

Military Leadership as a Managerial Model in the VUCA Era

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ABSTRACT

The VUCA era (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) requires leadership models that are not only resilient but also adaptive and visionary. This article is an article review that aims to examine the relevance of military leadership as a managerial model in addressing contemporary business challenges. The study employed a literature review method, analyzing scholarly works published in Scopus- and Sinta-indexed journals between 2015 and 2025. Findings indicate that military leadership, grounded in LDRSHIP values (Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honour, Integrity, Personal Courage), strengthens organizational discipline, decisiveness, mission orientation, and resilience. Furthermore, the concept of Mission Command has proven relevant in enhancing intrinsic motivation and subordinate empowerment, while recent studies highlight the positive contributions of military-background leaders in fostering organizational innovation and strengthening corporate governance. However, military leadership also presents limitations, particularly its rigid hierarchy and top-down communication style, which may not align with modern organizational needs. Therefore, this article concludes that military leadership should be adapted into a hybrid model by integrating leadership agility and digital literacy to meet the demands of organizations in the VUCA era.

Key words: Military leadership, VUCA, leadership agility, Mission Command, business management

INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of transformation in the contemporary global landscape—characterized by accelerating technological disruption, geopolitical tension, climate volatility, economic turbulence, and shifting social expectations—has intensified the relevance of what is commonly referred to as the VUCA era, an acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. Originally introduced by the U.S. Army War College in the 1990s to describe the unpredictable and unstable conditions of the post-Cold War strategic environment (Kiluang, Rouco, & Silva, 2024), the VUCA framework has since evolved into a widely adopted analytical lens in management and leadership scholarship. Modern organizations operate within environments that mirror battlefield uncertainty: rapid digital innovation shortens product life cycles, global supply chains amplify systemic risk, pandemics disrupt operational continuity, and political-economic instability reshapes regulatory landscapes. In such conditions, traditional linear planning models are increasingly insufficient, requiring leaders who can navigate ambiguity while maintaining strategic coherence.

In confronting these challenges, contemporary organizations must cultivate leadership capabilities that extend beyond technical competence. Effective leaders in the VUCA era are expected to demonstrate resilience under pressure, disciplined execution, ethical clarity, and adaptive agility. They must balance stability with innovation, combining structured coordination with creative responsiveness. Within this context, military leadership presents a compelling managerial paradigm. Historically developed to function under extreme uncertainty and high-stakes conditions, military leadership integrates hierarchical clarity with situational adaptability. Its structured command systems coexist with decentralized decision-making in dynamic operational contexts, offering a nuanced framework for leading in complex environments.

Military leadership is anchored in foundational values such as discipline, loyalty, decisiveness, courage, accountability, and mission orientation. These values are codified in the LDRSHIP framework—Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage—which continues to guide character formation and ethical leadership development within military institutions (Liseanu, 2023). Empirical observations indicate that these principles foster organizational cohesion, collective identity, and rapid mobilization during crises. Such attributes are highly relevant to business organizations facing disruption, where coordinated action and clarity of purpose are critical for survival and competitive advantage.

However, the transferability of military leadership to corporate contexts requires careful adaptation. The hierarchical rigidity and formal communication patterns associated with traditional military structures may appear incompatible with contemporary organizational cultures that emphasize collaboration, inclusivity, and innovation (Manurung et al., 2022). Modern enterprises often rely on cross-functional teams, participatory governance, and knowledge-sharing ecosystems, which demand flexible and emotionally intelligent leadership approaches. Consequently, integrating military discipline with leadership agility—defined as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral flexibility—is essential to ensure contextual relevance (Syamsir et al., 2025).

Furthermore, in the era of digital transformation and Society 5.0, leadership effectiveness increasingly depends on technological literacy. As noted by Abdurachman (2022), contemporary leaders—both military and civilian—must integrate artificial intelligence, big data analytics, cybersecurity awareness, and digital decision-support systems into strategic processes. The convergence of disciplined strategic thinking with data-driven insight creates a hybrid leadership model capable of responding proactively to volatility while leveraging technological innovation. Therefore, an adaptive, digitally literate military leadership model holds significant promise as a forward-looking managerial framework for navigating the uncertainties of the VUCA environment.

This article adopts a literature review approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize existing research on military leadership and evaluate its relevance as a strategic managerial model in the VUCA era. By integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, the study seeks to construct a comprehensive understanding of how military leadership principles can be translated, adapted, and applied to contemporary organizational settings characterized by complexity and rapid change.

METHOD

This article employs a literature review approach using secondary data from Scopus- and Sinta-indexed journals, international conference proceedings, and relevant academic reports published between 2015 and 2025. The collected literature was critically analyzed and synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of military leadership and its relevance as a managerial model in the VUCA era. Following Snyder (2019), this method aims to map previous findings, identify research patterns and gaps, and construct a conceptual framework that reflects current developments in leadership theory and organizational adaptation to volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

The literature selection followed four stages inspired by the PRISMA framework, adapted into a more flexible narrative review format. First, relevant articles were identified using keywords such as *military leadership*, *VUCA world*, *leadership agility*, *mission command*, and *management model*. Second, a screening process excluded non-managerial or purely technical military studies. Third, an eligibility check ensured that only full-text articles published within the last ten years were included to maintain contemporary relevance. Finally, the inclusion stage involved a thematic analysis of selected studies to identify connections between military leadership and challenges in modern business organizations.

Data analysis employed a thematic approach, examining each article to uncover recurring themes such as the core values of military leadership (LDRSHIP, discipline, loyalty, mission orientation), the adaptation of military leadership in business contexts, the Mission Command philosophy and empowerment of subordinates, leadership agility in VUCA environments, and the implications of military leadership for innovation, governance, and digital transformation. These themes were then compared and synthesized to construct a coherent conceptual framework, allowing this review to move beyond mere summarization toward a critical interpretation of the existing literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Military leadership is rooted in fundamental values centered on discipline, decisiveness, and mission accomplishment. Within the military tradition, leadership is not merely perceived as a formal position but also as a form of moral exemplarity and responsibility toward subordinates. Liseanu (2023) emphasizes that the core values of military leadership are often encapsulated in the LDRSHIP principles: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. These principles shape military leaders into figures capable of fostering trust, maintaining cohesion, and ensuring the achievement of organizational objectives.

The military leadership model emphasizes a clear hierarchical structure, a strong command system, and unwavering loyalty from subordinates to superiors. However, the advancement of the digital era necessitates that military leadership also embrace elements of adaptability, flexibility, and technological literacy (Abdurachman, 2022). Therefore, in the modern context, military leadership extends beyond command authority—it embodies a leader's ability to integrate the discipline and decisiveness of military values with innovation, collaboration, and strategic adaptability. However, military leadership is often perceived as overly rigid and somewhat authoritarian, which may hinder creativity and innovation within organizations (Manurung et al., 2022). Therefore, it is essential to adapt military leadership principles to align with the evolving demands of modern organizations that prioritize flexibility, collaboration, and innovative thinking.

In the business context, leaders in the VUCA era must possess situational awareness, the ability to interpret environmental dynamics, and the capacity to make strategic decisions amid limited or uncertain information. Syamsir, Fadillah, and Fitriani (2025) further assert that effective leadership in this era requires leadership agility—the capacity to integrate cognitive agility (flexibility in thinking), emotional agility (emotional resilience), and behavioral agility (adaptive behavior). Without these forms of flexibility, organizations will struggle to remain responsive, competitive, and sustainable in an environment characterized by constant change and unpredictability.

The concept of leadership agility acts as a key connector in adapting military leadership to modern contexts. As noted by Syamsir, Fadillah, and Fitriani (2025), effective leaders in the VUCA era demonstrate cognitive,

emotional, and behavioral agility. When combined with the military values of discipline and mission focus, these traits form a hybrid leadership model that is both structured and adaptive—well-suited to contemporary organizational challenges.

One of the key concepts in modern military leadership is Mission Command, a leadership philosophy that emphasizes decentralized decision-making guided by the commander's intent. According to Knevelsrud et al. (2024), Mission Command fosters subordinate initiative through four core elements: trust, shared understanding, disciplined initiative, and clear command relationships.

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Mission Command supports the fulfillment of subordinates' basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Meeting these needs enhances intrinsic motivation, work engagement, and overall job satisfaction. Thus, this military leadership philosophy holds strong relevance for the business world, which increasingly seeks to balance clear structural hierarchy with employee empowerment.

According to Knevelsrud et al. (2024), Mission Command has been shown to enhance intrinsic motivation by fulfilling the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This concept aligns closely with the principles of empowering leadership widely discussed in contemporary management literature, emphasizing trust, delegation, and the development of employees' capacity to take ownership of their roles and decisions within the organization.

Equally significant is the mission-oriented focus inherent in military leadership, which anchors the organization's efforts toward clearly defined objectives and prevents the diffusion of priorities amid competing demands. This sense of purpose reinforces both individual and collective commitment to achieving organizational goals. Furthermore, military leaders are often characterized by a high degree of **resilience**, enabling them to persevere and lead effectively through uncertainty, adversity, and volatile conditions (Henderson, 2023). Collectively, these attributes make military leadership a compelling model for organizations seeking stability, agility, and endurance in the face of dynamic and unpredictable challenges.

Empirical evidence also reinforces this connection. Wang and Zheng (2024), in their study of 3,506 publicly listed companies in China, found that firms led by executives with military backgrounds tend to exhibit greater risk-taking behavior in innovation. The military culture's emphasis on courage, discipline, and collective responsibility encourages organizations to allocate more resources toward research and development (R&D). This aligns with Simanauskienė et al. (2021), who found that military leadership that promotes innovation through delegation, support for innovation, intellectual stimulation, and reward mechanisms can significantly enhance innovative behaviors among personnel.

In the Indonesian context, Natalia and Isnalita (2025) discovered that the presence of military-background commissioners contributes to improved corporate performance, stronger governance structures, and reduced risks of conflicts of interest. These findings suggest that military leadership influences not only defense and security sectors but also has substantial and positive implications for corporate governance and organizational effectiveness.

However, military leadership also presents several limitations that warrant careful consideration. Its rigid hierarchical structure can sometimes inhibit creativity and limit subordinate participation in decision-making processes, potentially reducing the flow of innovative ideas from within the organization. Similarly, the top-down communication style commonly associated with military settings may foster perceptions of authoritarianism, which can undermine open dialogue and mutual trust among team members. Moreover, the inherent inflexibility of traditional military systems may not always align with the evolving needs of modern organizations that prioritize adaptability, innovation, and employee empowerment (Manurung et al., 2022).

Therefore, the application of military leadership within the business context must be approached adaptively—by harmonizing the discipline, structure, and mission focus of military principles with the agility, collaboration, and innovation that define contemporary management practices. This integrative approach allows organizations to retain the strengths of military leadership while ensuring alignment with the dynamic and creative demands of the modern corporate landscape.

In summary, military leadership can serve as a relevant and effective managerial model in the VUCA era when adapted with the principles of agility, empowerment, and digital literacy. By integrating military discipline and structure with flexibility, innovation, and technological competence, this hybrid model offers a balanced approach that promotes both organizational stability and adaptability. Ultimately, such a model enables leaders to navigate complexity, foster creativity, and drive sustainable success in an increasingly uncertain and dynamic environment.

CONCLUSION

Military leadership possesses a range of distinctive strengths that contribute to its effectiveness across various organizational settings. Foremost among these is its strong sense of discipline, which ensures organizational stability and operational consistency even under conditions of intense pressure. This discipline fosters reliability,

accountability, and adherence to established standards—qualities essential for maintaining cohesion in complex environments. Another notable advantage is the speed and decisiveness in decision-making, a hallmark of military leadership that proves invaluable during crises where swift, strategic actions are required to mitigate risk and sustain momentum.

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This study underscores that military leadership is not merely a legacy confined to the battlefield, but rather a dynamic framework that can be transformed into a contemporary managerial model. By harmonizing the discipline and decisiveness of military principles with the adaptability of agile management, organizations can foster leaders who are resilient, forward-thinking, and capable of steering effectively through the complexities of an increasingly uncertain environment. There is a need for further research and in-depth case studies to examine the practical implementation of the military leadership model within the contexts of business and healthcare. Such exploration would provide valuable insights into how military-derived leadership principles can enhance organizational effectiveness and resilience in these sectors.

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