appropriate leadership model in the subunit and tap into their knowledge and skills to enhance his leadership skills.

### The third case

The third case is a representative of the professional private corps with ten years of service, with the rank of senior private and aged 34. When asked whether he sees leadership competence in his company commander, the soldier gives the following answer: "The commander is a young lieutenant who came after officer school. He is not prepared to command a company. He does not have the developed qualities that were given. He is not even theoretically prepared."

The next question: "Do you see leadership competence in your platoon leader?", is answered as follows: "He is an old non-commissioned officer. He has the knowledge and desire to teach young soldiers very well. Such a person is the best fit for a company commander, not someone who is inexperienced."

The third question asks for self-assessment: "Do you notice leadership competencies in yourself and would like to use them as a leader?" Here we have a very specific answer: "Although I do have enthusiasm for further self-development, it has been reduced to a minimum due to a lack of promotion opportunities."

The third case helps to corroborate the voices coming from the students of military academies saying that they get an opportunity to encounter real leadership only after graduation. In this case, the company commander is a young lieutenant. As the interviewee notes, he does not have the leadership competencies that we asked about. He emphasises the lack of not only practical but also theoretical preparation. Thus, one can note the imperfect military universities training for leadership skills development in their students.

What differs in this case is the assessment of the platoon commander. He is the opposite of the company commander. The experienced NCO has the most experience in the platoon. As the soldier points out, this NCO, despite his old age, has been teaching soldiers since the beginning, "he moulds them like clay". The interviewee emphasises that this NCO is the best replacement for a company commander who has a very low level of experience. Thus, we can conclude that this senior NCO is an invaluable teacher for younger soldiers, even those with higher military rank. But there is one condition: the company commander should want to draw knowledge from him.

As for our private, he is aware of the leadership competencies he possesses. However, the system of promotion and the path and limitations existing at the moment have significantly reduced his willingness. In all likelihood, it will not be possible to

achieve the same results we would have achieved a few years earlier when training this soldier as a non-commissioned officer.

### The fourth case

The fourth interviewee was a representative of the non-commissioned officer corps with four years of service, with the rank of corporal and aged 25. When asked if he sees leadership competence in his company commander, the soldier gives a short answer: “I do and I am proud of him for his ability as a commander to stand up for us as soldiers.”

The question about assessing the competence of his subordinates – “Do you see leadership competence in your subordinates?” – was answered in the following way: “I can see it in some, but I don’t have the opportunity to send them to courses to develop them.”

The last question was “Do you notice leadership competencies in yourself and use them as a leader?” The soldier responds: “I do, and I am aware of it. I try to develop them all the time.”

When looking at the fourth respondent, we can see a fairly young NCO who has not served long. Nevertheless, he is specific in his answers. In the evaluation of the company commander, he emphasises one important element, “he knows how to stand up for his soldiers.” The company commander applies the rule that the sub-unit is a unity and is not a separate element but a part of the whole. Analysing the third and fourth respondent’s statements, one can notice some similarities. The corporal notices in his subordinates leadership qualities which could be developed, but it is not possible for him to send them to courses and training. The third case concerns a soldier in the corps of privates, who has these competencies, but has not been sent to any competencies development course, which resulted in limiting his desire for further development. It can be assumed that the corporal, without the opportunity to support his subordinates with leadership competences, will also lose his enthusiasm and willingness to work on leadership. In his self-assessment, systematic work on his competencies requires special consideration.

### The fifth case

The fifth interviewee is a representative of the professional non-commissioned officer corps with ten years of service, with the rank of sergeant and aged 35. Asked if he sees leadership competence in his company commander, the soldier indicates: “He has the qualities necessary to be a company commander, but I am not convinced that his competence would work in higher positions.”

The answer to the next question – “Do you see leadership competence in your subordinates?” – which is addressed to the soldier, is as follows: “This is a difficult issue. I try to keep a superior-subordinate distance. During the eight hours at work, there is no way I can notice them.”

The third question asks for self-assessment in the area of having and using leadership competencies (“Do you notice leadership competencies in yourself and use them as a leader?”), and the respondent says: “I have them, but I don’t develop them. I think this level is enough for me.”

In the fifth case, we have a soldier who is aware of the level of his leadership competence. He also notices the qualities that are more or less important in leadership. When evaluating his company commander, he acknowledges he leadership qualities the commander possesses and expresses a good opinion of leadership at the company command level. However, he is not sure if his company commander has not already reached his highest level in leadership because, according to the sergeant, the qualities possessed by the company commander may not be sufficient for higher positions.

Assessing leadership qualities and competencies in subordinates is difficult. As the soldier points out, he is trying to maintain the essential element of service which is the supervisor-subordinate relationship. He is not able to notice his subordinates during eight hours of work.

In conclusion, the respondent is aware of his leadership competence level, but he is also sure that there is no need to develop it further because the level he has is sufficient and satisfactory for him.

## The sixth case

The sixth case is a representative of non-commissioned officer corps with twelve years of service, rank of chief warrant officer and aged 46. When asked if he sees leadership competence in his company commander, the soldier replies: “He’s trying to be the best possible commander for his soldiers.”

The next question addressed to the soldier – “Do you see leadership competence in your subordinates?” – is answer with the following statement: “They very rarely have the opportunity to demonstrate it. However, there are some people who do, and I try to support them in their development.”

The third question asks for self-assessment: “Do you notice leadership competencies in yourself and use them as a leader?” and the answer is short and surprising. “I don’t know. I can’t tell.”

Case five reflects an ideal situation with acceptable minor shortcomings. Here, the interviewed soldier emphasises the knowledge, skills, and role of his company commander. He sees in him a true leader whose example he can and does follow and learns how to be the best leader for his own soldiers.



The evaluation of subordinates in the ensign's words is somewhat complementary to case five. The ensign notes that his subordinates rarely have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership qualities. In case five, the sergeant felt that there was no opportunity to see these qualities in eight hours. Therefore, does the problem lie in the lack of opportunity to see the leadership competence of subordinates? Perhaps it does to some extent because in this case the sergeant manages to notice these competences and qualities in some of them. As he declares, he tries to support these soldiers in developing their potential.

What is surprising in this case is that the NCO is not aware of his competencies and therefore cannot evaluate them. In Maxwell's 21 laws of leadership,<sup>7</sup> the law of intuition is mentioned. A soldier may have it highly developed so that he can make good decisions for the unit, but Maxwell himself points to the need to be aware of one's own competencies because without this knowledge, a leader is not able to determine his strengths, weaknesses, and level of leadership skills. He is also unable to work with Maxwell's upper limit law, which is extremely important in the functioning of the Polish Armed Forces.

## The seventh case

Case seven is a representative of the professional officer corps with seven years of service, with the rank of lieutenant and aged 28. When asked if he sees leadership competencies in his subordinates (non-commissioned officers), the soldier gives a short answer: "Yes, my NCOs have the leadership competencies necessary for their positions."

When presented with another question – "Do you see leadership competencies in your subordinates (privates)"? – the soldier responded with an answer emphasising the role of non-commissioned officers: "I don't have much opportunity to notice it in privates. I try to rely on the opinion of non-commissioned officers."

The third question asks for self-assessment: "Do you notice leadership competencies in yourself and use them as a leader?", and the short answer is: "Sometimes in certain situations I try to focus on myself."

In the first case of the soldier from the officer corps, we have the case of an officer young in age and seniority. When assessing the leadership qualities in his subordinates, he places a strong emphasis on the non-commissioned officers who are well prepared for the role of the first commanders in a soldier's path. His role is extremely important in communicating information to the privates as subordinates. As he points out, he does not have the opportunity to observe leadership competence in privates. He relies on of his NCOs' opinions.

---

<sup>7</sup> J.C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998.

When it comes to self-assessment, we do not notice a great desire to develop or learn. He is aware of the level of competence he possesses, and the effort needed to develop them. However, he has no desire to continue acquiring new competencies. A certain (larger) part of leadership and training private soldiers in their responsibilities rests on the shoulders of non-commissioned officers.

## The eighth case

Case eight is a representative of the professional officer corps with thirty years of service, with the rank of second lieutenant commander and aged 50. Asked whether he sees leadership competence in his subordinates (non-commissioned officers), the soldier gives the following answer: “I talk a lot with my NCOs about training young soldiers and how important their role as commanders is in that process. Some understand this and try to develop their competencies.”

The next question, “Do you see leadership competences in your subordinates (privates)?”, was answered more broadly. “Twice a month at the company, I meet with privates to talk about their self-development and insights into the service. I try to support the privates in whom I have noticed greater competence by assigning an NCO to support them.”

The third question asks for self-assessment: “Do you notice leadership competencies in yourself and use them as a leader?”, and here the answer is quite long: “Yes. Over the years of service, I have learned to identify my strengths and weaknesses. More than once, I have learnt some competencies from my NCOs, who have developed them to a high level.”

This is an officer with many years of service and a rare approach to service, and we could combine it with case four, where the company commander, according to the corporal, stood up for his soldiers. The officer emphasises the commander’s participation and involvement in training soldiers. He points to numerous conversations with NCOs about training young soldiers and their vital role in the process. He states that some understand this and try to develop their leadership qualities and competencies. Thus, the commander starts the preparation for the process of training young soldiers with a crucial element, namely the preparation of the NCO as a trainer.

The officer schedules time twice a month to meet and talk with privates about their self-development and insights into the service. He tries to support them in their plans. When he notices outstanding leadership competencies in a soldier, he assigns an NCO to help enhance his development, perhaps preparing him for an NCO course.

In his self-assessment, the officer stresses the role of his experience in the service, which helped him realise the strengths and weaknesses of his leadership. He emphasises that he often learns from his subordinates who have reached a higher level of competence.

## The ninth case

The ninth and last case is a representative of the professional officer corps with ten years of service, in the rank of captain and aged 33. When asked whether he sees leadership competencies in his subordinates (non-commissioned officers), the soldier gives the answer: “I believe that since they are in these positions, they have the necessary skills.”

The next question the soldier is asked – “Do you see leadership competencies in your subordinates (privates)?” – is answered briefly: “I believe that this is the task of NCOs.”

The third question is a request for self-assessment: “Do you notice leadership competencies in yourself and use them as a leader?”, and here the answer is confident. “Yes, I do. I believe they are at a high level and use them when necessary.”

The answers in the last case are very short but, at the same time, they show us distinctly that the commander has clear rules to which he adheres. He believes that to be in a position, one must have the required leadership competencies which he emphasises when evaluating NCOs. As for the privates, the captain is of the opinion that the determination of their competence falls within the remit of NCOs.

The captain’s self-assessment is confident but positive at the same time. He is aware of his competence and uses it when necessary.

## Conclusions

One might therefore ask the question why such a strongly characterised model of a commander is put as an officer? Its image was formed historically where the most outstanding commanders were high ranking officers and generals. But let us think about how many outstanding NCOs trained those soldiers. How many such NCOs and privates are there now? Nowadays, the Polish Armed Forces should focus on the greatest possible development of leadership competences in the non-commissioned officer and non-commissioned officer corps because it is there that the most exceptional leaders for the whole military structure are formed.

As for officers: if an officer develops these competencies in the non-commissioned officer corps, he is likely to be additionally predisposed to develop these competencies in the officer corps. Officers graduating from officer schools should be prepared to perform the role of a commander and not just be perceived through the prism of the rank on their armband. Unfortunately, most officer schools’ graduates leave with theoretical knowledge of military skills, but the issue of leadership is often overlooked. Asking my colleagues at different military academies and at different levels of learning, I can come to one conclusion: leadership and being a good leader is not discussed at all, or it is discussed but does not play a major

role in learning. Due to this omission, there is a lot of friction and miscommunication in the company, the privates' resentment against the officers, and worse performance of the subunit. In our opinion, if we want to have a model where the leader is an officer, then we should let the person who is to be an officer be evaluated for leadership competence by his subordinates because they see and can say the most.

An important question we should ask is "What qualities, predispositions and competencies are needed among security system personnel?" The answer can be found in many publications both in the scientific discipline of security sciences and in management and quality sciences. An example of this can be the monograph *Cechy przywódcze kadr systemu bezpieczeństwa narodowego*.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the issues of security culture, which were the subject of the research described in the article "Culture Functions for Creating Security Culture,"<sup>9</sup> are also very important. The problem of military leadership is characterised by a large number of variables and, according to the authors, requires undertaking interdisciplinary research.

## References

- Łydka W., *Przywództwo wojskowe*, Warszawa: Wojskowe Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej im. płk. dypl. Mariana Porwita, 2017.
- Majewski T., Rola przywództwa w dowodzeniu wojskami, [in:] *Współczesne dylematy dydaktyki obronnej*, ed. K. Krakowski, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2015, pp. 387–399.
- Majewski T., Kurek D., Szulc B.M., *Przywództwo: konteksty, reminiscencje, odniesienia*, Warszawa: Akademia Sztuki Wojennej, 2020.
- Maxwell J.C., *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998.
- Ostolski P.R., Cechy przywódcze kadr systemu bezpieczeństwa narodowego, [in:] *Edukacja w świecie VUCA: Szanse, wyzwania, zagrożenia*, eds. D. Kaźmierczak, J. Ropski, O. Wasiuta, W. Zakrzewski, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2021, pp. 161–180.
- Ostolski P.R., "Culture Functions for Creating Security Culture", *Security Dimensions*, vol. 37, 2021, pp. 78–90, DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0015.3294.
- Szulc B.M., *Przywództwo w dowodzeniu wojskami lądowymi RP*, part 1: *Koncepcja*, Warszawa: Akademia Obrony Narodowej, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See P.R. Ostolski, Cechy przywódcze kadr systemu bezpieczeństwa narodowego, [in:] *Edukacja w świecie VUCA: Szanse, wyzwania, zagrożenia*, eds. D. Kaźmierczak, J. Ropski, O. Wasiuta, W. Zakrzewski, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2021, pp. 161–180.

<sup>9</sup> See P.R. Ostolski, "Culture Functions for Creating Security Culture", *Security Dimensions*, vol. 37, 2021, pp. 78–90.

## Military leadership: a case study

### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to draw the reader's attention to the research problems of military leadership that are identified at the lowest levels of command in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland. The authors presented cases of soldiers who present various attitudes in the context of understanding the role of a military leader, as well as ambiguously perceived competencies in this area, including their self-assessment. The problem of a systemic approach to the formation of leadership competencies in military education units is addressed, and the dangers of low levels of commander traits, aptitudes, and competencies are highlighted. The final conclusions inspire the reader to gain knowledge and undertake interdisciplinary research on military leadership.

Key words: military leadership, case study, leadership competencies