# Decision-Making in a Military Staff Context :

## A Qualitative Study on Norms, Challenges and Difficulties

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Leadership is one of the most studied topics in organizational settings and has been approached in relation to several aspects such as relations to co-workers and subordinates,[1] job-satisfaction, organizational commitment and power[2], or gender aspects,[3] to mention but a few. Leaders and decision-makers should ideally be effective in pursuing organizational goals and, at the same time, be popular among their subordinates. To date, leadership research has provided some – but not all – of the answers as to how this could be achieved. This study addresses the importance of decision-making challenges and decision norms for understanding the outcome of leadership. The chosen context is military staff work. To begin with, we will argue that analysis of (good or bad) outcomes of leadership has previously relied too much on the leader's individual characteristics and leadership style. One important, but less visible, aspect of leadership models is how decision complexity – and the methods of managing it – affects perceptions of leadership quality.

Beginning with leadership research in general, several reviews of the area have concluded that modern leadership models possess both strengths and weaknesses. One weakness is that research has focused mainly on the individual leader and less on other dimensions, e.g. followership processes.[4] Another is that there are many different leadership theories and that these are poorly integrated.[5] Most theories and models only explain a limited part of what is considered leadership.

Several scholars argue that we must either better integrate existing models in order to understand the complexity of leadership or develop a new uniting theory.[6] Others claim that this is already in progress. Avolio and colleagues[7] have identified three trends in a review of existing leadership research. The first has seen leadership research become more holistic in its approach by analyzing all aspects of leadership, i.e. the leader, organization, context, followers and the interplay between them. Another trend is to probe more closely the interaction and processes that arise, as well as how both leaders and followers analyze information and how this affects their situation. The third trend resides in the search for new methods and measurements to analyze leadership. Kilburg and Donohue (2011), who argue that leadership consists of processes that take place at several levels at the same time,

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[1] Bäcklander, 2019 ; Furnes, Mykletun, Einarsen & Glasø, 2015.

[2] Northouse, 2013.

[3] Kitterød & Teigen, 2018.

[4] Alvesson & Spicer 2012 ; Dinh *et al*., 2013 ; Avolio, Walumba & Weber, 2009.

[5] Meuser *et al*., 2016.

[6] Dinh *et al*., 2013 ; Kilburg & Donohue 2011 ; Lord *et al*., 2017; Meuser *et al*., 2009.

[7] Avolio *et al.*, 2009.

also advocate the holistic perspective. Leadership complexity is, of course, difficult to study but in order to improve the capacity of the organization, leaders need to understand which processes lead to which different outcomes.

Different general models and theories of leadership, then, highlight the leader's characteristics, contextual factors, leader-follower relations and leadership ethics. One aspect that, however, often seems absent from most models is the impact of the decision-making process – even though decision-making is a basic leadership activity especially at higher levels. Leadership and decision models are poorly integrated. One indicator is the fact that decision or decision-making are not even mentioned in the contents or subject index sections in some well-known academic textbooks on leadership.[8]

Like leadership research, decision-making research has adopted several approaches over the course of its history. Some scholars have highlighted the fact that that decisions bear on a complex and changing reality and are made in some kind of social context, like a staff or a management team. This means that models of dynamic and distributed decision-making are relevant.[9] Poor decision-making has been related both to emotional and cognitive factors[10] (e.g. heuristics and biases), but also to group dynamics phenomena such as groupthink.[11]

While the outcome of leadership and decision-making may be related to individual or contextual characteristics, it is also important to recognize that leaders sometimes have to make unpopular decisions that will result in objective impairments for some groups. The problem of how decisions are perceived is especially relevant in these cases. Among the factors that have an effect on the perceived outcomes of unfavourable decisions, one of the more important is the perceived fairness of the decision-making process.[12] Several studies show that procedural fairness is positively related to the perception of decisions, a pattern named the "fair process effect". Lower levels of favourability of outcome increase the importance of fairness in decision-making processes. Other factors that positively affect individuals' willingness to accept the leader's decisions are participation, the ability to voice opinions and trust in the decision-maker.[13]

In order to understand both the subjective and the objective outcomes of leadership, we argue that the characteristics of both the leader and the decision have to be taken into account. To put it simply, you will probably be much more popular as a leader if you only have to make decisions that never conflict with anyone's interest. And vice versa, you will probably be more unpopular if you have to make difficult decisions, for example about downsizing the organization, despite all the good reasons you have for doing it.

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[8] See e.g., Northouse, 2013.

[9] Brehmer, 1992.

[10] Kinnunen & Parviainen, 2016.

[11] Kahneman & Klein, 2009 ; Janis, 1972 ; Wallenius, Bäccman & Larsson, 2014.

[12] Wallenius & Brandow, 2017.

[13] *Ibid*.

Several doctrines state that decision-making is one of the military commander's primary responsibilities.[14] In military contexts, the ability to make decisions is more challenging and important than in other settings. Modern warfare implies a number of factors that affect the type of decisions that have to be made, as well as their degree of uncertainty and stress.[15] One is that the types of mission have become more varied. Up to the end of the Cold War, there was a focus on conventional conflict between opposing military forces. Now, other challenges have been added such as peace-building, peacekeeping, irregular warfare, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism. Military operations have also become more complex, more continuous, and characterized by a faster pace. Technological advances have led to an abundance of information to process at all levels. Decision-making cycles have been cut while at the same time, consequences can be dramatic. Decisions that often have to be made in a few seconds may, if incorrect, lead to "wrong" casualties, worsened relationships and international complications. This new environment thus poses special challenges for decision-makers, as well as new risks and uncertainties.[16] In addition, the use of smaller, more mobile combat units has to some degree shifted responsibility to lower organizational ranks, with more frequent cases of junior officers – and sometimes even soldiers – having to make important decisions.

One important setting for military decision-making is the military staff. Its tasks normally consist in creating a basis for the commander's decisions, translating them into orders and instructions, and conducting follow-up as well as evaluation. Swedish studies of decision-making in staffs have been few, but have shown that stress reactions, negative group dynamics and lack of situational awareness have proven to be central to decision-making problems. Staff members' personalities, on the other hand, appear to have relatively little significance. It is accordingly important to choose the right people, but this is not enough to get a staff to work well.[17]

To sum up, experience of (good and bad) outcomes of leadership is traditionally attributed to the leader's individual characteristics and leadership style even if scholars now, to a greater extent, also highlight the importance of other dimensions. One aspect that has traditionally been less visible in leadership models is how the decision-making process affects the perception of leadership quality. This impact is likely to increase in proportion to the complexity of decisions, and as a function of the organizational level examined. One aspect that also is likely to exert impact is the difficulty level of the decisions and how they affect subordinates and the organization. One context where this may have great relevance is the military staff, but we currently know little about this. The purpose of this study is to obtain a deeper understanding of decision challenges in relation to the organizational context from a sample of informants with both leadership and staff experience in military staffs. Due to the lack of research on the subject in this specific context, we have chosen a descriptive and exploratory approach.

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[14] See e.g. Knighton, 2004.

[15] See e.g. Morath, Leonard & Zaccaro, 2011.

[16] See for example Laurence, 2011 ; Fallesen, Keller-Glaze & Curnow, 2011.

[17] Wallenius & Brandow, 2017.

# Material and Methodological Approach

## Selection of informants

Informants were selected with the intention of capturing as wide a variety of experience as possible in the given context. In total, nineteen Swedish participants were included who all possessed previous experience of decision-making in national and international staff work, which is crucial in order to understand the complexity of the decision-making process. The informants, of whom two were women and 17 men, ranged from 40 to 60 years of age. For the sake of anonymity, specific details about them are not revealed but they were all currently staff members at the Swedish National Military Headquarters, instructors in military staff work at the Swedish Defence University or unit commanders. They were, with some exceptions, Lieutenant Colonels/Commanders and upwards. Some informants had a background as political advisors or information officers.

The sample was taken from a group of people who were possible for us to reach. Accordingly, they could be regarded as a convenience sample. The informants were initially contacted by e-mail and informed about the aim of the project, including the use of data. Communicating with the informants by e-mail was a conscious strategy in order to give them time to reflect on whether to give us their informed consent. The e-mail was followed up and a meeting was arranged. All of the informants contacted agreed to participate in the study.

## Data Collection

The data collection approach was explorative and inductive in order to fulfil the purpose of the study. Data were collected through qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted according to a prepared interview guide. The interviews consisted of broad, open-ended questions organized around a few main themes inspired by a pilot interview of a previous high-level headquarters military staff officer. The questions centred on the following themes : (1) background questions focused on national and international staff experience ; (2) communication in staff work ; and (3) methods of influencing the decision-making process. There were, in addition, follow-up questions about decision-making, but these were adapted to the content of each individual interview.

The authors held the individual interviews in the spring and summer of 2014 at the informants' places of employment. The interviews lasted approximately forty-five to ninety minutes and all were recorded with the interviewees' consent. All interviews were conducted and later analyzed by the first and second authors.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety. They were analyzed using an approach that Braun and Clarke (2006) define as thematic analysis. The first step in the analysis consisted of open coding, i.e. identifying meaningful units in each

individual interview. If the informant included several aspects in his/her response, the answer was divided up and given several codes.[18]

Step two in the analysis was to classify codes into themes. A theme, according to Braun and Clarke,[19] "*captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set*". In this study, a theme is a representative perception for the sample. Here, for example, is an example of interview content:

> I have some patience with them and then I tell them they are complainers. Then I say that now I am tired of this ! Now I want you to come and talk about a solution ! If not, you should at least say that you realize these are the problems, but unfortunately, you have no solution ! Because then you will be a little more controlled in your complaints. Because then you have to say : I think this is wrong, but I do not know what to do about it ! Then you become less of a complainer ! So I try to use many of these simple techniques that you really learn at the UGL (Understanding Group and Leadership) course. How to give feedback, because that also affects their thoughts.

This part of the interview was coded : "managing complaining individuals". The code was sorted into the theme : "decision difficulty". In the third and final step, a model was created. The model is hypothetical and illustrates how the themes identified are assumed to affect objective and subjective outcomes. While the formulation of interview questions was fuelled to a certain extent by pre-defined concepts and earlier research, the analyses of informants' answers were mainly inductive and data-driven.

**Ethics**

This study has followed the principle of informed consent. The informants were fully aware of the purpose of the study. They were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were entitled to terminate participation at any time. The identities of the individual informants are confidential. We believe that our research exerts positive consequences for the community and that possible risk of harming research subjects has been minimised.[20]

## Results

Three superior themes were identified in the analysis of interview content: norms, challenges and coping strategies. These are, in turn, divided into themes containing a number of codes. An overview of the codes, themes and superior themes is found in the following table :

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[18] Braun & Clarke, 2013.

[19] Braun & Clarke, 2006.

[20] Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007 ; Swedish Research Council, 2017.

**Table 1**: An overview of the analysis. Three levels : codes, themes and superior themes

| *Superior themes* | *Themes* | *Codes* |
|---|---|---|
| *Norms* | **Decision norms** | Decision preparation<br>Decision timing<br>Decision comfort<br>Decision courage<br>Transparency<br>Task loyalty<br>Daring to be inconvenient<br>Gaining acceptance for decision |
| *Decision challenges* | **Tough decisions** | Managing HR problems<br>Managing complaining individuals<br>Other tough decisions – distributing (limited) resources, workforce reduction, internal conflicts of interest and handling lack of financial resources |
| | **Unfavourable decision routines** | Trivial decisions<br>Information holding<br>Information by-passing<br>Scapegoat searching<br>Recruiting from "the brotherhood" |
| | **Unfavourable decision preconditions** | Cross-pressure<br>Organizational short circuits<br>Personal agendas<br>Decision fear<br>Decision distrust<br>Lack of trust between HQ and units<br>Decision disobedience<br>Excessive bureaucracy<br>Nepotism and corruption |
| *Coping strategies* | **Organizational coping strategies** | Role definitions<br>Team building<br>Building relations<br>Participation and sensitivity<br>Accepting culture<br>Consensus culture |
| | **Coping in the decision situation** | Accepting the situation<br>Functional distancing<br>Improvisation<br>Being "staff smart"<br>Flexible informal processes |

The different themes are described below, along with illuminating and representtative citations from interviews. The citations have been somewhat edited for the purpose of facilitating reading and understanding.

## Norms

### *Decision norms*

The first theme concerns the norms for decision-making described by the informants. The norms are primarily valid in the specific military staff work organizational context. This theme has eight codes: decision preparation, decision timing, decision comfort, decision courage, transparency, task loyalty, daring to be inconvenient and gaining acceptance for decisions.

1. ***Decision preparation***. Informants described the importance of preparing the decision, e.g. through mentally imaging different scenarios. "*But it is important that you prepare mentally before you get into a situation. We are talking about scenarios. What situations can we end up in ? How should we act ? What should we do ? If not, what will we do instead ?*"

2. ***Decision timing***. Informants described that there is a point in time when the decision has to be made. Sometimes you have to make a decision without feeling optimally prepared and sometimes you have to let people wait. Sometimes you have to take the time to prepare a really good decision in order to make it optimal.

3. ***Decision comfort***. Informants described the importance of being comfortable with taking decisions.

4. ***Decision courage***. Informants described the importance of having the courage to make decisions. This is described as a norm, not least in the military culture. It is also important in training: "*So it is important to practise for a war situation during peacetime. Then the leaders we train, in a situation where time is short and when there is uncertain information, dare to make decisions because they have the ability and have previously practised in similar situations*".

5. ***Transparency.*** Informants described that you have to dare to make tough decisions, but that you should account for the arguments and your reasoning. On the general level, transparency was considered important.

6. ***Task loyalty***. Informants described the importance of being loyal, primarily to the task and the organization.

7. ***Daring to be inconvenient***. Informants described that it may sometimes be necessary to be inconvenient when the task demands it. This may, however, conflict with other norms :

8. ***Gaining acceptance for decisions***. This was not widely described, which hypothetically may be due to the military culture. Occasionally, informants pointed out the importance of gaining acceptance for decisions among those who are affected.

## Decision Challenges

### *Tough Decisions*

The second theme is about the kind of decision informants described as tough. There are three codes : "managing HR problems", "managing complaining individuals" and "other tough decisions".

1. ***Managing HR problems***. Informants described that working with employees can be satisfying but it also the tougher part of being a leader, especially as some employees do not function well in the organization and you have to address different problems connected with them. If you have to make a decision that will

have consequences for a single employee, this is considered tough. "*As a leader, you should be a little careful. Sometimes I have felt that I am turning into some kind of instrumental psychopath. This means that sometimes I make decisions that people do not feel good about*".

2. ***Managing complaining individuals***. Informants described how one tough challenge is handling complaining individuals, especially when it comes to obsessive and non-constructive complaining. "*If there is someone who has a different opinion, then there will be no flow, instead they will be working counter to the rest. It is harder to get past this than it is to deal with lack of knowledge*".

3. ***Other tough decisions***. Informants gave some more examples of tough decisions: distributing (limited) resources, workforce reductions, internal conflicts of interest (within the organization), and managing limited financial resources.

## *Unfavourable Decision Routines*

The third theme is about informal routines relevant to decision-making that the informants described. They can be considered as mainly unfavourable for decision-making. There are five main codes : "trivial decisions", "information holding", "information by-passing", "scapegoat searching", and "recruiting from *the brotherhood*".

1. ***Trivial decisions.*** Informants described occasions where higher levels had to make decisions about bike racks, meaning that decisions are trivial and should preferably be made at a lower level. "*I'm involved in ridiculous things about bike racks. The decision is whether we should have a bike rack with a roof*".

2. ***Information holding***. Informants described that "sitting" on information could lead to a personal advantage and that you occasionally do not share information.

3. ***Information by-passing***. Informants mentioned occasions when lower levels call directly to the general and accordingly by-pass the staff and other middle levels. This is described as a problem.

4. ***Scapegoat searching***. Informants described that sometimes higher levels may serve as scapegoats who are blamed although it is not really their fault. Some occasions where the HQ and/or the government serve that purpose are described : "*Then you tell your personnel that it is not me as a local head stopping the shooting or the exercise days, but the headquarters has stopped the money!*"

5. ***Recruiting from the brotherhood***. Informants pointed to occasions when someone had recruited his buddy in a way that perpetuated male dominance, or when recruitment was not based on competence but – as perceived – on personal favours or membership in informal networks. One female informant described the following : "*I have not had any support, and I've got to work hard, even though I usually hear positive remarks from my bosses and get a lot of good feedback. I applied for a job two years ago, and I came second on their list, but the person who was offered the job was a guy who had not even applied for it, but happened to be their best brother*".

6. ***Other unfavourable routines.*** The informants described these as:

- Demands for consensus (that make decision-making too time- and energy-consuming).

- Availability expectations – that you as a leader are expected to be ready for action at any time.

- That subordinates dump problems on a superior (meaning that the superior must handle it whether he/she likes it or not), that co-workers pass on their problem to the next level, that you as a leader experience that your staff members pass on problems to you without any ideas as to how they are to be solved.

### *Unfavourable Decision Preconditions*

The fourth theme is about organizational preconditions relevant to decision-making as described by informants. These can be considered as mainly unfavourable. This theme has nine main codes : "cross pressure", "organizational short circuits", "personal agendas", "decision fear", "decision distrust", "lack of trust between HQ and units", "decision obedience", "excessive bureaucracy" and "nepotism and corruption".

1. ***Cross-pressure***. Informants described the middle manager's exposure to cross-pressure, i.e. demands from all directions.

2. ***Organizational short circuits***. Informants described situations where upper level managers are forced to, or are fooled into, delivering decisions that are not really well grounded. Lower level employees must still see that there is a decision that has to be implemented.

3. ***Personal agendas***. Informants described occasions when single individuals had personal agendas, for instance appearing to be a high-performance officer.

4. ***Decision fear***. Informants mentioned that sometimes they perceive decision fear from different leaders, mostly connected to the fear that a decision would be considered wrong. "*Information technology has impacted in terms of making it difficult for managers to make decisions. Significantly harder to make decisions. Because managers today are much, much more afraid of making mistakes!*".

5. ***Decision distrust***. Informants described decisions about organizational changes that were met with distrust. One example mentioned is when the defence force branches were broken down because – as the informants described it – they were too strong.

6. ***Lack of trust between HQ and units***. Informants described that occasionally there is a lack of trust between HQ and units – a circumstance that is also confirmed in different surveys: "*There is no doubt that the figures show devastating results in confidence for the headquarters and senior management*".

7. ***Decision disobedience***. Informants described experience of mutiny. The soldiers refused to obey orders, which was felt as traumatic by the officers concerned :

"*However, if it is the most traumatic events that you learn the most from, that particular event was so terribly hard on my little lieutenant heart. I stood there in a bog in northern Sweden on a night in early March 1981 and had a mutiny*".

8. ***Excessive bureaucracy***. Although bureaucracy may not be a decision in itself, it is described as a source of irritation : "*Our administration is a major burden. One example is all the reports that I have to submit. Sometimes I wonder if anyone reads them or uses the information we report*".

9. ***Nepotism and corruption***. Informants described contexts when decision-making was compromised by corruption. Mostly this is when you hold a diplomatic position in a corrupt country. It is problematic because on the one hand you do not want to bribe anyone, but on the other hand it can be very hard to change local routines and traditions. One informant described one example of a closely-related phenomenon, nepotism : "*Yes, you apply nationally and it is the nations that decide who is suitable to go. But I do not know if all nations base their choice on suitability, or if there is any kind of what you may call nepotism. That's what gets some people approved*".

10. ***Other unfavourable conditions.*** Informants described these as :

   - Lack of sensitivity (from co-worker or higher levels).

   - Fear (of higher levels).

## Coping Strategies

### *Organizational coping strategies*

The fifth theme is about organizational strategies that could be defined as preventive coping. They can be considered as mainly favourable for decision-making. This theme included six codes : "role definitions", "team building", "building relations", "participation and sensitivity", "accepting culture" and "consensus culture".

1. ***Role definitions***. Informants described the importance of defining the roles : chief, staff, advisor etc. Roles and responsibilities are different and it is important to clarify this. In short, the chief is the decision-maker, while the staff and advisors give advice about what decisions to make. One informant describes the advisor role : "*Normally, an advisor does not have the role of participating actively in a discussion, but is responsible for answering specific questions. The chief makes the decision and he or she will be responsible for its consequences*".

2. ***Team building***. Informants mentioned the importance of building a team, even if this was sometimes experienced as just one more thing that had to be done : "*I know that when I was there in Kosovo, we carried out team building for almost two months. You had to tie the group together*".

3. ***Building relations***. Informants described the importance of relationship building and, in some cases, the joy of it. It could be especially important when you represent different perspectives, e.g. in civil-military relations. It may also be

important in the diplomatic context, where the wife, husband or partner also has an important role : "*And when it comes to networking, your companion is very important, because there is a group of co-workers and wives, and they run their own lives*".

4. ***Participation and sensitivity***. Informants generally described this as something preferable, even if it sometimes could be a balancing act : "*In international work it's very important to learn how your counterpart works and how to get inside the decision circle. That is, become a friend of someone high up who makes decisions. Then you start to get close to the limits of the diplomat's permitted operational fields*".

5. ***Accepting culture.*** Informants described that some errors will undoubtedly happen and there has to be some room for forgiveness in the organization. This tolerance has, however, limits : "*I think we have a pretty good understanding of the fact that everyone makes mistakes. However, if you are stupid, make a fool of yourself or hit someone in the face, this can't easily be ignored. Then you are branded as being bad*".

6. ***Consensus culture.*** Informants emphasized various effects of the Swedish leadership culture characterized by an anti-authoritarian and democratic ideal. On a continuum from authoritarian to non-authoritarian leadership, Sweden comes close to the latter end. Orders are not detailed but instead describe goal-oriented assignments, leaving room for subordinates to design the task (mission command). Informants described this in terms of consensus culture : "*An expression of the typical Swedish officer is that you always want to see if there is more knowledge to add to the task to get the best answers possible. In addition, everyone should agree with what is said. Call it 'consensus decision' or something similar, which is internationally quite unusual*". This cultural difference is occasionally described as a problem as other countries have much more authoritarian leadership traditions.

### Coping in the Decision Situation

The seventh theme is about coping strategies in the specific decision situation that was described. They can be considered as mainly favourable for decision-making. This theme has five codes : "accepting the situation", "functional distancing", "improvisation", "being staff smart" and "flexible informal processes".

1. ***Accepting the situation***. Informants described how sometimes you just have to accept the situation as it is, and try to make the best of it. You need "ice in your veins" [patience], even if you may not like the situation.

2. ***Functional distancing***. Informants mentioned that sometimes it is preferable to take a step back to make your perspective a little broader. It could imply stepping out of your role and attempting to base decisions on organizational aims.

3. ***Improvisation***. Informants described situations where you have to improvise, mainly because the situation could not have been predicted and there was a lack of

routines but the need for fast action. "*I think you need to understand the logic of staff work. You have to be quite dynamic and able to improvise, and not have fixed meeting times only*".

4. ***Being*** "***staff smart***". Informants described the importance of being smart, which implies using your knowledge of the decision-making process to influence decisions.

5. ***Flexible informal processes***. Informants pointed to what is defined as informal processes. These include, for example, using your personal network to solve certain problems even if this lies outside of the organizations' formal processes. This may be adaptive and favourable but may sometimes also imply an ambiguous shadow structure : "*Then there are the personal meetings that take place alongside the formal meetings. The formal meetings are documented, and we have follow-up on the decisions made. However, what happens may not be a formal decision, but it's as if it is an indirect decision, based on a meeting outside of the regular routine. I believe these are examples of shadow structures*".
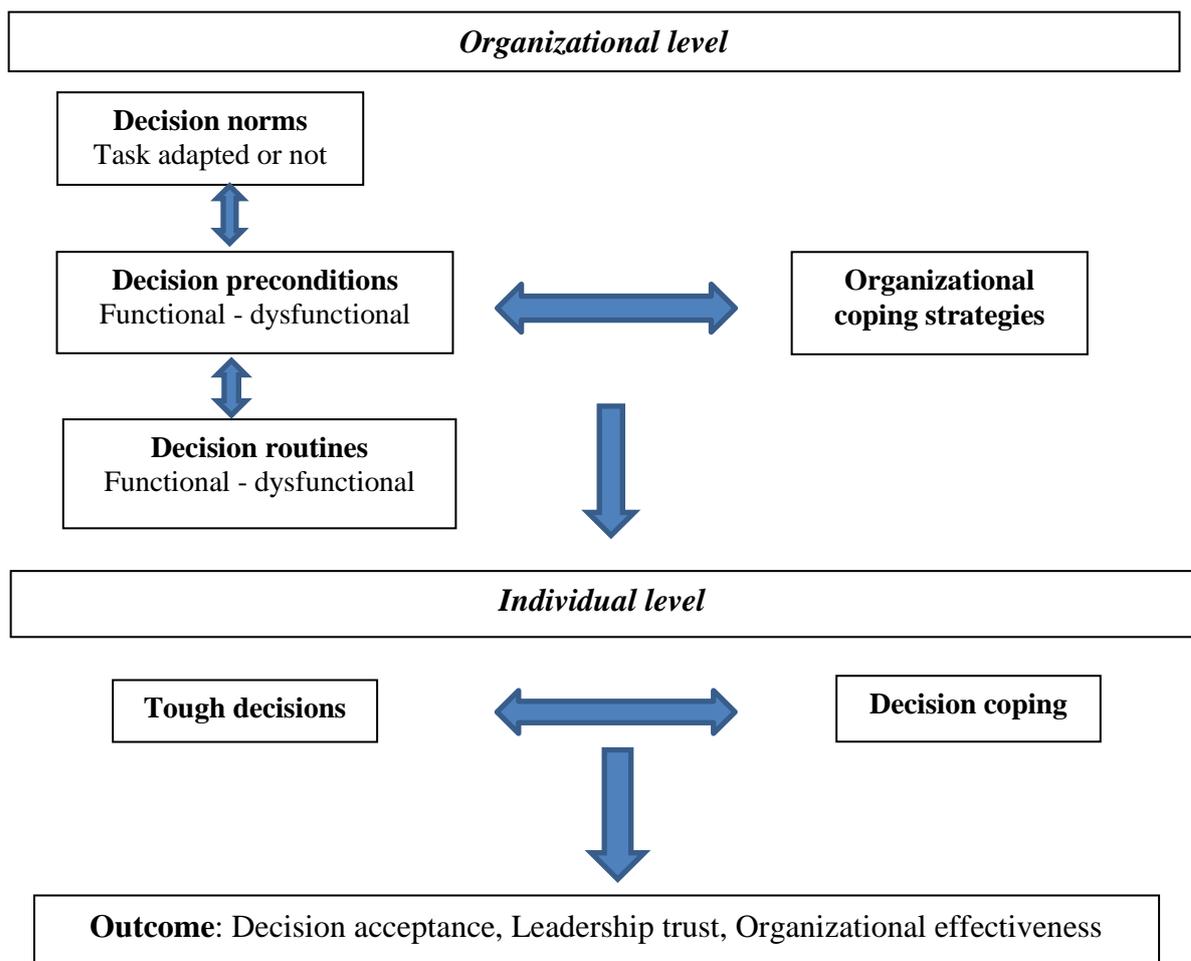
## Hypothetical Model



**Figure 1** : A Descriptive Model Based on Themes Identified in Interviews.

This study has not proven any causal relationships and the outcome variable is currently only hypothetical, in the sense that the interview analysis has not included any themes concerning these issues. However, we do hypothesise that organizational, individual and decision preconditions affect outcome (see Figure 1 above). This is also a testable hypothesis for further questionnaire studies on a larger sample where the relative impact of the factors identified in the model could be studied.

The content of the boxes could be complemented with factors that have not been highlighted in the interviews, but are mentioned in the introduction, e.g. personal skills or leadership style as general individual preconditions. The decision challenges are, on the organizational level, a synthesis of norms, preconditions and routines in relation to coping strategies. On the individual level the synthesis of decision toughness and decision coping will give the outcome.

# Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of decision challenges in a military staff context. Several such challenges are described in the interviews, mainly related to HR problems, resource limitations or internal conflicts of interest. There are obviously decisions that undoubtedly will be unpopular with, in some cases, single subordinates and in some cases larger groups or a larger part of the organization. Accordingly, the study supports the conclusion that the outcome of leadership is dependent on decision difficulty. At times, the leader takes the blame when it is actually the decisions that are tough. Similar results can be found in civilian contexts, as well as in crisis management.[21]

The discussion on military leadership has previously largely focused on combat and the rather specific leadership demands that this context implies. Clearly, combat leadership is an exacting task and, as already been concluded, demands are increasing due to political and technological developments. The informants do, however, not primarily refer to any combat situation or to any mission context. The interviews are instead dominated by the challenges of peacetime management. One reason may be that informants were not specifically asked about combat leadership. However, we should bear in mind that military leadership occurs in several contexts – from combat and international missions to peacetime management – and even the latter can imply significant leadership challenges. Informants mention, for example, HR issues such as non-functional or complaining employees, and resource problems such as workforce reduction or lack of financial resources. This implies that similar themes may come up in a study of higher management in corresponding civilian organizations[22].

This study highlights, in addition, that understanding decision-making is not only about specific decisions. In addition to tough decisions, several decision routines and

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[21] Zemba, Young & Morris, 2006 ; Boin *et al.*, 2010.
[22] Wallenius, Bäccman & Larsson, 2014 ; Wallenius & Brandow, 2017.

decision preconditions were described, mostly as unfavourable. These do not always occur simultaneously. Poor routines and preconditions may exist with or without tough decisions. What differs is that tough or unpopular decisions may have to be made in almost every organizational context. Unfavourable routines and preconditions are, on the other hand, unnecessary factors that worsen perception of leadership. It is known that unfavourable organizational structures challenge leaders and impact decision-making[23].

Decision challenges must also be understood as a function of the norms in the organization concerning what makes a good or a bad decision-maker. The Swedish Armed Forces, or supposedly military culture in general, applies several norms concerning decision-making, basically that you should not hesitate when a decision has to be made. This could also be related to a classical formulation in Swedish Army Regulations, often cited as an expression of military leadership norms : "*Indecision and failure to act have more serious consequences than mistakes in the choice of means*".[24] Although this formulation may be more relevant to combat leadership, it seems that this norm characterizes military leadership ideals on all levels.

One implication is that the decision norms in the organization should preferably be made clear and subjected to critical analysis. These norms may be more adapted to some of the organizational challenges, while less adapted to others, and this needs further attention. For example, it is reasonable to assume that decision norms in a military context are affected by the combat situation and its need for instant and intuitive decisions, rather than examining the effects of every possible alternative. This intuitive (or rather recognition-primed) decision-making may not be the optimal choice in, for instance, a staff context when decisions are complex and not so urgent. There is still a risk that you carry certain decision norms with you – even if situations change. This study also highlights the impact of organizational and individual coping : for example, maintaining relationships, knowing people and using flexible, smoother ways of solving different challenges.[25]

This study has its limitations. The sample is limited to Swedish high-level military staff personnel and opportunities for generalizing any results beyond this group are restricted. Still, some of the dilemmas above may hypothetically be present in a number of organizational contexts, e.g. as regards HR problems, resource limitation or internal conflicts of interest. There may also be other types of decision challenges in civilian organizations. One example is ethical dilemmas in a business context.[26]

Additional limitations are that there may be some biases in choices of informant focus. For example, the focus in the interviews is more on the organizational context, norms and culture and less on intrapersonal shortcomings. One explanation is a tendency to attribute poor culture to the surrounding context and not to your own responsibility.

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[23] Brown, 1997 ; Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007 ; Coser, 1974.
[24] The Swedish Armed Forces, 2013.
[25] Wallenius, Bäccman & Larsson, 2014 ; Wallenius & Brandow, 2017.
[26] Schwartz, 2016.

Furthermore, informants' understanding of complex organizational issues will affect results. It could, for example, be noted that the focus is not on the requirement that decisions should be rational, but more on timing and courage. However, many factors that are described as unfavourable by the informants are, in fact, deviations from the rational model of decision-making.

This study also has its strengths. Its value lies mainly its in-depth descriptions of challenges, as well as the contexts in which they appear. Another strength is the theoretical contribution that is illustrated in Figure 1. Leadership outcome cannot be understood as solely an effect of the leader's individual preconditions. Our study supports the ambitions within leadership theorizing to apply a broader holistic perspective in order to better understand how the interaction of contextual factors, individual qualities and decision challenges affect objective and subjective output (organizational performance and leader popularity). Decision preconditions are, to date, seldom included in leadership models but we argue that they form an important explanatory variable when studying leadership outcome.

Another value is that our analysis may form the basis of further studies, especially quantitative survey studies. Military staff work is a context with specific aims, normally analysis and decision support, with the purpose of attaining organizational performance. Although we have not specifically evaluated the outcome here, we could still hypothesize that many of the experiences that informants mention resulted in either favourable or unfavourable consequences for the outcome (organizational performance, job motivation etc.). Several research problems could, accordingly, be formulated:

1. How are favourable or unfavourable decision preconditions related to different outcome measures such as

    a. organizational performance?

    b. decision acceptance?

    c. job satisfaction ?

    d. leader popularity, trust in leadership?

2. What influence on the objective and subjective outcome does the presence of tough decisions have in relation to other leadership variables?

3. What explicit and implicit decision norms exist in the military staff culture and how are they adapted to the task and to the demands of modern military leadership/ command and control?

We believe that further studies applying our current approach could be of value to improved military leadership, to improved leadership in general and to improved leadership models.

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