

An Argumentative Essay



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**TRANSFORMING THE INDONESIAN ARMY:
THE “SKILLS APPROACH” OF LEADERSHIP
IN A CHANGING ORGANIZATION**

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TRANSFORMING THE INDONESIAN ARMY:

THE “SKILLS APPROACH” OF LEADERSHIP IN A CHANGING ORGANIZATION

In recent years the Indonesian Army has been pursuing a transformation initiative. The vision is clear: a professional, modern, and decisive land force that will guarantee the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity amidst the ever-complex security environment in the 21st century. As in most organizations, change is the most challenging task to accomplish. In life, almost everyone prefers equilibrium, which essentially offers certainty and stability. Change will disrupt that equilibrium. Therefore, it is quite natural that people resist to change. To avoid change, they ask questions, such as: “what is it for me?”; or “if it does not break, why fix it?”. Even when they know that there are actual (personal and organizational) short-term benefits they will enjoy, or on the contrary, in the absence of change there are immediate risks they may have to endure, it is extremely difficult to move people out from their comfort zones. Leadership is therefore the centerpiece of an organizational change, through which we can define problems, challenges and opportunities; translate vision into achievable missions; introduce new paradigms; influence others to get on-board; and finally encourage teamwork to implement those changes and obtain better results. This essay aims to examine some of the key leadership challenges and opportunities in the Indonesian Army transformation. In doing so, the “**Skills Approach**” of leadership is used as a relevant analytical tool. By effectively applying Mumford’s Skill-Based Model of Leadership, the Indonesian Army can actually implement substantial organizational changes to achieve its long-term vision.

Understanding the “Skills Approach” of Leadership

Unlike the “Trait Approach” that analyzes the quality of leaders based on their innate characteristics, the “Skills Approach” highlights leaders’ individual skills and abilities.¹ This approach is particularly useful because it suggests that skills can be learned and developed over time. In this construct, whether or not people were born with leadership traits, they can always improve their skills, and become more effective leaders.² Among others, a valuable model that can be used to better understand the fundamentals of “Skill Approach” is Mumford’s Skill-Based Model of Leadership. This model is an outgrowth of a simple Three-Skill Approach of Leadership set forth by Robert Katz in 1955, which emphasizes leadership in three basic personal skills: technical, human, and conceptual.

Mumford’s Skill-Based Model of Leadership

In 2000, Mumford and his colleagues formulated a more comprehensive skill-based model of leadership. Individual “capability” is the heart of this model, as it examines the relationship between a leader’s knowledge and skills and his or her performance.³ Similar to Katz, Mumford argued that leadership is not reserved for only gifted few individuals; leadership is a capability that can be developed over time through education, training, and first-hand experience.⁴ According to Mumford, there are five interrelated core components of the skill-based model: competencies, individual attributes, leadership outcomes, career experiences, and environmental influences.⁵

- **Competencies.** There are three types of competencies: problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge. **Problem-solving skills** are “a leader’s creative ability to solve new and unusual, ill-defined organizational problems”. Key to this is the leader’s critical and creative thinking to construct and implement solutions to persisting problems.

Leaders are expected to go beyond the conventional wisdom and present “outside the box” ideas. **Social judgment skills** are defined as the “capacity to understand people and social systems”; they help leaders to “work with others to solve problems and to marshal support to implement change within an organization”.⁶ Mumford explained social judgment skills into four elements: perspective taking, social perceptiveness, behavioral flexibility, and social performance. **Perspective taking** is “understanding the attitudes that others have toward a particular problem or solution”; it involves “knowledge about people, the social fabric of organizations, and the interrelatedness of each of them”.⁷ **Social Perceptiveness** is “the insight and awareness into how others in the organization function”; it is essentially “an understanding of the unique needs, goals, and demands of different organizational constituencies”.⁸ The third element is **behavioral flexibility**. It is “the capacity to change and adapt one’s behavior in light of an understanding of others’ perspectives in the organization”. Such flexibility is important in the context of organizational change, where leaders cannot be dogmatic, and on the contrary must always embrace openness and willingness to change in order to meet new demands and address emerging challenges.⁹ The fourth element of social judgment skills is **social performance**, which includes “many related communication skills, such as persuasion and conflict-resolution that are needed in an organization”.¹⁰ Finally, the third type of competencies is **knowledge**, or “the accumulation of information and the mental structures used to organize that information”.¹¹

- **Individual Attributes.** According to Mumford, there are four kinds of attributes that support leaders as they apply their leadership competencies: general cognitive ability, crystalized cognitive ability, motivation, and personality.¹² **General cognitive ability** is

defined as “a person’s intelligence, usually grows and expands up through early adulthood and then declines with age, which includes perceptual processing, information processing, general reasoning skills, creative and divergent thinking capacities, and memory skills”.¹³ **Crystalized cognitive ability** is “an intellectual ability that is learned or acquired over time through experience, which includes being able to comprehend complex information and learn new skills and information, as well as being able to communicate to others in oral and written forms”.¹⁴ **Motivation** is “the drive to accomplish both personal and organizational objectives, which includes willingness to tackle complex organizational problem, dominance to exert influence, and commitment to the social good of the organization”.¹⁵ Finally, Mumford described **personality** as “the characteristics that have significant impact on the development of one’s leadership skills, which include openness, tolerance for ambiguity, curiosity, confidence, and adaptability”.¹⁶

- **Leadership Outcomes.** Mumford categorized two aspects of leadership outcomes: effective problem solving, and performance. **Effective problem solving**, the cornerstone in the skill approach, can be assessed whether or not the solution to the problem is logical, effective, and original.¹⁷ **Performance** is defined as “the degree to which a leader has successfully performed the assigned duties”.¹⁸

- **Career Experiences.** Mumford asserted that career experiences are important in developing leaders’ knowledge and skills to solve complex problems.¹⁹ It goes back to the view that leaders are not born: through challenging job assignments, mentoring, appropriate training, and hands-on experience, people can always be better leaders.²⁰

- **Environmental Influences.** Environmental Influences represent “both internal and external factors that lie outside the leader’s competencies, characteristics, and experiences”.²¹ Internal factors include “technology, facilities, expertise of subordinates, and communication, while external factors include economic, political, and social issues, as well as natural disasters”.²²

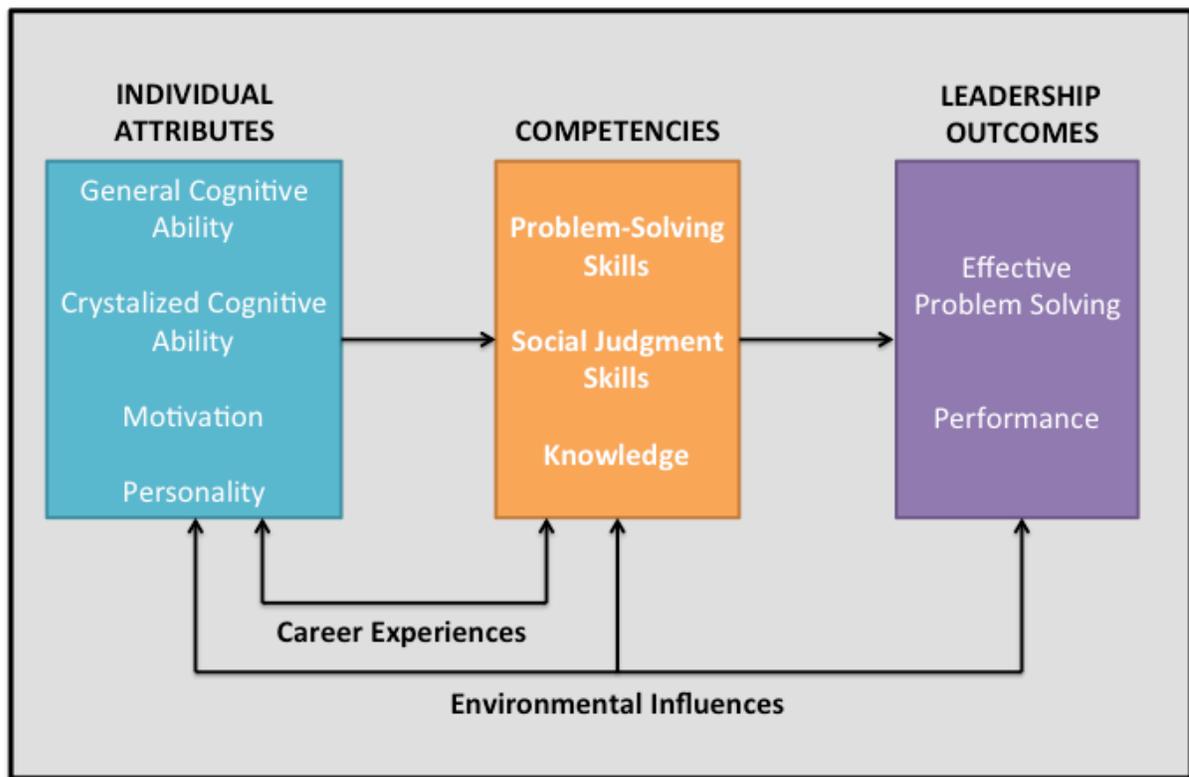


Figure 2. Skill-Based Model of Leadership²³

The Indonesian Army Transformation

For the last ten years, the Indonesian economy has grown significantly. In fact, according to World Bank, today the country is among the top ten largest economies in the world. This condition has allowed the Indonesian Government to allocate significant amount of resources to build up its defense posture, including through several weapons systems modernization programs. As the Commander in Chief, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono envisions a world-class Indonesian military that serves as the nation's best and most ready force in dealing with a broad range of security threats in the future. Being a retired Army General himself, President Yudhoyono was determined that the Indonesian military should take a greater role in national security affairs as well as in the maintenance of international peace and stability. They include both military operations for war and military operations other than war, from counterterrorism to disaster relief to peacekeeping missions. The President's vision has served as the foundation for each military service, including the Army, to establish a comprehensive roadmap for transformation. Applying Mumford's model, both financial and political support from the government and the parliament were the most important **environmental factors** that enabled the Army to transform.

Upon receiving the Presidential guidance in early 2013, General Budiman, the Army Chief of Staff assembled a task force, which comprised the best and brightest officers. Interestingly, he himself designed the composition of the task force, and even handpicked the members. He carefully went through a long list of names, before he finally decided to only include "progressive" officers (from Major to Colonel) who belong to the top 30 percent of their respective year groups. Almost 100 percent of them had prior education or training abroad,

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especially in the United States, Europe, and Australia, and many of them held masters' degree. He expected that this task force would be the “brain” of the Army transformation. He clearly demonstrated an enduring **motivation**, yet the primary reason why he preferred to micromanage the task force was primarily due to time constraint; he wanted to make sure that he could present the roadmap to the President right before his retirement in mid 2014.

The Army top leadership has correctly identified three major problems within the organization to be seriously addressed: human resources, weapons systems, and doctrines. The Indonesian Army was once the strongest and the most sophisticated land force in the Southeast Asian region. However, when the country suffered from a devastating economic crisis in the late 20th century, the Army faced significant setbacks. Moreover, due to some alleged human right violations that took place in East Timor, the country had to endure more than a decade of military embargo. During this period, the Indonesian Army could not maintain the operational readiness of its foreign-made major weapons systems for two reasons: first, the government did not have the money to procure new capabilities and maintain the existing ones; second, even if they had the money, they could not buy those weapons systems including spare-parts from overseas.

Another critical problem that occurred during this “dark period” was related to the Army human resources capacity. Various professional military education and training programs, such as the U.S. IMET program, were stopped. The Indonesian Army could not send its best and brightest officers abroad. Those officers were then labeled as “a lost generation”; throughout their career, they have largely grown as “conservative” officers. Only in 2005, after President Yudhoyono and President George W. Bush agreed to reopen military-to-military cooperation

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between the two countries, did the Indonesian Army begin to send its officers to pursue education and training in the U.S. military schools including at the Command and General Staff College.

Finally, in general the Indonesian Army doctrines were considered outdated. This was a natural outcome of the first two problems discussed earlier. Since the Army did not acquire new technology for so many years, there was no drive to alter its doctrines. It also failed to appreciate the important features of a rapidly changing global security environment, which should actually be incorporated in its doctrines, both at the operational, and tactical levels. Yet, the biggest contributing factor to this problem was that the Army at the time did not have a sufficient number of “thinking officers” who would work together and creatively craft relevant doctrines for the Army.

Having understood the organization’s major problems, the Army Chief of Staff focused the transformation on three agendas: first, upgrading the capacity of human resources through education, training, and field experience; second, modernizing weapons systems and maintaining its operational readiness; and third, improving the Army combined-arms war-fighting doctrines. General Budiman was determined that these three pillars were equally important and interrelated. For him, hi-tech weapons systems would be irrelevant without well-educated, well-trained, and adaptive soldiers who would eventually operate them. Similarly, no matter how professional and dedicated our soldiers are, they would not necessarily transcend into an effective fighting force without technology and sufficient logistics. Finally, the Army doctrines should also be updated in order to match with the improved force structure, as well as to meet the highly complex new security environment.

Using Mumford's Skill-Based Model of Leadership, the Army top leadership has evidently shown sound **competencies**, especially with regard to "conceptual" **knowledge** and **problem-solving skills**. These competencies were acquired and developed throughout his thirty-year **career experiences** serving in various leadership positions in the Army, the Joint Staffs, as well as the Ministry of Defense. He could intelligently understand and visualize the President's strategic vision, and set up a good foundation to institutionally initiate internal change. The forming of a task force of officers possessing high-level of **cognitive abilities (both general and crystalized)** was aimed to support his gap of "technical" knowledge, especially at the operational and tactical levels. In doing so, he applied the mission command philosophy, which essentially provided the task force with an extensive space for initiative and creativity. Not to exaggerate the situation, but he almost gave those mid-level officers a "blank check" to help him craft a strategic plan. It was indeed a very unusual policy in a traditionally rigid organization. They were also granted with a "highway" channel of communication, bypassing multiple levels of hierarchy. Such policy has arguably disrupted the Army's organizational culture, which later presented a number of problems.

As discussed earlier, not everyone is comfortable with change, especially one that is sudden and has a widespread implication. With more than 350,000 active personnel, the Indonesian Army is a huge enterprise that consists of a complex system of systems. Introducing change within such organization is very demanding. In the context of Army transformation, the most challenging part was how to get the "buy-in" from the majority (if not all) of its stakeholders. They were far greater in number compared to a few progressive officers of the task force. The alarming fact was that the bulk of the Indonesian Army was considered more

conservative. They believed that there was nothing wrong with the existing system, therefore had little interest to “shake” the organization. This can be understood since throughout their career they had limited opportunities to acquire broader perspective on how an actual professional and modern Army should look like.

Another factor why these conservative officers have displayed resistance to change was because they felt excluded from the change process itself. They even questioned the Army Chief’s policy to form an exclusive task force of “western-minded” officers. To make things worse, General Budiman in many occasions was “overselling” the qualities and the ideas of those officers, while at the same time publicly undermining the conservatives, as well as blaming their ignorance. He even threatened everyone who was not “on board” with harsh sanctions, including a forced early retirement. Unsurprisingly, many felt discouraged, disrespected, and distrusted. This situation has also put the task force in an uncomfortable position, which negatively impacted their overall **performance**.

The Army top leadership has clearly shown his strong **personality**, which included a high-level of confidence and adaptability. However, while solely focusing on mission accomplishment, General Budiman failed to understand the negative command climate that he had created within the organization. He neither spent time to get the buy-in, nor fix the unintended conflict between the progressives and the conservatives. This situation described what the Army top leadership was lacking: the social judgment or the human skills. Had he better appreciated that **social judgment skill**, as suggested by Mumford: “helps a leader work effectively with his subordinates”, he would be more successful in introducing and implementing the Army transformation initiative. What he needed to do was to exercise a more effective

communication skills, or **social performance**, to get everyone on-board. Rather than stressing on “reward and punishment”, he should persuasively engage people, especially the conservatives, in order to shape their “**behavioral flexibility**” in favor of where the Army was heading. Key to this was “**perspective-taking**”, or the understanding of the various attitudes (from neutral to disobedience) that the conservatives had toward the overall concept of Army transformation. In doing so, he should first gain insight and awareness of the conservatives’ specific concerns, which most likely revolved around preserving the status quo. Such a “**social perceptiveness**” was certainly important to gain the much-needed compromise.

In the end, the Army transformation is a complex undertaking. Involving only a small number of officers, however bright, talented and proficient they are, is far from sufficient. It takes a unity of effort of all stakeholders, which will only be established through effective interpersonal skills. Mumford’s Skill-Based Model of Leadership provides an important foundation for leaders at all level, from the Chief of the Army to a platoon leader, to embrace a comprehensive organizational change. If they all can consider and apply the five elements of the model: competencies, individual attributes, leadership outcomes, career experiences, and environmental influences, they can achieve the transformation end state: “a professional, modern, and decisive Indonesian Army”.

¹ Northouse, Peter G, *Leadership: Theory and Practice, Sixth Edition*. California: Sage Publication, 2013, 43.

² Ibid, 58.

³ Ibid, 47.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 48.

⁶ Ibid, 49.

⁷ Ibid, 50.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 51.

¹² Ibid, 52-53.

¹³ Ibid, 52.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 53.

¹⁶ Ibid, 54.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 56.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 55.