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Article

Perceptions of Key Managerial Characteristics of Leaders in Local Self-Governments in Serbia

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Abstract

This paper examines leadership characteristics within local self-governments in the Republic of Serbia through a comparative analysis of leaders' self-assessments and associates' evaluations. Drawing on the Johari Window framework, the study explores differences in the perception of leadership attributes from two complementary perspectives. The sample consisted of 150 participants occupying managerial positions within different municipal administrations. The findings indicate that capability is the dominant leadership attribute across both respondent groups, followed by energy, reliability, intelligence, and responsibility. However, notable discrepancies were identified between self-perception and external evaluation, particularly regarding adaptive and interpersonal characteristics. The results further suggest that leadership perception in transitional institutional environments is strongly influenced by organizational uncertainty and institutional instability. Emotional and relational attributes appear to be less emphasized, whereas functional competencies and managerial effectiveness remain highly valued. The study contributes to contemporary leadership research by highlighting the importance of contextual and relational dimensions in the interpretation of leadership characteristics. In addition, the findings offer practical implications for leadership development within public administration systems.

Keywords: leaders; qualities; management; capability

1. Introduction

Leadership remains one of the most widely examined concepts in organizational and administrative sciences, yet there is still no consensus regarding the characteristics that define effective leadership. Early leadership theories largely relied on the assumption that leadership effectiveness derives from stable and inherent personal attributes, whereas contemporary approaches increasingly emphasize the dynamic, relational, and context-sensitive nature of leadership processes. Although trait-based approaches have frequently been criticized for their static understanding of leadership, they continue to occupy an important place in leadership research, particularly in studies addressing leadership perception, managerial behavior, and organizational expectations. Contemporary scholarship increasingly suggests that leadership is shaped not only by individual competencies, but also through social interaction, institutional context, and collective organizational perception. Contemporary scholarship increasingly suggests that leadership is not solely determined by individual competencies, but also shaped through social interaction, institutional context, and collective perception.



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This issue becomes particularly relevant in transitional institutional environments, where leadership is often shaped by broader socio-economic and organizational conditions. In societies undergoing long-term political transformation, economic instability, and administrative restructuring, leadership expectations are frequently influenced by uncertainty, adaptive pressures, and changing institutional frameworks. Consequently, leadership in such environments may be evaluated differently than in more stable administrative and organizational systems.

Previous studies on leadership characteristics have predominantly focused either on leaders' self-perception or on external evaluations provided by followers and associates. However, considerably less attention has been devoted to discrepancies between these two perspectives, particularly within local governance systems operating in transitional institutional environments. In addition, leadership research in Southeast Europe, especially within the context of public administration and local self-governments—remains relatively underrepresented in international scholarship.

The theoretical foundations of trait-based leadership research emerged during the first half of the twentieth century through attempts to identify characteristics that distinguish leaders from non-leaders. Early approaches, including the so-called "great man" theory, emphasized inherited personal attributes and assumed that successful leaders possess stable and identifiable characteristics. Subsequent research challenged the universality of these assumptions by arguing that leadership effectiveness depends not only on individual attributes, but also on situational and relational factors (Stogdill, 1948).

Building upon these theoretical developments, this study examines leadership characteristics within local self-governments in the Republic of Serbia through a comparative analysis of leaders' self-assessments and associates' evaluations. The research employs a Johari Window-inspired comparative perception approach to explore differences between self-perceived and externally perceived managerial attributes. By focusing on perceptual discrepancies within transitional institutional environments, the study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of leadership as both an individual and socially constructed phenomenon.

2. Theoretical Framework

Trait-based approaches have historically occupied an important position in leadership theory, particularly in efforts to identify personal attributes associated with effective leadership (Bryman, 1992). Early leadership studies primarily focused on distinguishing leaders from non-leaders through stable personality characteristics and behavioral predispositions (Jago, 1982; Bass & Stogdill, 2008). Empirical research further demonstrated that personality attributes significantly influence leadership perception and evaluations of leadership effectiveness (Lord et al., 1986). Similarly, Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) argued that leaders differ from non-leaders across several important dimensions, including motivation, cognitive ability, self-confidence, and persistence.

The development of trait-based leadership theories was strongly influenced by the assumption that successful leadership derives from inherited or stable personal attributes. Approaches associated with the "great man" tradition attempted to identify universal characteristics capable of distinguishing leaders from followers (Zaleznik, 1977; Nadler & Tushman, 1989). Later studies expanded these perspectives by examining broader sets of leadership attributes and managerial competencies (Bryman, 1992; Zaccaro, 2002; Bennis & Nanus, 2012; Nikezić et al., 2013).

However, trait-based leadership theories have also been subject to substantial criticism. One of the central critiques concerns the assumption that leadership effectiveness can be explained through universal and context-independent characteristics. Stogdill's (1948) influential research challenged this deterministic perspective by demonstrating that

leadership effectiveness depends not only on individual attributes, but also on situational and relational factors. Consequently, contemporary leadership scholarship increasingly points to leadership as a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by organizational culture, institutional structures, and interpersonal dynamics.

Recent leadership scholarship further emphasizes that leadership effectiveness cannot be understood independently of relational perception, communication processes, and institutional context. Contemporary studies increasingly integrate trait-based and relational approaches, arguing that leadership legitimacy emerges through interaction, social interpretation, and organizational expectations rather than exclusively through stable personal characteristics. This perspective has become particularly relevant in complex institutional and public administration environments characterized by uncertainty, organizational transformation, and adaptive pressures.

Renewed interest in leadership attributes emerged through studies on charismatic, transformational, and visionary leadership, which emphasize perception, symbolic influence, and meaning construction (Zaccaro, 2002; Bennis & Nanus, 2012). These approaches suggest that leadership effectiveness is not determined solely by the possession of specific attributes, but also by the way such attributes are interpreted and recognized within organizational and social environments. Research conducted by Jung and Sosik (2006) further demonstrated that charismatic leaders are frequently characterized by self-control, impression management, motivation to influence others, and a strong orientation toward self-realization.

Contemporary research increasingly highlights the importance of adaptive and relational leadership in organizational systems undergoing institutional transformation. Recent studies emphasize that leadership effectiveness in public administration depends not only on managerial competencies, but also on interpersonal trust, organizational communication, and the capacity to respond effectively to uncertainty and change (Khan et al., 2024). Such findings are particularly relevant in transitional societies, where institutional instability and administrative restructuring may significantly shape leadership expectations and evaluative frameworks.

Within this context, the Johari Window framework provides a useful conceptual foundation for exploring discrepancies between self-perception and external evaluation. Developed by Luft and Ingham (1950), the Johari Window was originally conceived as a model of interpersonal awareness and communication. The framework is based on the relationship between self-disclosure and external feedback and traditionally distinguishes between different dimensions of known and unknown aspects of personality and behavior.

The original Johari Window exercise involved the use of predefined adjectives through which individuals evaluated themselves, while members of the surrounding group simultaneously evaluated them using the same descriptors (Luft, 1969). This comparative self–other perception logic enabled researchers to identify similarities and discrepancies between internal self-perception and external social evaluation. Subsequent studies demonstrated the applicability of the Johari Window framework in organizational development, communication analysis, and leadership training processes (Hase et al., 1999).

Although the Johari Window has primarily been applied in studies of interpersonal communication, organizational development, and group dynamics, its comparative self–other perception logic also offers a valuable analytical perspective for leadership research. In this study, the Johari Window framework is therefore not applied as a strict psychological operationalization, but rather as a comparative perception approach that enables the exploration of differences between leaders' self-assessments and associates' evaluations of managerial characteristics. By integrating trait-based leadership perspectives with rela-

tional and contextual approaches, this study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of leadership perception in transitional institutional environments.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data Collection Procedure and Sample

The research was conducted among representatives of local self-governments in the Republic of Serbia. Participants were recruited from municipalities located in Central Serbia and included individuals occupying managerial and administrative leadership positions, primarily mayors, heads of municipal administrations, and their closest associates involved in local governance processes.

A purposive sampling approach was employed to ensure the participation of respondents directly involved in decision-making and managerial activities within self-governments. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in local governance, managerial responsibilities, and direct participation in administrative decision-making processes. Associates included in the study were required to maintain regular professional interaction with municipal leadership in order to ensure evaluations of leadership characteristics. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all respondents provided informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire.

Data collection was conducted electronically via Google Forms over two months during 2025. A total of 150 valid responses were collected and included in the analysis. The final sample consisted of two respondent groups: 75 leaders occupying managerial positions within local self-governments and 75 associates employed within the same institutional structures. Leaders included mayors, heads of municipal administrations, and department managers, while associates were employees directly involved in administrative and organizational processes under the supervision of local leadership structures. The research design incorporated two respondent groups: leaders who conducted self-assessment of their managerial characteristics and associates who evaluated the characteristics of their respective leaders.

3.2. Research Methodology

This study examines leadership characteristics within local self-governments through a comparative perception approach based on two complementary perspectives: leaders' self-assessment and associates' evaluation of leadership characteristics.

The research instrument was based on a predefined list of 56 leadership-related attributes derived from the original Johari Window framework developed by Luft and Ingham (1950). Respondents were asked to select attributes they considered most representative of leadership qualities. The questionnaire consisted of a structured list of 56 predefined personality and leadership-related attributes adapted from the original Johari Window adjective inventory. The attributes included managerial, interpersonal, adaptive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics frequently associated with leadership perception in organizational studies. Respondents were instructed to identify the attributes they considered most representative of effective leadership within the context of local self-governments.

The original set of attributes was translated and linguistically adapted to the Serbian administrative and organizational context using a conceptual equivalence approach and reduced to 29 attributes. To improve contextual relevance, several descriptors were slightly modified while preserving their original semantic meaning. Prior to the main research phase, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in management and organizational behavior and pilot-tested on a smaller group of respondents to ensure clarity, comprehensibility, and applicability within the local governance context.

The use of identical attributes for both respondent groups enabled a comparative analysis of similarities and discrepancies between self-perceived and externally perceived leadership characteristics. Rather than applying the Johari Window as a strict psychometric instrument, this study adopts its comparative self–other perception logic as a conceptual framework for exploring differences in leadership perception.

The methodological approach was designed to examine how managerial and interpersonal leadership characteristics are perceived within transitional institutional environments and to identify patterns of alignment and discrepancy between internal self-assessment and external organizational evaluation.

3.3. Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework and previous leadership studies, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1. *Leaders in local self-governments in the Republic of Serbia primarily identify capability, energy, reliability, intelligence, and responsibility as dominant leadership characteristics.*

H2. *Associates perceive leadership characteristics differently from leaders' self-assessment, particularly regarding interpersonal and adaptive attributes.*

H3. *Emotionally oriented leadership characteristics are less represented in leadership perception within local self-governments.*

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected were analyzed using a descriptive comparative approach. The analysis focused on the frequency and distribution of selected leadership attributes across the two respondent groups to identify dominant characteristics and perceptual discrepancies between self-evaluation and external evaluation.

The study primarily relied on comparative frequency analysis, attribute ranking, and interpretative comparison between leaders' self-assessments and associates' evaluations. The objective of the analysis was to explore patterns of leadership perception within the specific socio-institutional context of local self-governments in the Republic of Serbia.

The interpretative framework was informed by the comparative perception logic of the Johari Window model, particularly regarding the relationship between self-perceived and externally perceived managerial characteristics.

4. Results

The results reveal several consistent patterns in the perception of leadership characteristics across both respondent groups. Tables 1–4 indicate that capability emerged as the most frequently identified leadership attribute in both leaders' self-assessments and associates' evaluations.

Capability was followed by attributes associated with responsibility, intelligence, reliability, and adaptability.

However, important differences emerge between leaders' self-assessment and associates' evaluations. Leaders more frequently emphasized characteristics associated with managerial efficiency and personal competence, including energy, reliability, intelligence, organization, and decisiveness.

These findings suggest that leadership perception within local self-governments is shaped not only by managerial self-understanding, but also by organizational interaction and external evaluation processes. The discrepancy between self-assessment and associates'

perceptions appears particularly evident in qualities associated with personal effectiveness and organizational performance.

Table 1 presents the numerical values of leadership characteristics identified through leaders' self-assessment. The most frequently selected characteristics include capability (133), energetic behavior (99), reliability (99), intelligence (67), responsibility (67), and organizational ability (66). Characteristics associated with emotional sensitivity and interpersonal openness, such as modesty, shyness, peacefulness, and emotional openness, were significantly less represented.

The predominance of performance-oriented attributes suggests that leaders within local self-governments primarily perceive leadership in terms of competence, functionality, and managerial effectiveness.

Table 1. Numerical values of the leader's self-assessment.

Leadership Characteristics Selected by Leaders	
Capable	133
Energy	99
Reliable	99
Intelligent	67
Responsible	67
Organized	66
Smart	50
Change	34
Adjustable	33
Reasonable	33
Bold	33
Dignified	17
Brave	17
Inconsistent	16
Independent	16
Relaxed	15
Observer	15
Spontaneous	14
Idealist	14
Cheerful	12
Useful	3
Caring	3
Nervous	2
Proud	2
Friendly	2
Peaceful	2
Modest	1
Shy	1
Idealist	1

Source: Author's research (2025).

Table 2 presents the associates' evaluation of leadership characteristics. Capability (116) again emerges as the most frequently selected characteristic, followed by adaptability (83), responsibility (67), usefulness (51), friendliness (50), and peacefulness (49). Compared to leaders' self-assessments, associates attributed greater importance to adaptive and interpersonal characteristics.

The comparison between the two respondent groups indicates a perceptual discrepancy regarding several leadership characteristics. Leaders tend to evaluate themselves more strongly through functional and performance-related dimensions, while associates more frequently emphasize adaptive and relational characteristics.

Table 2. Numerical values of the associates' evaluation of leadership characteristics.

Leadership Characteristics Identified by Associates	
Capable	116
Adaptable	83
Responsible	67
Useful	51
Friendly	50
Peaceful	49
Energy	35
Intelligent	34
Organized	33
Wise	33
Reasonable	33
Independent	33
Cheerful	32
Modest	31
Reliable	17
Bold	17
Smart	16
Relaxed	16
Observer	16
Caring	16
Nervous	15
Proud	15
Shy	15
Confident	14
Dignified	3
Brave	3
Spontaneous	3
Believer	2
Inconsistent	2

Source: Author's research (2025).

Table 3. Key Potential of Leaders Based on Leaders' Self-Assessment.

Key Potentials
Capable
Energy
Reliable
Intelligent
Responsible

Source: Author's research (2025).

Table 4. Key characteristics of Leaders based on the associate's evaluation.

Key Characteristics
Capable
Adaptive
Responsible
Useful
Friendly

Source: Author's research (2025).

Tables 3 and 4 summarize the dominant leadership characteristics identified by each respondent group.

The findings further indicate that emotionally oriented characteristics were generally less represented across both respondent groups. Attributes such as modesty, shyness, emotional sensitivity, and inconsistency appeared with considerably lower frequency compared to capability, adaptability, responsibility, and organizational effectiveness.

Overall, the results point toward a leadership perception model in which functional competence and adaptive managerial capacities are prioritized over emotionally expressive or relationship-based characteristics.

5. Discussion

The findings support the continued relevance of trait-based leadership approaches while simultaneously confirming their contextual and relational limitations. Although capability emerged as the dominant leadership attribute across both respondent groups, the results suggest that leadership perception cannot be understood solely through stable personal characteristics, but rather through the interaction between individual self-perception, organizational expectations, and broader institutional contexts.

The predominance of capability, responsibility, reliability, and organizational effectiveness suggests that leadership within local self-governments is primarily associated with functional competence and adaptive managerial performance. Such findings may reflect the demands of local governance systems operating within environments characterized by institutional transformation, administrative complexity, and organizational uncertainty.

The identified discrepancy between leaders' self-assessment and associates' evaluations further confirms the importance of relational and socially mediated dimensions of leadership perception. Leaders more frequently emphasized managerial efficiency, energy, and competence-oriented attributes, whereas associates assigned relatively greater importance to adaptability, usefulness, peacefulness, and interpersonal characteristics.

The findings also suggest that emotionally expressive and highly personal characteristics, such as modesty, shyness, and emotional sensitivity, occupy a marginal position in leadership perception within the examined governance context. This indicates that organizational and institutional environments characterized by uncertainty tend to prioritize decisiveness, adaptability, and functionality over emotionally oriented leadership styles.

Rather than interpreting these findings as evidence of fixed national cultural patterns, the results may be more appropriately understood within the broader framework of transitional institutional environments, where leadership legitimacy is frequently associated with operational capability, authority, and adaptability. Previous studies on Serbian society and post-transitional organizational cultures have similarly emphasized the social importance of competence, adaptability, and managerial authority in contexts shaped by long-term economic and institutional instability (Gordy, 1999; Cvetičanin & Lavrič, 2021; Pavlović, 2021).

The study also supports recent leadership scholarship emphasizing that leadership effectiveness depends not only on technical competencies, but also on the relationship between leaders and organizational actors who evaluate and interpret leadership behavior.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The theoretical contribution of this study lies primarily in its comparative perception approach and its focus on local governance systems operating within transitional institutional contexts. While previous leadership studies have primarily focused either on leaders' self-assessments or on followers' evaluations, this study integrates both perspectives through a comparative analytical framework inspired by the self-other perception logic of the Johari Window model.

The findings contribute to contemporary discussions on relational and contextual leadership by demonstrating that leadership characteristics are interpreted differently

depending on organizational position and evaluative perspective. In this regard, the identified discrepancies reinforce the importance of comparative and perception-based approaches in leadership studies.

5.2. Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that leadership development within local self-governments should extend beyond technical and administrative competencies to include interpersonal, adaptive, and communication-oriented capacities. The relative marginalization of emotional and relational characteristics may reflect potential limitations in organizational communication and collaborative governance processes.

The study therefore highlights the importance of leadership development programs that integrate managerial effectiveness with adaptive leadership, interpersonal communication, and reflective organizational practices. Such approaches may be particularly important in transitional institutional environments characterized by institutional uncertainty and organizational complexity.

5.3. Research Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted on a relatively limited sample consisting of municipalities located in Central Serbia. Second, the study primarily relied on descriptive and comparative analytical procedures and perception-based evaluation, without applying advanced inferential statistical procedures.

Additionally, the study did not directly measure organizational culture, emotional intelligence, or cultural value dimensions, which means that broader socio-cultural interpretations should be approached with caution. Future research could expand the geographic scope of the study, incorporate comparative international samples, and apply more advanced statistical and mixed-method research approaches.

6. Conclusions

The findings suggest that capability remains the dominant leadership attribute across both respondent groups, followed by attributes related to responsibility, reliability, intelligence, and adaptability. Leaders primarily emphasized performance-oriented and managerial attributes, whereas associates assigned relatively greater importance to adaptive, interpersonal, and relational dimensions of leadership.

The results further suggest that emotionally expressive characteristics, such as modesty and idealism, occupy a less prominent position within the examined leadership perception framework. This may reflect broader organizational and institutional expectations within environments characterized by administrative complexity, uncertainty, and transitional governance dynamics.

One of the central findings of the study is the identified discrepancy between leaders' self-assessments and associates' evaluations. Such differences further reinforce contemporary leadership perspectives that conceptualize leadership as a relational and socially interpreted phenomenon. Leadership effectiveness appears to depend not only on managerial competencies, but also on how such competencies are perceived and evaluated within organizational environments.

The study contributes to contemporary leadership research in two principal ways. First, it expands the limited body of research addressing leadership perception within local governance systems in Southeast Europe. Second, it demonstrates the analytical value of comparative self-other perception approaches in examining leadership characteristics within transitional institutional contexts.

Although the findings may be interpreted in relation to broader cultural and organizational frameworks previously identified in studies of transitional societies, such interpretations should be approached with caution, given that cultural dimensions were not directly measured within the study.

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