

LEADERSHIP–FOLLOWERSHIP DYNAMICS IN MILITARY ORGANIZATIONS: FOLLOWERSHIP AS A VECTOR OF ORGANIZATIONAL BALANCE

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Abstract: *The dynamics of the leadership–followership relationship constitute the core of organizational functioning, acquiring critical importance in the military environment due to the high-stakes nature of missions and rigid hierarchical structures. This article examines how high-quality military followership acts as a key vector of organizational balance, interacting synergistically with military leadership to identify and address neglected risks. In the contemporary security environment, characterized by uncertainty and hybrid threats, such risks often manifest as “Gray Rhino” phenomena: highly probable, high-impact threats that are systematically ignored. The study integrates classical and modern theories of military leadership, highlighting the transition from rigid, command-and-control models to adaptive, transformational approaches centered on human capital and distributed decision-making. Simultaneously, it explores the evolution of followership from passive execution to active engagement grounded in critical thinking, responsibility, and ethical courage. Drawing on contemporary theoretical frameworks, the paper argues that effective followers are not merely executants but co-producers of organizational outcomes. By linking leadership–followership dynamics with the “Gray Rhino” paradigm, the article demonstrates that organizational failures often stem not from a lack of information, but from deficiencies in interpretation, communication, and action. Ultimately, it proposes that balanced interaction between leadership and followership enhances institutional resilience and anticipatory capacity in complex operational environments.*

Keywords: followership, leadership, adaptive capacity, strategic foresight, organizational equilibrium

1. Introduction

The dynamics of the relationship between leadership and followership constitute the core of any organization’s functioning, and in the military environment, this dyad takes on critical importance, given the vital nature of missions and the rigid hierarchical structure.

This article examines how high-quality military followership acts as an essential driver of military organizational balance, interacting synergistically with military leadership to identify and address overlooked risks, which, in the current security context, marked by uncertainty and

hybrid threats, may face the risk of “Gray Rhino” crises.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Military Leadership

Studies in the fields of military organization management and military science have traditionally been dominated by the concept of leadership, considered the cornerstone of operational success and organizational cohesion.

The redefinition of leadership in the 21st century represents a fundamental shift, moving from rigid hierarchical structures to more flexible and dynamic approaches.

Leadership is the conscious and intentional process through which a leader influences, inspires, and motivates employees to participate in achieving the organization's goals (mission, aims, and objectives) by gaining their commitment through non-coercive influence.

Ultimately, leadership is the process of exerting influence in terms of the ability to convince others to follow. This definition can be expressed as an equation: leadership = leader + followers.

The traditional paradigm of leadership was, initially, that of command and control, in which there was a clear distinction between the role of leaders and that of the subordinates who followed them. In this model, the relationship between leaders and the people who followed them was based essentially on the leaders' authority and the obedience of others.

The principle of unity of command, as a fundamental principle established by military theorists such as Antoine-Henri de Jomini and Carl von Clausewitz, stipulates that every subordinate must have a single direct superior, ensuring a clear chain of command and preventing confusion in combat situations [1].

Approaches to military leadership have evolved significantly throughout history, reflecting changes in society, technology, and the nature of conflict itself; and although the fundamental principles of leadership have remained constant, their implementation has undergone major transformations.

In this way, military leadership has shifted substantially from its classical, rigid models, centered on strict hierarchical structures, to modern approaches that emphasize flexibility, adaptability, and the development of human capital.

"Military leadership is the process of influencing people by providing the purpose, direction, and motivation necessary to accomplish the mission and improve the organization" [2].

The classic leadership model is fundamentally linked to operational

efficiency and the need to make quick and clear decisions in crisis situations.

The key principles included:

- unity of command, which is a fundamental principle whereby each subordinate reports to and receives orders from a single superior. This ensures a clear hierarchy, prevents confusion and ambiguity in the chain of command, and enhances organizational cohesion.
- strict hierarchy, which establishes that classical military structures are eminently hierarchical, with well-defined roles and responsibilities for each level, from the team leader to the strategic leader.
- discipline and order, where the primary emphasis is on following orders and regulations and maintaining "iron" discipline, considered essential for mission success.
- transactional leadership, where in this model, the relationship between leader and subordinate is often transactional: subordinates perform tasks and follow orders in exchange for rewards (promotions, recognition) or to avoid punishment. The leader focuses on control, organization, and correcting deviations.

As the operational environment has become more complex and unpredictable, there has been a need for new approaches. Modern theories emphasize the relationship between leader and follower and the leader's ability to inspire and motivate.

One answer to this problem can be found in the difference between the leadership styles practiced in organizations. This gives rise to the distinction between two concepts: *transformational leadership* and *transactional leadership*.

The concept of "transformational leadership" was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns in his research on political leaders. Today, the term is also used in organizational management and organizational psychology. Burns noted the difficulty of distinguishing management

from leadership, arguing that the differences are found in characteristics and behaviors. He identified two concepts: transformational leadership and transactional leadership [3].

Transformational leadership is regularly studied in contrast to transactional leadership, that is, the type of leader interested in persuading others to act by offering immediate rewards and satisfying immediate, and especially extrinsic, needs. While the transformational leader convinces you to act in the spirit of an uplifting idea, of corporate, scientific, or human ideals, the transactional leader is of a mercantilist nature: *“if I help you or do something for you, you will help me or give me something else in return”*.

Thus, transformational leadership, often considered the opposite of classic transactional leadership, focuses on motivating subordinates (followers, adherents) to transcend their personal interests for the collective good and to achieve higher-level objectives.

The transformational military leader has a clear and compelling vision that gives meaning to the mission and motivates subordinates (followers, adherents) to act with enthusiasm.

The transition from the rigid principle of command-and-control, which emphasizes control, conformity, and strict hierarchy, to postmodern transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision, inspiration, and human development, reflects a more nuanced understanding of human dynamics within organizations.

In practice, today’s effective military leaders do not adhere to a single philosophy, but rather integrate elements from both paradigms. They maintain structure and clarity (the classical aspects) while using inspiration and vision (the postmodern aspects) to “navigate” the complexity and context of the postmodern security environment.

In the context of the multi-domain battlefield, operational success is no longer guaranteed exclusively by the leader’s

vision, but by the subordinates’ ability to interpret and adapt the military leader’s intent to fluid tactical realities.

In conclusion, leadership at the beginning of the 21st century is grounded differently than that of the previous century. It is less about control and more about culture, less about orders and more about learning, and requires leaders capable of delegating authority and making effective decisions in a constantly changing environment.

3. Military Followership, from Execution to Critical Thinking

Followership is a relatively new field of research that has evolved from a traditional view that regarded followers as passive and subordinate to a postmodern perspective that recognizes them as active participants and causal agents in the leadership process. By exploring the “followership” paradigm in the contemporary military context, we analyze the transition from the traditional model of blind execution to a model based on critical thinking and proactive engagement.

The term “followership,” often neglected in favor of the cult of leadership, actually accounts for 80–90% of the activity of any command structure, and the transition from execution to critical thinking among followers (subordinates, adherents) is, therefore, an imperative for organizational survival. *“Followers are the people who contribute to achieving organizational goals through enthusiasm, cooperation, and critical thinking, not just through blind conformity”* [4].

The concept of followership represents an essential field of study that complements the traditional concept of leadership, shifting the focus from the leader to the role and actions of subordinates (followers, adherents).

Contrary to common perception, this is not about passive obedience, but rather an active set of behaviors and processes through which an organization’s staff supports, challenges, or interacts with leaders to achieve common goals.

The concept of followership can be defined in several ways, depending on the theoretical approach (role-based or process-based).

Followership, in general, refers to the process by which an individual achieves personal and organizational goals through active participation, collaboration, and support of a leader's efforts in a given situation.

From another perspective, followership represents the ability, willingness, and process through which a person actively supports a leader, contributing to the achievement of organizational goals through engagement, critical thinking, and initiative.

From Robert Kelley's (1992) perspective, the concept of followership refers to the active and important role within an organization that is complementary to, yet distinct from, leadership. Kelley redefined the traditional passive perception of followers, arguing that they are, in fact, *"people who act with independent intelligence, courage, and a strong sense of ethics."*

Ira Chaleff (2009) introduced the concept of *"the courageous follower,"* emphasizing the importance of courage in taking responsibility, participating, challenging the leader when necessary, and supporting the leader's vision. He emphasizes the balance between supporting the leader and challenging them. The central definition highlights that: *"The courageous follower is one who has the courage to take responsibility, the courage to serve, the courage to challenge, the courage to participate in a transformation, and the courage to take a stand ethically"* [5].

The key characteristics of followership are:

- an active and voluntary role in which followers (subordinates, adherents) are not mere executors, but choose to follow a vision, get involved, and contribute to its success;
- dynamic interaction, where followership involves a complex, two-way relationship between the leader and

followers (subordinates, adherents), in which both parties influence one another;

- shared responsibility, whereby both leaders and followers bear responsibility for the outcomes (successes or failures) of military structures or organizations;
- critical and independent thinking, characteristic of effective followers (subordinates, adherents) who do not unconditionally accept the military leader's ideas, but think critically, provide constructive feedback, and, if necessary, challenge decisions deemed wrong (*the so-called "courageous" or "effective" followers*).

Military followership defines the essential and dynamic role of followers (subordinates, lower-ranking military personnel, adherents) within the military hierarchy, emphasizing how they interact with military leaders to achieve mission objectives. Contrary to the traditional view, which saw the subordinate as a passive recipient of orders, postmodern literature emphasizes that effective military followership is a vital component of operational success, requiring initiative, critical thinking, and commitment.

In conclusion, the study of military followership transforms the traditional view of organizational dynamics (of the "top-down" model), showing that followers are active partners in the leadership process, essential to success and ethics within the military organization.

4. The "Gray Rhino" Paradigm in the Context of Security and Defense: From Forecasting to Strategic Failure

In the analysis of contemporary strategic risks, the *"Gray Rhino"* paradigm, introduced by Michele Wucker, has redefined how military planners assess imminent threats.

Unlike Nassim Taleb's *"Black Swan,"* which describes unpredictable events with massive impact, *the "Gray Rhino"* represents a high-probability, high-impact

threat that is deliberately or systematically neglected.

As Michele Wucker states in her seminal work, *"A Gray Rhino is a highly probable, high-impact threat that is coming straight at us, but which we choose to ignore"* [6].

In the military context, this translates to the accumulation of early warning indicators that, although validated by intelligence services, are not translated into political decisions or concrete defensive actions.

Failure in the face of a military "Gray Rhino" is not a failure of prediction, but one of response. Max H. Bazerman and Michael D. Watkins, in their study *"Predictable Surprises: The Disasters You Should Have Seen Coming, and How to Prevent Them,"* emphasize that *"predictable surprises occur when leaders possess the data necessary to anticipate an event but fail to act due to cognitive, political, and organizational barriers"* [7].

At the top and upper levels of the military organization, these barriers are often fueled by "groupthink" and excessive bureaucracy. Graham Allison, in his analysis of decision-making processes, *"Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis,"* explains that military decisions are not the product of a single rational actor, but rather the result of rigid organizational routines that can obscure or bypass obvious dangers if they do not fit within standard operating procedures [8].

Applying this paradigm to recent conflicts reveals a consistent pattern of ignoring obvious warning signs. A relevant example is the annexation of Crimea and, subsequently, the invasion of Ukraine. In his book *"The Return of Marco Polo's World: War, Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-first Century,"* Robert D. Kaplan argues that the geopolitical revisionism of the great powers was a "Gray Rhino" visible as early as 2008, but the European security architecture preferred to maintain the economic status quo at the expense of military consolidation [9].

Furthermore, Lawrence Freedman notes in his book *"Strategy: A History"* that, in

modern warfare, surprise no longer lies in *"the enemy's appearance,"* but in *"the speed and scale of his action,"* elements that are often underestimated by defenders despite being documented in exercises and adversary simulation scenarios [10].

To counter this paradigm, military structures must shift from a culture of *"crisis response"* to one of *"active anticipation."* H.R. McMaster, in his work *"Battlefields: The Fight to Defend the Free World,"* emphasizes the need to combat *"strategic narcissism,"* that is, the tendency to view the world solely through the lens of one's own desires and to ignore the enemy's agency and intentions, which often constitute the "Gray Rhino" of the future conflict [11].

Transforming a "Gray Rhino" from a catastrophe into an opportunity for reform requires a critical step: recognition. In the general staff environment, this involves encouraging the *"devil's advocate"* and incorporating *"red teaming"* analyses to determine whether ignoring a risk is a calculated decision or a misperception [12]. The "Gray Rhino" paradigm demonstrates that the greatest military defeats do not arise from the unknown, but from the inability to confront the obvious. In an era of big data, the challenge is no longer the collection of information, but the political and military will to act before the "rhino" triggers its imminent impact on national defense.

5. Conclusions

The relationship between leadership and followership is a fundamental element in the effective functioning of modern military organizations. Analysis shows that organizational success can no longer be attributed solely to leaders, but depends on the dynamic and balanced interaction between leaders and their subordinates. High-quality followership, characterized by critical thinking, initiative, and responsibility, actively contributes to improving decision-making and increasing adaptability in complex operational

environments.

The integration of the “Gray Rhino” paradigm highlights that many strategic failures result not from a lack of information, but from the disregard of obvious risks. In this context, subordinates

play a crucial role in identifying and flagging these threats early. Therefore, developing an open organizational culture based on communication, trust, and accountability is essential for strengthening resilience and strategic foresight.

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