



Military Leadership: Concepts and Theoretical Approaches

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Abstract

Leadership is a key concept in military organizations which refers to processes of direct influence and command. In this chapter, the subject, basic concepts, and central issues of military leadership are described. General leadership concepts

This chapter is an expanded version of an article in German by Kernic (*Militärische Führung. Commandement militaire. Leadership militaire*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. and in: Leonhard, N., & Werkner, I.-J. (Ed.) (2021): *Militärsoziologie – Eine Einführung*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. [forthcoming], 2021), which was as well translated and revised as supplemented by contributions from Elbe and Richter.

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such as military leadership myths and archetypes as well as leadership theories in philosophy and the social sciences show the broadness of the ideas about leadership. Theoretical approaches, explanatory models, and empirical findings concerning military leadership are discussed in this paper, too. Leadership concepts in modern armed forces finally help us to improve our understanding of nowadays military leadership.

Keywords

Command and control · Coordination · Leadership · Leadership styles · Leadership theories · Military sociology · Social control

Introduction

Leadership is a key concept of military organization. The frequent reference to the leadership tasks of military cadres, the high value placed on leadership training, and the reference to an experience of leadership in military service bear witness to the intensity with which images of leadership are passed on in the military. However, the term is marked by a high degree of vagueness. Not only does it display an enormous range of content and connotations, but it also conveys value judgements (e.g., good/evil; effective/noneffective; ethical/unethical) that go hand in hand with emotionality. Leadership is much debated in the military, especially what constitutes good and effective leadership and how it should be practiced.

Any scientific discourse on military leadership assumes that people have always had concrete ideas about leadership. These images mirror individual experiences as well as a collective cultural memory. These images can change, i.e., they are not just images of real conditions and experiences, but something that can be shaped and formed (*ideals, concepts, models, idolizations, etc.*). Leadership can generally be defined as social influence. Leaders change through their words (ideas and visions) and/or deeds (action); they pit a certain thinking, feeling, and behavior in other people. Leaders motivate, inspire, guide, and lead (as leaders, instigators, guides, etc.).

The term military leadership refers to processes of influence and command in connection with the military and warfare. The specificity of military leadership results from the dense intertwining of these processes with the violent character and the hierarchical structure of the military organization. The military hierarchy is a one-dimensional concept of leadership: Social influence on the behavior of people is exerted by a single person at the top of the hierarchy who is able to steer the thoughts, feelings, and actions of subordinates through his or her words and deeds; his or her orders are translated directly into military actions. A chain of command and command structure enables social influence to move from top to bottom by means of a chain of command and to reach all levels of the organization (Menth 1974; Berg 1976; Kernic 2021). Within the chain of command, a clear distinction

can be made between the sender of the command (leader) and the recipient of the command (follower).

Of course, there are deviations from this ideal of everyday military life: withdrawal (desertion), failure to carry out an order, refusal, or mutiny. Nevertheless, the military (to this day) adheres to the idea of totality and the concept of a mechanically organized control of human actions. Consequently, social mechanisms are established to prevent deviant behavior. The most important tools encompass disciplining, coercion, surveillance, social control, and punishment, as well as incentives through (material and ideal) reward, the prospect of social advancement or motivation.

The common understanding of military leadership can be illustrated using the example of the Swiss Armed Forces: In the units, training as a military leader begins at the lowest level, by teaching the so-called 3Cs as the 101 of military leadership – command, control, and correct (Swiss Armed Forces 2007, doctrine 70.013). It is argued that running a military organization – and the key to success and to achieving objectives – lies in the consistent implementation of this three-step military leadership.

Military Leadership: *Subject*, Basic Concepts, and *Central* Issues

A comparison of lexical definitions of leadership shows major shifts in the content and field of reference of this term throughout history. In German-speaking countries, the term “Führung” gained social importance especially at the beginning of the twentieth century. The widespread and ideological-political usage of this term in the first half of that century – in connection with the authoritarian regimes of the era – led to reservations about its use in everyday language after the end of the World War II. At the same time, this promoted the gradual introduction of the Anglo-American concept of leadership and its incorporation into German language use (Neuberger 2002: 48 ff. and 7–11).

When talking about leadership in the military in general, three levels of command and control relations occur. On the level of social groups (e.g., squads and platoons) personal guidance is referred to as leadership and is intended to promote social efficiency in the coordination process. The informal leadership component, the balance of interests in direct contact, is particularly important here. The next higher level is that of commanding units and forces (command and control). This is not about personal relationships, but rather about the [means-end relation](#) and level of ambition communication (economic efficiency). At the top level there are political requirements to be managed in a way to reach effective enforcement of collective interests. The question to be asked here is: What interests are being pursued? And directly related to this: Whose interests are being pursued? (Elbe 2020).

When discussing military leadership in this paper we refer to interactions in social groups. Most definitions of leadership on this level share three core elements: a) a reference to the existence of a *basic structure of an interpersonal interaction* distinguishing between the leader and those being led; b) the assumption of a

transformation of the social relationship (process); and c) an indication to intentional social influence to achieve certain goals (Hunt 1996; Northouse 2007; Bass 2008; Yukl 2010; Blessin and Wick 2014 Kernic 2021). Neuberger (2002: 31) provides an action-theoretical definition: Actor A carries out action X in relation to actor B in situation C and causes Y. Therefore, leadership describes a course of action that is based on a cause-and-effect relationship. For the military, orientation toward a mutual objective is central, i.e., it is a matter of concentrating all available forces to achieve this very objective (cf. Neuberger 2002; Rosenstiel et al. 2005). In war, this objective means repelling an attack or subduing the enemy, i.e., military victory (primary task); in peacetime, further organizational objectives are added (secondary tasks). A central question is apparent: Which methods and means of social influence have the highest probability of success in military practice? While for some, strict command and execution, enforced down to the last detail, appears to be the central prerequisite for the consolidation of all forces (*directive leadership*), others see a minimum of freedom and autonomous thinking/acting as indispensable for people to work in the best possible way to achieve certain goals (*mission command*).

The concept of leadership can be clarified by distinguishing two types of leadership: firstly, *direct* or *interactional leadership*, wielding social influence by way of direct communication between individuals; and secondly, *indirect leadership* through structures and norms (*structural leadership*). In addition, with regard to theory development, it is above all leadership concepts that are gaining in importance (Glasl and Lievegoed 1993: 134 f.). The following *subconcepts of leadership* can be emphasized (Kernic 2021):

- *Leadership theories*: This term refers to basic assumptions used to explain leadership processes; at the same time, they are based on assumptions about a concrete view of the individual and the world.
- *Leadership behavior and leadership styles*: These terms refer to the specific behavior of leaders, their respective behavioral preferences, and typical patterns of behavior (leadership styles).
- *Management procedures, techniques, and instruments*: These terms refer to the development of standardized management procedures and the methods, techniques, and means (tools) used.
- *Leadership process*: This term shows the process of intentional social influence on other people's actions and ways of thinking.
- *Leadership structure*: This term comprises those elements that significantly influence or shape the leadership process.

The following questions appear to be particularly important regarding military practice: What command structure and what command procedures do armed forces require in order to achieve their objectives? What makes a military leader successful? What command methods and techniques are particularly suitable for exerting social influence and control? How can appropriate leaders be selected for the tasks to be performed? How can leadership be taught and trained?

Of course, the interest of social science research goes beyond this practical and application-oriented reference and aims to explain and understand military leadership: What factors determine processes of military leadership? Are they people, situations, or structures? What role does the human factor play and what significance does interpersonal communication have in everyday leadership? What is the significance of norms and how does military leadership become structurally entrenched through actual practices (e.g., ceremonies, rituals, drill, etc.)?

Leadership in Society and the Military: Dimensions in the History of Ideas

Guiding principles and practices of leadership are always embedded in an overall sociohistorical context. Even in archaic cultures, specific leadership structures developed in which people assumed roles with different social status and unequal opportunities for social influence. As a result, processes of social differentiation led to the development of competing ideas of leadership, and leadership was determined and practiced differently in the respective social sectors. The differentiation of social leadership into political, religious, economic, and military leadership went hand in hand with the social emergence of divergent activities and social roles. What is striking in these development processes is the concentration of political and military power in the hands of one person or a certain social leadership elite (Kernic 2021).

The close ties between the fields of politics and the military is historically apparent: Political leaders were at the same time military leaders and political control was based on military force. It was, above all, war that seemed to be the ultimate arbiter on the success or failure of leadership structures. Only in classical Greek antiquity – and later with the development of the modern state – was an attempt made to draw a clear line between politics and the military, between political and military leadership. Even in modern democracies, based on the rule of law, relicts of the original unity are still discernible, for example, in the constitutional regulation of the supreme command of the armed forces. This is held by the civil Federal Minister of Defense in the Federal Republic of Germany in peacetime and the Federal Chancellor in wartime. In the case of France and Austria, the supreme command of the armed forces is held by the President of the Republic; in the USA the president is the supreme commander of the armed forces; in the UK it is the prime minister.

Military Leadership Myths and Archetypes

Traditions of basic social and cultural convictions and leadership myths still shape the image of leadership today. Three questions appear to be of particular importance in this context: a) Which conceptions of man determine the ideas of leadership that exist in the military? b) Which basic philosophical convictions can be found regarding the how and why of leadership and how are they justified? c) Which central leadership myths constitute the cultural memory of military organizations?

And which archetypes of leadership (primeval images) emerge? (Neuberger 2002: 58–69; Blessin and Wick 2014: 23–45; Kernic 2021: 10–12).

Regarding the first question, an *instrumental* idea of man prevails in the military. The human being (= soldier) is primarily seen as a tool in the service of the organization who stands at its disposal and who can be ordered to carry out certain tasks. Soldiers are even expected to be willing to sacrifice their lives for a higher cause. In principle, the achievement of military organizational goals is priority over the self-realization and the life of the individual. The group and the military unit are always more important than the individual. The individual is believed to be able to fit smoothly into the military organization (voluntary socialization), but in practice certain motivational and coercive measures seem to be unavoidable in many cases. In pluralistic, free democracies the instrumental conception of man is waning. Here, the human being is granted personal rights and certain military sanctions and coercive measures are prohibited. Nevertheless, it is generally expected of the human being as a soldier to integrate as smoothly and as seamlessly as possible into what's conceived as a big military organizational machinery (military socialization). The idea that he or she should not just be forced to do so, but, above all, be motivated by incentives and conviction, is a special characteristic of the concept of military leadership in liberal democratic societies.

The second question concerning the basic convictions in the military with regard to the why and how of leadership can be answered with reference to the hierarchical order of the military organization: The central assumption is that command must be given by one person at the top. The idea of a self-organization of systems is foreign to the military. Rather, the conviction prevails that action (= active leadership) is inherently necessary to create the necessary military unity. Without leadership, targeted bundling of all forces (conceived as the mechanical use of all available instruments and systems controlled by a central command) cannot be achieved. The question of how military leadership is to be achieved is usually answered to the effect that the desired social influence can best be guaranteed by means of an authoritarian power in the hands of the leader. Successful military leadership requires not only the existence of a leader but also a concentration of authority and power in his or her person. If such a maximum of authority and power becomes apparent in the person of the military leader, then the readiness to obey and the social recognition of the claim to leadership increase at the same time.

With regard to the third question, the central leadership myths and archetypes of military leadership (Neuberger 2002: 58–69), we can observe the following: Images of idealized leaders and commanders are not only omnipresent in narratives and depictions of military life, but such images are always used specifically as tools of leadership, i.e., for purposes of motivation, enthusiasm, socialization, and obedience. The motivational power of military leadership myths derives mostly from their connection with ethical-moral value judgements or a military doctrine of virtue. At the heart is the idealized (model) image of a military leader, who is nearly always male. The central archetypes of military leadership are still men: on the one hand, the hero, who is characterized by courage and particular bravery; on the other hand, the father, who cares for his subordinate soldiers and leads them on the right path.

Finally, there is the mind (spirit, inspirer), from whom team spirit, fighting spirit, and vitality flow and who embodies military virtues and military ascetic way of life (Neuberger 2002: 109–130). Because of the special need for cohesion, comradeship is very important in the military. The fundamentally positive strengthening of cohesion can also lead to group pressure and social closure and foster subcultures with their own rites. Such incidents often serve the clarification of the meaning of informal leadership, i.e., the question: Who is actually leading? Subcultures and rites can be linked to unwanted traditions or illiberal attitudes, but this is not necessarily the case (Elbe 2020). Such problems, as well as general attacks and forms of abuse of leadership positions, are reported in many cases (e.g., in the German case the Information from the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces: German Bundestag 2020). An extreme form of this kind of leadership practice is described in the Australian Brereton Report: “Typically, the patrol commander would take a person under control and the junior member [...] would then be directed to kill the person under control” (The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force 2020: 29).

Approaches to Systematic-Philosophical Thinking About Military Leadership

In addition to such myths, systematic-philosophical and social science thinking about aspects of human leadership and principles of practical leadership action (general leadership principles) play an important role in modern armed forces. Thoughts and fundamental insights or assumptions from philosophical and scientific discourses are reflected in various ways in military leadership concepts and documents (Kernic 2021).

Plato, Xenophon, and Machiavelli represent the classics of philosophical-political thinking about the military and military leadership. In the nineteenth century, Clausewitz’ approach in particular receives great attention. In sum, over the centuries, a strong connection between human leadership and aspects of soldierly virtue and the talent for army and warfare was evident. Plato (2006–2009) changes this conception by extending successful human leadership systematically on the basis of ideas of justice, harmony, and peace, all of which are to ground a successful social life of coexistence. In the *Nomoi* he no longer presents the ideal leader merely as a lover of wisdom, but as a legislator who lays down rules and watches over their validity and authority. Above all, Plato’s definition of *Arete* (diligence) becomes important for the military because it describes virtue and diligence, the excellence of a person and a thing. It is also linked with fighting and warfare (i.e., to prove oneself in a warlike conflict). Plato’s ethics are particularly suitable to draft a military doctrine of leadership and virtue. Guiding principles of leadership translate into principles of a reasonable and virtuous social life: balance, observance of the right measure, fulfillment of duty, modesty, and prudence; striving for knowledge and wisdom; as well as exemplary behavior.

Xenophon (2009) devotes his works *Anabasis* (The March of the Ten Thousand or The March Up Country) and *Cyropaedia* (The Education of Cyrus) to two interlinked aspects of leadership: on the one hand, the reflection on successful leadership in a war situation; on the other hand, he ponders how the education and training of an ideal leader (army and state leader) should be organized. Xenophon stresses the importance of the *character* and *abilities* of successful leaders, who are to be shaped in their personality through education, training, and testing to become successful leaders. His principles of successful leadership are still taught today in everyday military life: simplicity, uniformity, flexibility, concentration, coordination, and economy of forces.

Machiavelli's (2014) analysis of power and his conception of *virtù*, strength, ability, and power under all circumstances, as well as foresight, have decisively influenced modern thinking about leadership, especially regarding the relationship between leadership and ethics. Machiavelli's thoughts find expression in numerous leadership guidebooks and military leadership documents. These include the principle of consistency of all leadership decisions and the demand for the establishment of rules of social interaction and the enforcement of these – if necessary with an iron fist (question of leadership *credibility*).

Clausewitz (1990) brings a rational understanding of leadership into play and particularly promotes strategic thinking. His differentiation of three different levels of leadership – strategic, operational, and tactical – is still important today. Clausewitz coins the idea of *purpose, ends, and means*. In doing so, he turns away from the widespread dogma of his time, according to which the conduct of a war and military units could be calculated down to the smallest detail using mathematical, quantitative calculations (Schössler 1991: 80–83). Rather, he calls for concentration on the actual purpose of action and the choice of the shortest route to achieving the goal, without applying generally valid, universal rules (Schössler 1991). Intuitive ability is what is required, a reasonable reflection on all situations (Schössler 1991: 91). Psychological aspects are thus given special importance. From this perspective, military leadership is less of a geometrically-mathematically structured planning of (combat) actions but rather a complex interplay of elements such as uncertainty, chance, creativity, intuition, courage, and talent (Clausewitz 1990, cf. in particular the section on the martial genius).

In modern armed forces, special emphasis lies on the formulation of *military leadership principles*. In practice, these are often merely normatively formulated principles of good conduct, i.e., they are less committed to theory and insight but are primarily oriented toward the practical concerns of controlling the behavior of soldiers. At present, such principles are frequently reduced to aspects of organizational theory, especially the idea of *increasing the efficiency* of organizations. Instead of a *people- and life-oriented* perspective of leadership, an *organisation-theoretical* view becomes predominant. Principles of correct or efficient management replace general principles of leadership. The reasons for this lie, on the one hand, in the increased need for legitimation of armed forces in peacetime and, on the other, in a general trend toward economization of social action. It is a characteristic of the armed forces in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to willingly adopt

business management and organizational theory views on leadership. The military leader thus becomes a leader, manager, and administrator, but loses the classic profile of hero, father, and motivator.

Military Leadership: Theoretical Approaches, Explanatory Models, and Empirical Findings

In the social sciences, there are various theoretical efforts on the phenomenon of leadership (Neuberger 2002; Northouse 2007; Yukl 2010; Bass 2008; Bryman et al. 2011; Elbe 2015). These have entered the military sciences, too. In particular, the leadership research of recent decades, which originated in the Anglo-American world, has shaped the academic debate. The most important theoretical approaches and explanatory models are outlined below.

Personality-Based Theories

Personalized approaches characterize almost all efforts at theory building. The strength and weakness of this approach lies in its primary focus on the leader (*Great Man Theory*), with particular attention paid to such factors as character, abilities, and personality.

The trait theory is based on a comparative analysis of different leadership personalities and their specific characteristics. It is necessary to identify those character traits that appear to be directly or indirectly decisive for leadership success (see Rosenstiel 2014). Empirical research tends to develop a catalogue of elementary (leadership) characteristics on the basis of such observations and comparisons (Neuberger 1976; Rosenstiel and Nerdinger 2011; Gebert and Rosenstiel 2002; Kernic 2021). Rosenstiel (2014: 7) provides the following catalogue (see Stogdill 1974; Northouse 2007: 18):

- (a) Ability (intelligence, vigilance, verbal dexterity, originality, and judgement)
- (b) Achievement (school performance, knowledge, and sporting achievement)
- (c) Accountability (reliability, initiative, perseverance, aggressiveness, self-confidence, and desire to excel)
- (d) Participation (activity, sociability, willingness to cooperate, adaptability, and humor)
- (e) Status (socioeconomic position and popularity)

On the other hand, there are studies that emphasize the following three characteristics (Manning and Curtis 2009: 16):

- (a) Intelligence
- (b) Clear and strong values
- (c) High personal driving force

The trait theory aims particularly at answering a central question of military leadership: Which are the characteristics troop leaders and commanders have to possess in order to achieve leadership success?

The skills theory considers certain learnable and developable (leadership) skills to be decisive for leadership success. As early as the 1950s, Katz (1955) developed a model according to which leaders are expected to have different levels of technical, social, and conceptual skills, depending on the level of leadership. The starting point is the assumption that nobody is born a leader, but that leadership skills can be learned, practiced, and improved. This view is widely accepted in the military today, although it is linked to the belief that people are unequally suited to leadership. The two central questions that this approach seeks to answer can be formulated as follows: What practical skills and techniques do military leaders need to lead successfully? And, how can these skills be taught?

Theoretical approaches to leadership personality are mainly based on assumptions and findings from personality psychology. The conception of the five dimensions of personality (Big 5 personality traits) and the relationship between personality and trust play a central role. According to the five assumed Big 5 personality traits, every person can be ranked on a scale with the following factors: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and tolerance (or sociability) (Costa and McCrae 1992). It is often attested that successful leaders show a particularly high degree of conscientiousness (high sense of responsibility), make high demands on themselves (high work ethics), and exhibit a high degree of extroversion (McCrae and Costa 2003; Howard and Howard 2008). The military often refers to the need for charisma (*charismatic leadership*) in this context.

Max Weber's concept of *charismatic command* (Weber 1980) at the same time exposes a number of fundamental aspects and problems of military leadership: Firstly, by introducing this originally theological concept and defining charisma as "the exceptional sanctity or heroic qualities or exemplary character of a person, and of the orders that this person proclaims or creates (charismatic rule)" (Weber 1980: 342), he makes reference to always preexisting possibilities of a metaphysical and theological foundation of leadership/obedience, especially in terms of a fusion of religious and military spheres. In the context of his concept of command, he looks at aspects concerning legitimacy, on the one hand. On the other hand, Weber also includes purely empirical (factual, actual) evaluations of leadership by the followers or charismatically ruled without these value judgements being based on moral criteria or standards (Weber 1980: 374 ff.). This reveals the ambivalence of the type of charismatic leader: he or she may be good or evil, leader or seducer. Secondly, Weber's concept of charismatic leadership radically questions the modern, mechanical-instrumental understanding of leadership (especially the belief that human action can be controlled down to the smallest detail, i.e., that ultimately it is only a matter of choosing and using the right means of control) as well as ideas of bottom-up leadership (e.g., participatory leadership). Referring to charisma enables the drafting and the practical implementation of a metaphysical concept of top-down military leadership. Based on its divine metaphysical justification, this allows for the development of ways of thinking and acting in the military – right up to the

establishment of a radically conceived blind and unconditional obedience to the commander (in the sense of total devotion). Such thinking detaches itself from socially established ethical criteria and standards. At all military levels of leadership, the desire or will to impress one's own subordinate soldiers and followers as a field army or military leader often becomes dominant within the framework of such leadership action.

All in all, the military organization always faces a dual task (Elbe 2020; Kernic 2021). On the one hand, charismatic-dogmatic leadership has to be limited, i.e., leadership responsibility in an ethical sense has to be guaranteed and leadership processes have to be designed primarily according to rational-functional criteria. On the other hand, there is the need for convincing, inspiring, and motivating troop leaders in the military who, on the basis of their personal qualities and abilities, can produce loyalty among the soldiers under their command and thus make a significant contribution to military success (especially in combat situations).

Behavior-Oriented Theories (Leadership Styles)

Leadership behavior theory is based on the observation that leaders develop (dominant) behavior patterns in their relationships with followers. At first glance, these patterns of behavior and action (leadership styles) appear to be independent of the situation. The term leadership style refers to a "regularly recurring pattern of leadership action that lasts over time and is inherently constant in relation to certain situations" (Staehele 1999: 334; Macharzina 2003). Military discourses on leadership styles are often based on a one- or two-dimensional leadership style model.

The best-known one-dimensional model was developed by Kurt Lewin, who in his typology of basic attitudes first made a fundamental distinction between authoritarian or democratic leadership behavior and the absence of leadership – what had been labeled a *laissez-faire* group atmosphere (Lewin 1951; Lewin et al. 1939). The *laissez-faire* group atmosphere allows the greatest freedom for the group members (i.e., not to lead, to let things simply run their course). In terms of the active leadership attitudes, the authoritarian style of leadership allowed no contradiction, and decisions are made by one leader alone. This contrasts with the democratic style of leadership in which a cooperative relationship is created (objective discourse, participation, and dialogue) and decisions are made together. In two extensive experiments, clubs of 10-year-old boys were exposed to both leadership styles (authoritarian vs. democratic) and all three group atmospheres (authoritarian, democratic, and *laissez-faire*). The main results determined were that, firstly, democratic climates were considered most pleasant, and secondly, that aggression and hostility in autocratic groups was generally more frequent. Hostility and aggression especially occurred when there was a transition from autocratic to a freer social climate. Group conflicts were promoted by three factors: the presence of hostile persons who were not group members, the absence of a group leader, or the lack of group activity (Lewin et al. 1939).

From the group of two- and three-dimensional models, the *Managerial Grid* developed by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton (1994) in the 1960s has become particularly well known. It allows a further differentiation of leadership styles and is still used in military leadership training today. However, all models suffer from the shortcoming that there is no empirical evidence for the assumption of a single correct leadership style whose application would automatically guarantee successful leadership. The choice of the correct or appropriate management style ultimately always depends on the respective situation and the concrete circumstances. Another model that has received particular attention in the recent past is that of transformational leadership. This concept highlights the transformational power of the leader through factors such as optimism, charisma, intelligence, etc. (Burns 1978). Bass (1985) and Bass and Avolio (1990) subsequently expanded and refined the concept of transactional/transformational leadership, whereby the possibilities for change in leadership were based on the following four factors: (a) good practice, charisma, and credibility (idealized influence), (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration.

Situational Theories

Situational theories and situational leadership models emerged as a reaction to the unsatisfactory explanatory power of all person and behavior-related approaches. Instead of the leader, the leadership situation became the object of investigation. The following question became the guiding principle: Which concrete situational factors determine whether or not a leader is successful in a certain situation? The socioscientific claim of these theoretical approaches is to identify the most important parameters or influencing factors for the respective leadership situations (and, wherever possible, to make them measurable). The basic idea is to find out which *mixture of factors* produces best results, i.e., ensures leadership success.

In the basic pattern of situational leadership, situation- and person-related influencing factors (variables) are combined, which are subject to permanent change (“dynamic model”). The group of situational factors, generally regarded as important, includes (cf. Manning and Curtis 2009: 43 f.) the size of the organization, the social and psychological climate, working conditions, and the type, location, and purpose of the work. In German-speaking leadership papers, the following factors are often used for analysis: personality of the leader, employees, organization, environment, and leadership behavior.

Current Theoretical Approaches

At this point a variety of current theoretical approaches could be listed, e.g., with reference to neurosciences, systems theory, cybernetics, constructivism, and gender (Bryman et al. 2011; Nohria and Khurana 2010; Elbe 2015). Such a project has, so far, not been considered because these approaches have hardly been applied to the

field of military leadership. Overall, one can speak of a coexistence of the most diverse leadership theories, without one of them having succeeded in asserting itself as the dominant theory or meta-theory over the others nor having succeeded in becoming generally accepted in science. Therefore, only two approaches shall be briefly examined: the systemic and the constructivist approach.

Since the late 1960s, concepts and notions developed by system theory (system, environment, autopoiesis, communication, observation, etc.) have found their way into leadership research. From a systemic perspective, leadership situations are a dynamic social reality of enormous complexity that must be made manageable. This can and should be achieved by identifying the relationships that are effective in it (cause-effect, means to an end, etc.). Decisive guiding differences in systemic theory formation are in particular the distinctions between the partial and the whole, the system versus the environment, and the identity difference. Such system-borne distinctions cause demarcations and establish an order of things simultaneously, although this is subject to constant fluctuations. The person-oriented (or behavior-oriented) perspective is replaced by a focus on the dynamics of interaction and communication.

Constructivist theories see leadership practice in social reality and life as constructed. The focus is on construction elements and processes of a socially constructed reality that can be shaped and socially influenced or even changed. At the same time, this theoretical approach takes leave of the claim to be able to make unambiguous predictions. Thus, there are no ready-made recipes for successful leadership. Rather, it is a matter of precisely describing and understanding complex relationships in their respective effects and influences (social constructions).

Overview of Empirical Findings

A systematic review of the large amount of literature on military leadership quickly leads to the insight that the vast majority of books, studies, and articles can be assigned to two main categories: The first grouping includes personal, mostly historical-biographical depictions of military leaders. In contrast, the literature in the second category focuses on concrete (contemporary) historical leadership situations, i.e., on the interaction of individuals in specific situations and in a very specific sociocultural context (often designed as empirical case studies). Both categories are characterized by descriptive-analytical research methods based on historical documents, testimonies, and personal experiences. There are also many publications by former commanders who, after a military mission, present their personal reflections and analyses to the world – mostly in the sense of lessons learned or as recommendations and guidelines for future generations of leaders, both inside and outside the military (for example: Montgomery 1961; Smith 2002; Kiyosaki 2015; Kernic 2021).

Numerous surveys on military leadership largely dispense with a systematic processing of empirical findings. Instead, they endeavor to make normative statements on leadership in a military context, especially with regard to the triangle of

(a) leaders, (b) leadership actions and processes, and (c) general principles of military leadership (motivation, cohesion, discipline, values, culture, trust, etc.) (Taylor and Rosenbach 2005; Horn and Walker 2008). A first comprehensive evaluation of the empirical findings of military leadership research and military sociology of the postwar period was carried out in the mid-1980s by Van Fleet and Yukl (1986). This showed that empirical social research on military leadership is characterized by the effort to test empirically individual leadership theories in specific military fields of action and to make new psychological research approaches (e.g., leadership under stress) useful for research as well as for military service. In recent times, for example, the concept of empirically based leadership (McDonald 2013) combines psychological aspects with personality-specific characteristics of effective leadership and context-related factors. The importance of the interplay of intelligence (cognitive and emotional) and ethics/values for leadership performance is emphasized (ibid.).

At the beginning of the 2000s, interesting empirical findings were produced by studies on the importance of trust in everyday military leadership. Vadell (2008) provided evidence of a close connection between trust and commitment in the course of his studies on the US Air Force: “Junior officers with a stronger sense of duty and an obligation to the Air Force are less likely to leave the Air Force after their commitment. (...) With an increase of trust in leadership fewer junior officers leave the Air Force” (ibid.: 107). In the German-speaking world, there is a lack of socioempirical findings on the sociopsychological significance of the factor trust in the context of everyday military leadership. One exception is Mackewitsch’s survey (2001), which aimed to determine the trust German soldiers place in their superiors in the Kosovo mission and to ascertain how their leadership behavior is perceived.

The importance of soft skills or human skills for efficient, successful leadership has been repeatedly confirmed for years by empirical findings from *command and control (C2) research*. Various studies point to a clear primacy of human factors (personality and abilities of the commander, flexibility, and potential for change management) over technical and procedural factors with regard to military leadership success (Creveld 1985; Pigeau and McCann 2002; Sharpe and English 2002; Kernic 2021). In the context of military stabilization missions, the case studies presented by Fieder (2011) recently provided empirical evidence for the following attributes of military leadership success: unity of forces, focus on strategic vision, inspiration and flexibility, authority and relationships, as well as planning and training (ibid.: 56).

Anglo-American leadership research – both in general and in relation to the military – has been intensively received in the German-speaking world since the 1970s. Various studies have taken up the various leadership theory approaches and tested their applicability to concrete leadership situations (e.g., Lippert and Schneider 1977). Two large-scale empirical surveys have dealt with the activities of leaders in the German Bundeswehr and the image of company commanders and noncommissioned officers as leaders, educators, and instructors of their soldiers. The activity analysis of the Company Commander Study (Kuhlmann 1979) showed that relatively little time is actually spent on the actual leadership activities within a

company. With regard to the oral communication of the officer and company commander as the leader of his soldiers, the study diagnosed a significant social distance between the leader and the commanded. This was shown, among other things, by the fact that in over 90% of the interaction time in everyday military life there was no direct contact. Therefore, only nonverbal interaction between the unit leader and his soldiers was possible (ibid.: 189–193), at best. This finding was confirmed again some 20 years later, with more recent studies focusing primarily on the specific habitus and professional ethos of officers. Elbe (2004), who defines officers as the sectoral elite of the military (ibid.: 420), referred to this distance between the officer and his crew (his soldiers), which in his opinion is not only due to the dispositive activity of the officer, but must rather be seen as a part of an elitist attitude. A structural consequence of this social distance for military leadership in everyday life is obvious: “The officer is therefore dependent on the implementation and mediation performance of non-commissioned officers, who in turn develop their typical attitude” (ibid.).

The broadly based *Group Leader Study* (“Unterführer-Studie”) of the Social Science Institute of the German Bundeswehr (Dillkofer and Klein 1979; Dillkofer and Klein 1981) produced interesting results regarding the self-perception and perception by others of the noncommissioned officers of the German Bundeswehr in terms of their activity as human leaders: “In all ranks and all branches of the armed forces there is a clear preference for a cooperative style of leadership. The members of the Air Force are particularly in favour of it, those of the Army less so. This branch of the armed forces is the only one with a not inconsiderable number of non-commissioned officers who consider a leadership style based strictly on command and obedience to be optimal” (Dillkofer and Klein 1981: 96).

While in the late 1980s the aspect of military leadership in small combat communities (Lippert 1985) met with particular interest within military sociology, research of the last two decades has concentrated particularly on aspects of military career progression. Elbe and Prondzinski (2002: 110 f.) showed that an above-average number of officers succeeded in advancing to leading positions in their later professional lives outside the German Bundeswehr. According to Elbe in his conclusion, the “decisive factor for the first employment after military service” was “the combination of academic qualifications and (military) leadership experience” (Elbe 2004: 427). All empirical findings with regard to career progression – also over the 20-year time axis – confirm that leadership experience in the military proves to be advantageous and useful for a later career and leadership activities in the civilian environment (Elbe 2018). An empirical study from Switzerland came to a similar conclusion and emphasized the strengths attributed to military cadre training, such as “ability to work under pressure, assertiveness, self-discipline and the ability to quickly assess the situation and make decisions,” while on the other hand, “the benefit of military cadre training for the development of social competence” was considered relatively low (Schmid et al. 2007).

More recently, questions concerning the relationship between leadership style and leadership success have experienced a renaissance within the military context. In this respect, multinational operations and close cooperation between members of armed

forces of different nations and between civilian and military personnel in multinational headquarters offer an ideal field of investigation for empirical surveys on questions of leadership culture (Hagen 2006; Casas Santero and Sánchez Navarro 2008; Richter 2018b). In 2014, a broad empirical study examined the preferred leadership styles and the general leadership culture in Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) (Richter 2018a). The data clearly show that the participatory management style is generally preferred and that a clear majority of the respondents favor a management style that encourages the involvement of subordinates in decision-making processes. At the same time, the results of the study provided two interesting insights: First, a very similar attitude preference with regard to preferred leadership style was found across all levels of leadership and groups of people, regardless of national origin or status as a civilian or military person. Second, data analysis suggests that the leadership style itself does not have a significant impact on aspects such as organizational commitment or mission clarity (ibid.).

Leadership Concepts in Modern Armed Forces

In modern times, the emergence of mass armies has drawn increased attention to central aspects of military leadership, organizational control, and modern management. The enormous armies undoubtedly bore strong similarities to modern factories and enterprises aimed at the mass production of goods and commodities. Compared to these companies, the special feature of the military is its orientation toward a “management of military force” (Lasswell 1941). Early management theory (scientific management) and military leadership theory are therefore closely interwoven. With increasing democratization, however, they gradually began to fall apart. Democratization processes led to a new definition of civil-military relations based on the primacy of politics and public and parliamentary control of military force.

The social, political, and economic upheavals of modern times have changed the leadership concepts of the armed forces in democratic pluralistic states. New concepts have found their way into the military, for example, in the area of personnel management. The concept of personnel management makes reference to everyday work and the understanding of such work in modern society, especially to the places and processes of product production. From this perspective, military leadership becomes a means of influencing the social driving factors of people’s work performance. Military forces appear as companies that are responsible for the production of a range of products (e.g., security) and the provision of certain services. Military management becomes corporate management, which involves guiding principles and concepts of personnel management for the military organization and for military operation (Kernic 2021).

The introduction of an entrepreneurial perspective on leadership leads to a division of leadership tasks in the military: on the one hand, personnel management or personnel administration; on the other hand, corporate management in the sense of actively shaping the structures and processes in the “military” enterprise. And

suddenly there is talk of employee motivation and satisfaction or a binding definition of performance targets for soldiers.

What are the contents and basic convictions behind the management concepts of the armed forces in democratic, pluralistic societies? A study of current leadership documents of the armed forces reveals a picture of the military leader who is faced with a wide range of hybrid challenges. He appears both as a recipient of orders and as an independently thinking and acting commander; he is a fighter and peacekeeper; he is a leader and manager; he is demanding and encouraging. What is striking is the constant emphasis on his leadership activity based on ethical values, on the basis of ethics and law.

In the US Army, for example, various Army Regulations (Field Manuals) regulate aspects of military leadership. Leadership is defined here as “influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation, while operating to accomplish the mission and improve the organisation” (US Army 2007). The framework for military leadership in the US Army model is determined by a specific military culture (army culture), which is based on the following cornerstones: ethics, values, standards, war ethics, and principles/imperatives.

According to Army Regulation 600–100, the Army develops “competent and multifaceted military and civilian leaders who personify the Army values and the warrior ethos in all aspects from warfighting, to statesmanship, to enterprise management. The Army develops qualities in its leaders to enable them to respond effectively to what they will face.” [ibid.]

In the German-speaking world, current discussions seek to integrate military leadership in the democratic constitutional state with its fundamental values. Since its emergence, the concept of *Innere Führung* (*Civic Education and Leadership*) in Germany can be seen as an expression of such a need to merge democratic principles under the rule of law with the ideas and practices of military leadership. Generally, Civic Education and Leadership “ensures that Bundeswehr soldiers are part of society and obliges the armed forces to uphold law and military order. It shapes the leadership culture of the Bundeswehr” (BMVg 2008). The regulation itself, now known as the Central Manual on *Civic Education and Leadership, Self-Conception, and Leadership Culture A-2600/1* (BMVg 2017), goes one step further and declares intrinsic leadership to be the general norm of conduct for soldiers of the Bundeswehr: “Civic Education and Leadership is the obligatory basis for our own actions in day-to-day activity as well as in operations, in national and multinational structures. All soldiers must align their behaviour and actions with the principles of Civic Education and Leadership. This is an important element of the Bundeswehr’s leadership culture” (BMVg 2017: paragraph 501).

This leadership culture was put to the test in a representative research in the German Armed Forces by Richter (2020). He shows that the majority of the soldiers are satisfied with their direct superior. However, superiors in the German Armed Forces should develop more leadership sensitivity in some areas, namely show more critical self-assessment, live their role model more strongly toward subordinates, convey more confidence, and express more criticism and praise, i.e., give more feedback. In addition to the individual management-led interaction level, the

leadership culture at the organizational level is of central importance for a healthy organization. Still there is potential for further development of the Civic Education and Leadership Conception to further improve the soldiers' satisfaction with their superiors' leadership performance.

In Switzerland in the 1990s, it was mainly Rudolf Steiger (of the Military Academy at ETH Zurich) who provided suggestions for military leaders on how they should behave in their capacity as leaders in everyday situations. He describes his leadership philosophy with the concept of people-oriented leadership, which he sees as a basic attitude "in which people play a key role in thinking, feeling – and hopefully also in acting!" (Steiger 2004: 17). "By people-oriented leadership we understand," Steiger says, "that the actions and behaviour of everyone involved in a task are focused on the goals that have been set or agreed upon, whereby the employee as a human being plays an important role". (ibid.: 17 f.).

The model of the Austrian armed forces (Theresian leadership model) is based on an image of man "which is characterised by personal responsibility, trust and the will to shape things" (Königshofer 2015: 12). Leadership action is understood "as responsible, goal-oriented action that is controlled by decisions, both at the level of military leadership and at the level of the person led (decision to co-responsible obedience)" (ibid.). Leadership competencies are regarded as the ability "to act creatively and self-organised in unexpected, open-ended leadership situations" (ibid.: 47).

Military leadership training today largely takes these models and concepts into account. This promotes a new image of the officer, which pushes the trainer and human leader (instructor, motivator, initiator, and helper) to center stage, but without eliminating the image of the fighter (warrior) completely. At the same time, civilian leadership and management concepts are increasingly finding their way into the military: military leaders are often sent to civilian universities and educational institutions in order to learn new leadership insights and integrate them into the military. At the same time, the opening up of access for women to military service has marked the beginning of a gradual, albeit hesitant, erosion process of a dominant masculinity orientation with regard to leadership in the military (Kernic 2021).

Summary and Perspectives

Leadership in general extends to a multitude of different fields of social interaction and influence (Manning and Curtis 2009: 12). Military leadership can be defined as the systematically planned, intentional control of actions of armed forces in their entirety (including all branches of the armed forces, troop units, etc.) and influence on the people acting in these organizations, which aims to achieve certain (organizational) goals through a coordinated effort. These goals can be achieved, but they can also be missed. Successful military leadership is said to be achieved when the specified goals are actually achieved (leadership success, effective leadership). Countless examples from history show that military leadership can fail miserably. Due to the violent potential of the armed forces, such failure can have catastrophic

consequences that are by no means limited to the military sphere. This leads to the necessity of a careful selection of leaders as well as systematic, extensive leadership training in the military organization.

Today, the conviction prevails that every person is generally capable of exercising certain leadership activities, i.e., being a leader. However, the view is held that certain people are better suited than others. At the same time, empirical research clearly shows that people who seem to be born to lead have no guarantee of success in certain situations and in various constellations. Their actions may be crowned with success in practice in one instance, but not in another. The lack of a generally accepted, comprehensive social science theory of military leadership often inspires military leaders to view leadership as a form of art (Grint 2000) rather than science. Of course, empirical research findings and abstract leadership theories cannot simply be translated one to one into practical instructions for action but as for instance Richter (2020) has shown, it is the organization's leadership culture that fosters the soldiers' satisfaction with their superiors' leadership performance. However, they can help us to understand better leadership situations and advance our reflection on human action and social interaction – and thus open up new ways of thinking and new scope for action.

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