

## Leadership in Border Security: A Leadership Competency Framework

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### Abstract

Leadership is vital in any modern organisation, and especially so for one that has to keep Singapore safe at all times. Being a country's first line of defence, the border security agency in Singapore is responsible for maintaining Singapore's border security. With the ever-changing security climate, it is crucial for border security officers to be rigorously selected, assessed, trained, and developed into effective border security leaders, based on a common definition. This required a clear Leadership Competency Framework (LCF) to define the competencies for effective border security leadership. This paper explored and defined the leadership competencies in the context of Singapore border security. A multi-step approach was used during the development process to integrate the information objectively, and contextualised data from border security officers were used to inform the LCF. The results illustrated the completed LCF which defined five core competency domains. The application of the results is discussed in the areas of organisational selection, assessment, training, and development, with a focus on ensuring that these applications are contextualised within the unique operating environment of border security. For example, since Singapore's border security leaders are expected to lead large teams, initiatives derived from the LCF are tailored to empower leaders with the necessary team leadership capabilities. Further applications and future directions are also explored in the paper.

*Keywords:* leadership, border security, competency framework, Singapore

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## Introduction

Border security functions as a crucial line of defence against the illegal entry of persons, weapons, and goods into a country. Effective border control is consequently of paramount importance to national security. By facilitating lawful entry and exit across the borders, border security forces also play an important role in promoting trade and travel which in turn contributes to the economic growth of a country (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019).

Notwithstanding the importance of border security work, it is not without its challenges. As a result of globalisation, there is now greater mobility of people, goods, and services across the borders (PwC, 2015). While this enhances capital flow between countries, it also creates a wider range of threats present at the borders (Rosenblum et al., 2013). This includes illegal migration, trafficking, establishment of transnational criminal networks as well as the spread of communicable diseases (Leuprecht et al., 2012). Consequently, border security agencies are expected to constantly review and improve upon existing security measures in order to manage and keep up with the evolving border threats. While clamping down on the unlawful movement of people and goods across borders, border security forces also face the uphill challenge of finding the delicate balance between safeguarding their countries' national security interests and promoting free trade.

### How Leadership Supports Border Security Work

To address the growing demands in border management, it is important to put in place competent leadership to guide the agency towards its goal of enhancing border security. It is widely recognised that effective leadership is key for an organisation to achieve its desired goals. Under the influence of good leadership, employees are directed and motivated towards the attainment of key organisational goals (Humphrey, 2013). Effective leadership, exemplified by the use of appropriate leadership styles in different situations, has a positive impact on subordinates' job satisfaction (Lobban et al., 1998), morale, organisational commitment (Campbell & Kodz, 2011) and organisational culture (Tsai, 2011), all of which impact organisational performance and output.

Conversely, poor-quality leadership was associated with a large number of negative work and organisational outcomes. For instance, employees who perceive their supervisors as abusive demonstrated higher levels of psychological distress and were more likely to resign from their positions (Tepper, 2000). Employees under the supervision of passive leaders who fail to provide guidance and direction also reported experiencing role ambiguity, role conflict and psychological work fatigue (Barling & Frone, 2017), which influence organisational performance and effectiveness. Continual and progressive leadership development programmes can improve leadership quality and were found to have substantial benefits for employee satisfaction.

For border security agencies, it is vital for effective leadership to be developed for successful management and protection of national security. The complexities involved in managing personnel, transgressions of law, and protecting public interests call for more attention towards developing effective leaders who can lead vigilant and operationally ready officers in peacetime and crisis. Additionally, empirical data in job analysis study by Chia et al. (2019) on border security work has shown that leadership and crisis management skills are highly important for senior officers in supervisory roles.

However, organisations in homeland security are facing a challenge in balancing the management of time-critical operational demands, leadership, and personnel development (Tsai, 2011). Frequently, officers were promoted to leadership roles despite having minimal leadership experience or training. During the review of literature, the authors of the current study have also observed the relative lack of information on training and development of border security personnel, in job competencies and leadership skills. This trend has been observed in law enforcement (Deleware State Police, 2009, as cited in Moriarty, 2009; University of San Diego, 2019), and in government environments (Muellerweiss, 2008).

As observed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police in the *Police Chief Magazine*:

The law enforcement field is moving from one generation of leaders to the next. Unfortunately, many organisations have failed to prepare the next generation adequately. Traditional criminal justice programs and police academies do not teach leadership skills but focus on reducing and solving crime with little training devoted to effective leadership. (as cited in University of San Diego, 2019)

The lack of leadership development could potentially have a detrimental impact on the organisation's critical decision making, problem solving and quality of leaders (Armstrong & Longenecker, 1992, as cited in Wedlick, 2012; McCain, 1968, as cited in Wedlick, 2012).

Thus, there is a need to invest in leadership development for border security work. Only by possessing effective leadership competencies that are essential to their job can leaders lead their teams effectively to achieve organisational goals (Özçelik & Ferman, 2006).

### **Competency Framework Approach and Its Categorisation**

Given the increase in traditional demands and new challenges associated with the evolving nature of border security work, there is an inherent need to look at how we recruit and develop border security leaders. As outlined above, leadership in border security work has a pivotal role in influencing all aspects of the border security environment, from the day-to-day ground operations to mental well-being of officers. While there is extensive research on leadership competencies among law enforcement and corporate agencies (Banu & Leong, 2017), little has been published in the area of competencies required for border security leaders. Therefore, it is necessary to understand and describe the critical competencies required of border security work, which would be useful to educate, communicate, and guide future selection and development of border security leaders.

#### ***Defining a Competency***

Over the years, there have been variants of definition described by numerous authors on what constitutes as a *competency*. Commonly, a competency is defined as knowledge, specific skills, attitude, or characteristic which is necessary for effective performance (Boyatzis, 1982; McLagan, 1996). Dalton (1997) has defined competencies as behaviours that distinguish high performers from less outstanding performers, which is consistent with Klein (1996) and Thornton (1992) who identified a competency as a cluster of behaviours related to work performance. Sparrow (1996), on the other hand, has divided competencies into three categories: organisational, managerial, and individual competencies. Briefly, organisational or core competency refers to general resources that could be shared by all members within the organisation. Managerial competency considers the competency related to knowledge, skills,

and behaviours of individual jobs. Lastly, individual competency involves an individual's work performance, such as key strength that an individual possesses and demonstrates. Among these definitions proposed by various authors, emphasis on the relationship between competency and performance remains important.

### *Competency Models and Its Variations*

To describe a set of desired competencies required for effective role performance or behaviours, competency models are often adopted. Competency models and their applications have been associated with numerous benefits. Some of its advantages include standardisation of a common language for employees' roles and performances (Bouteiller & Gilbert, 2005), execution of developmental activities like 360-degree feedback, behavioural executive coaching, and training programs (Hollenbeck & McCall, 2003), streamlining of human resource activities, protection of employees' morale, and providing more valid planning data (Fulmer & Conger, 2004).

The popularity of competency models gave rise to many variations of models from different perspectives, the most dominant being the generic competencies model. Dulewicz (1989), Thornton and Byham (1982) demonstrated the use of the model by identifying key characteristics necessary for success for the top and middle management respectively. Despite the administrative convenience of a plug-and-play approach that generic competencies model offers, one distinct limitation is the transfer of generic competencies from one organisational setting to another which does not consider the internal and external environment of the organisation (Burgoyne, 1989; McKenna, 2004).

Others like Rothwell and Kazanas (1998) proposed three classifications of competency models (reformulated later by Rothwell and Lindholm [1999]): borrowed-approach, borrowed-and-tailored approach, and tailoring approach. The borrowed approach, similar to the generic competencies model, involves borrowing of an existing competency model from another organisation that aligns as closely as possible to the needs of the recipient organisation. This approach involves little methodology and lacks rigour for contextualisation of unique organisational traits. On the other hand, the borrowed-and-tailored approach offers minimal effort in modifying the borrowed competency model to suit the recipient organisation. Although this approach appears to adopt the best of both worlds, the validity and scientific qualities are questionable without a systematic job analysis of critical requirements. Finally, the tailoring approach espouses organisation-specific belief that competency model should be developed in accordance with the unique environment of each organisation. This approach often relies on strong methodology derived from interviews or surveys of target groups. Hence, the tailoring approach is perceived to have the most evidence in supporting human resource practices like recruitment, and evaluation of individual or team performance, but is naturally also the most time consuming.

Given the advantage of the utility of tailoring approach above others, Briscoe and Hall (1999) discussed three major approaches that organisations use to develop organisation-specific competency models: research-based, strategy-based, and values-based approaches. The research-based approach examines successful behaviours from high performers and from less outstanding performers through a systematic analysis of "critical incidents" interviews or behavioural examples. Through this approach, the resulting competencies are related to specific validated behaviours that correlate with successful performance, and employees' involvement in behavioural event interviewing often leads to greater enthusiasm for the competencies later.

Strategy-based approach considers the future strategic direction of the organisation instead of past performance. The resulting competencies allow organisations to position themselves to remain relevant in the event of an uncertain future and supports organisational transformation by new skills learning. Lastly, values-based approach develops competencies based on formal or informal organisational values such as values defined by top management. This approach offers stability and consistency within the organisation and may even initiate trends in the environment.

To ensure that leaders are developed effectively, leadership frameworks should comprise of organisation-specific competencies that best suit the organisation's aims and future strategic ventures. Thus, the present study utilised a hybrid of approaches in the development of a Leadership Competency Framework (LCF) for a border security agency in the country of Singapore.

## Methods

A multi-method approach was used to develop a robust LCF for a border security agency in Singapore, integrating research-, strategy-, and values-based inputs. The methods included preliminary research (research-based), interviews (strategy-based), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and a Leadership Opinion Survey (LOS; contextualised and values-based). This methodology is consistent with approaches used in other law enforcement context (Chan, 2006; Khader et al., 2013).

### Preliminary Research

An internal review of LCFs in similar law enforcement organisations identified three common categories of leadership competencies: (a) *task-related*, (b) *person-related*, and (c) *self-related* leadership competencies (Banu & Leong, 2017). Five common leadership themes also emerged, which are (a) personal mastery, (b) vision, (c) operational knowledge, (d) cognitive ability, and (e) relationship building. These preliminary categories and leadership themes serve as a foundation for the next phase of data collection, where the sharing from interviews, FGDs, and LOS can further elaborate on these themes.

### Data Collection

Data was collected in two phases. Phase One used qualitative methods such as Key Stakeholder Interviews (KSIs) and Critical Incident (CI) interviews. These interviews were used to obtain comprehensive information on leadership competencies required for border security leaders of today and tomorrow, and how these competencies are operationalised in the border security context. Findings were consolidated into a beta LCF. In Phase Two, quantitative data was collected through the LOS to assess the importance and frequency of competencies in border security work.

### Phase One: Qualitative Methods

#### *Key Stakeholder Interviews (KSIs)*

These interviews provided data from key stakeholders in border security, that is, the agency's senior management, on the leadership competencies required. The aim of the KSIs was to

develop an in-depth understanding of the agency's mission, strategy in leadership development, and the current and expected leadership competencies for border security officers.

Thirteen senior management leaders from the border security agency (including the Commissioner and his deputies) were interviewed to understand organisational strategy, leadership challenges, and expected competencies. A standardised interview protocol was used to ensure uniformity in the questions asked. When consent was given, the interviews were audio recorded to ensure that information was accurately captured and transcribed.

### ***Critical Incident (CI) Interviews***

The CI interviews were conducted with the aim of exploring the crucial leadership competencies necessary to manage and de-escalate border security-related incidents. In the present study, CIs are defined as situations that are time-critical, where decisions must be made quickly to prevent further adverse effects. Some examples of CIs in border security include dash-through (intentionally or unintentionally going past the passport clearance counters without providing passports for proper clearance), document misalignment, and escape from custody – all of which were taken from the past decade. In the CI interviews, the critical incident technique was used (see Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954).

Six border security officers (Senior Management  $n = 3$ , Middle Management  $n = 2$ , and Supervisory Officers  $n = 1$ ) with experience in managing border security-related CIs were interviewed. Similar to the KSIs, a CI interview protocol guide was used. The participants were interviewed on (a) details regarding the CI, (b) crucial leadership competencies required by border security officers to manage similar incidents, and (c) leadership lessons gleaned from the CI experience. The CI interviews were also audio recorded when consent was given.

### ***Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)***

From the KSIs and CI interviews, a list of detailed competencies was compiled. FGD (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) was used to gather contextualised examples for the list of leadership competencies, particularly on how border security officers across the different leadership levels displayed the competencies in their leadership roles.

Eighty-seven border security officers across leadership levels participated in the FGDs. Stratified sampling ensured representation across units, ranks, and experience levels, based on the following criteria:

- a) Equally represented from the border security checkpoints and staff divisions.
- b) Junior and senior ranks – for those below the rank of Inspector (at least five years of service within the organisation) and those above the rank of Inspector (at least six months of experience in their current position). This criterion ensured officers involved in the FGDs were familiar with the day-to-day border security operations, the complex border security crises, and the leadership competencies required to perform their duties well.
- c) Officers from different leadership levels - Support Officers, Supervisory Officers, Middle Management and Senior Management (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Sample Size of FGD Participants by Rank and Leadership Level*

Ranks	Junior Ranks (At least five years of service in the organisation)	Senior Ranks (At least six months of experience in their current position)		
<i>Leadership Levels</i>	<i>Support Officers</i>	<i>Supervisory Officers</i>	<i>Middle Management</i>	<i>Senior Management</i>
Sample Size ( <i>n</i> )	28	23	23	13

A FGD interview protocol guide was developed and used. Participants were also provided with a set of handouts, which comprised a competency manual containing the list of leadership competencies and its definitions, blank paper to structure their thoughts during the discussions, and a feedback form. The FGDs were also intentionally conducted separately for each leadership level to prevent hierarchical pressures from influencing officers' ease of sharing during the sessions. Each FGD took approximately three hours. A total of 15 FGDs were conducted.

### **Phase Two of Data Collection: Quantitative Method**

#### ***Leadership Opinion Survey (LOS)***

The leadership competencies obtained in Phase One were subsequently consolidated and compiled into a list of 11 competencies. The aim of the LOS was to validate the list of 11 competencies by importance in peacetime and crisis, and frequency of use. The LOS was disseminated to border security officers across various units and across the leadership levels.

In total, 944 border security officers participated in the LOS. Based on a 95% confidence interval, a representative sample size from the four border security leadership levels were recruited through stratified random sampling (see Table 2). Hard copies of the LOS were distributed to officers. Officers were also provided with an information sheet detailing the LOS's purpose and assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

In the LOS, participants ranked the 11 competencies on their level of importance to the specified leadership level, during peacetime and in crisis, with peacetime defined as "day-to-day border security operations", and crisis as "situations that are time-critical and do not occur often during day-to-day operations". Participants were also asked to rank the perceived importance of the 11 competencies for (a) themselves (as incumbents), (b) their supervisors (if available), and (c) their subordinates (if relevant). This structure was to elicit officers' responses based on the expectations that they would be more familiar with leadership competencies required and expected of their superiors and subordinates, due to their greater proximity in interaction with officers one leadership level above (superiors) and below them (subordinates).

Participants also rated the competencies based on the frequency of use in peacetime and in crisis for their own leadership level (as incumbents) across a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*never/ not applicable*) to 5 (*always*). Participants were also provided with an *unsure* option if they were unfamiliar with the use of the competency during peacetime or crisis.

**Table 2**

*Sample Size of LOS Participants by Leadership Level and Group*

Leadership Level	Group	Sample Size ( <i>n</i> )
1	Support Officers	501
2	Supervisory Officers	297
3	Middle Management	111
4	Senior Management	35
<i>Total</i>		<b>944</b>

*Note.* Leadership Level 1 = Support Officers; Level 2 = Supervisory Officers; Level 3 = Middle Management; Level 4 = Senior Management.

## Results

### Phase One

A thematic analysis was conducted on the findings from Phase One, and it was evident that there were three overarching focal areas of leadership in Self, Task and People. Five competency domains (personal mastery, mission-related, intellect-related, community-related, and team-related) and 11 competencies were also evident from the data. The findings from the analysis also revealed that five attributes were viewed as essential core competencies for border security leaders. Subsequently, these five core competencies were deemed to adequately represent and categorise the 11 competencies semantically into five domains: *Resilient* (representing personal mastery), *Adaptable* (representing mission-related competencies), *Thinking* (representing intellect-related competencies), *Collaborative* (representing partnership-related competencies), and *Inspiring* (representing team-related competencies). These five core competencies were subsequently identified as core competency domains; see Table 3 for detailed definitions of each core competency domain, and how they encompassed the 11 individual competencies. Based on the findings from the thematic analysis, the completed LCF (see Figure 1) comprises the following:

- a) three focal areas,
- b) five core competency domains,
- c) basic constructs of each competency, and
- d) behavioural indicators for each of the four levels of leadership for each competency.

**Table 3***Definitions of the LCF Core Competencies and Individual Competencies*

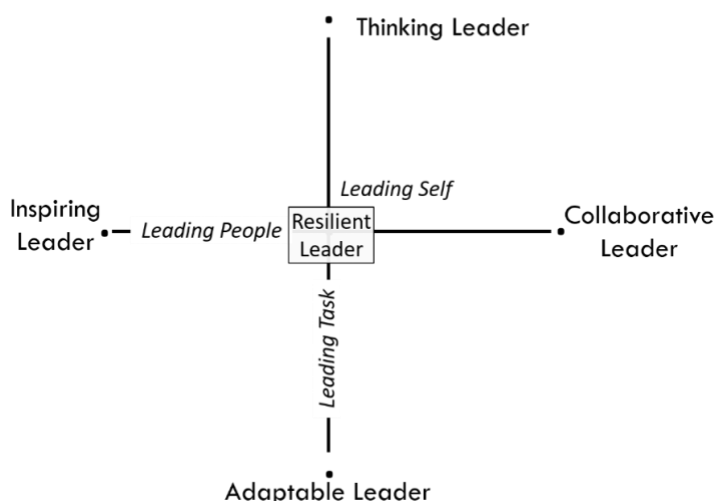
Competency Domains (Competencies)	Definition
<b>Leading Self</b>	
Resilient (Building Inner Strength, Growing, Leading by Example)	An effective leader is adept in personal mastery, and resilient. In the face of obstacles, the leader has the inner strength to take them in his/her stride, and internalises the learning lessons from the experience, so as to enable self-growth. The border security leader is also capable of bouncing back from setbacks and has the drive to re-visit problems without giving up. In the process, the border security leader presents himself/herself as a role model through leading by example.
<b>Leading Task</b>	
Adaptable (Preparing Executing)	An effective border security leader is adept in adapting to changes and uncertainties when performing his/her border security and immigration duties. While having technical competence and a clear understanding of existing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Working Instructions, border security leaders are also able to spot and adapt to emerging trends and challenges, construct feasible plans, and put the plans into action effectively to achieve mission success. When faced with a novel situation, the adaptable border security leader taps upon past experiences or learns new techniques to master the issue, and to generate a feasible solution for effective problem solving.
Thinking (Anticipating, Evolving)	A thinking leader takes on a “helicopter view” and pieces together different information sources to make sense of a situation, to anticipate potential changes, and to evolve accordingly. As an inquisitive border security leader, he/she puts thought into the actions and decisions of all players and seeks clarification when unclear. Whenever possible, the leader also provides constructive feedback with the aim of developing the organisation to greater heights.
<b>Leading People</b>	
Collaborative (Communicating, Partnering)	A border security leader understands the importance of effective collaboration with stakeholders and partners. The effective border security leader values the collaborative spirit and forges bonds and goodwill with their counterparts, stakeholders, and partners for effective teamwork and to achieve the same objectives.

Inspiring  
(Caring for Team,  
Developing Team)

A border security leader inspires and ignites the passion within his/her team, while instilling a sense of purpose in the officers' work. The leader inspires a culture of care by showing genuine supervisory care. The leader also grows trust within the team by using open communication and explaining the rationale for decisions. An effective border security leader also focuses on developing team members in their own unique capabilities, to empower them to take charge of their own development and to grow as border security officers. In doing so, the effective border security leader gels the team together as one collective unit to achieve mission success (e.g., task, mandate, incidents).

**Figure 1**

*Five LCF Leadership Competencies Depicted Along Two Axes*



**Phase Two**

The LOS was disseminated to border security officers with the purpose of validating Phase One's findings of leadership competencies for border security officers, and to determine the perceived importance and frequency of the use of the 11 competencies, during peacetime and crisis. The analysis was conducted on Microsoft Excel Professional Plus 2016.

***Composite Importance Scores***

The composite importance scores were calculated by taking the combined rankings from the perspectives of incumbents, superiors (where available) and subordinates (where applicable) (see Table 4).

**Table 4***Perspectives Used to Derive Composite Importance Scores by Leadership Level*

Leadership Level	Perspectives Used to Derive Composite Importance Scores
1	Incumbents, Superiors
2	Subordinates, Incumbents, Superiors
3	Subordinates, Incumbents, Superiors
4	Incumbents, Superiors

The importance ranking provided by the participants for each competency were weighted, and averaged across the three types of respondents to attain a composite score using the following formula (1):

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \textit{Weighted importance ranking scores} \\
 & = \Sigma \left[ \frac{(\textit{Incumbents' response rank x weighted ranks})}{\textit{Incumbents total responses}} \right. \\
 & + \frac{(\textit{Subordinates' response rank x weighted ranks})}{\textit{Subordinates total responses}} \\
 & \left. + \frac{(\textit{Superiors' response rank x weighted ranks})}{\textit{Superiors' total responses}} \right] \quad (1)
 \end{aligned}$$

The composite scores for importance ranking are displayed in Table 5. Based on the composite importance scores, *leading by example* and *communicating* appeared to be key competencies required by leaders during peacetime. Results also showed that *communicating* and *executing* are the most important competencies required by leaders during crisis. Table 7 depicted the top three most important competencies during peacetime and crisis, according to leadership level.

***Frequency of Use Scores***

The frequency of use ratings was obtained from the incumbents. The mean frequency of use ratings is depicted in Table 5 and 6.

**Table 5**  
*Importance and Frequency Ratings of 11 Competencies Across Four Leadership Levels in Peacetime*

	Peacetime							
	Mean Composite Importance Scores				Mean Frequency of Use (Incumbents' Perspective)			
Leadership Levels	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
<b>Competency</b>								
Building Inner Strength	4.61	5.57	6.43	7.17	3.87	3.87	4.02	4.12
Growing	5.31	6.27	6.91	7.80	3.88	3.88	4.16	4.00
Leading by Example	5.85	4.21	4.18	4.03	4.08	4.08	4.60	4.49
Preparing	5.72	5.87	5.76	5.68	4.02	4.02	4.27	4.24
Executing	6.72	6.94	6.91	7.32	3.88	3.88	4.26	4.09
Anticipating	7.47	7.39	6.20	4.71	3.64	3.64	4.01	4.11
Evolving	7.39	7.95	7.61	7.58	3.75	3.75	3.74	3.88
Communicating	4.34	4.68	4.84	4.87	4.31	4.31	4.57	4.60
Partnering	6.33	7.09	7.46	6.81	4.01	4.01	4.25	4.20
Caring for Team	5.66	4.79	5.18	5.36	4.22	4.22	4.48	4.51
Developing Team	6.50	5.24	4.48	4.72	4.03	4.03	4.41	4.46

*Note.* The lower importance value, the higher the importance of the competency. The higher the frequency of use scores, the more frequently the competencies are used.

**Table 6**  
*Importance and Frequency Ratings of 11 Competencies Across Four Leadership Levels in Crisis*

Leadership Levels	Crisis							
	Mean Composite Importance Scores				Mean Frequency of Use (Incumbents' Perspective)			
Competency	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Building Inner Strength	6.12	6.66	7.34	7.64	3.87	3.87	3.72	3.64
Growing	7.81	8.37	8.99	9.30	3.62	3.62	3.04	2.75
Leading by Example	5.28	4.08	3.58	3.03	4.28	4.28	4.63	4.67
Preparing	5.04	5.01	5.25	5.33	4.14	4.14	4.03	3.70
Executing	4.06	4.00	3.35	3.45	4.27	4.27	4.66	4.70
Anticipating	6.56	6.35	5.91	5.93	3.91	3.91	3.89	3.35
Evolving	7.30	7.74	7.65	7.98	3.90	3.90	3.43	3.33
Communicating	3.71	3.94	3.73	3.49	4.45	4.45	4.66	4.74
Partnering	5.65	5.74	5.69	5.60	4.23	4.23	4.37	4.33
Caring for Team	6.53	6.29	6.19	5.67	4.20	4.20	4.30	4.41
Developing Team	7.93	7.91	8.39	8.73	3.93	3.93	3.36	3.09

*Note.* The lower importance value, the higher the importance of the competency. The higher the frequency of use scores, the more frequently the competencies are used

**Table 7**  
*Top Three Competencies by Leadership Level and Situation*

Leadership Levels	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
<b>Peacetime</b>				
1 <sup>st</sup>	Communicating	Leading by Example	Leading by Example	Leading by Example
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Building Inner Strength	Communicating	Developing Team	Anticipating
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Growing	Caring for Team	Communicating	Developing Team
<b>Crisis</b>				
1 <sup>st</sup>	Communicating	Communicating	Executing	Leading by Example
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Executing	Executing	Leading by Example	Executing
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Preparing	Leading by Example	Communicating	Communicating

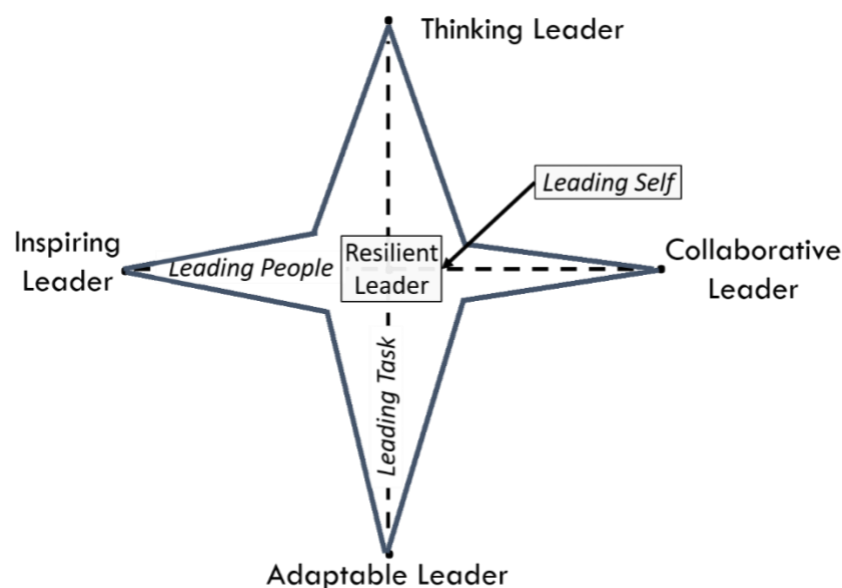
*Note.* Competencies are listed in descending order of importance ranking.

## Discussion

### Presentation of LCF

One of the key findings from our study is how the leadership competencies for border security officers function along two main axes of *leading people*, and *leading task* (see Figure 1). Particularly central to leadership is the focus of *leading self* which encompasses the competency of *Resilient leader*, depicted at the core where the axes intersect. For leading task, border security officers should be *Adaptable* and *Thinking* leaders. For *leading people*, leaders should be *Collaborative* and *Inspiring* leaders. The categorisation of leadership domains and focal areas also serves as a semantic heuristic which can help leaders easily remember the LCF.

Considerable thought was also placed upon the visual presentation of the LCF to enhance memorability. Complicated frameworks risk being overlooked and easily neglected by the organisation. Thus, a North Star was adopted as a guiding metaphor. Like its navigational role, the North Star directs leaders toward becoming effective border security leaders through the defined leadership domains and competencies.

**Figure 2***Visual Diagram of the LCF as a North Star*

Additionally, the North Star also aids in displaying the three focal areas and five leadership domains. The placement of competencies in the North Star diagram (see Figure 2) is also intended to be meaningful. For instance, the focal area of *leading self* and competency domain of *Resilient leader* is central to the North Star, reflecting the importance of persistence.

The next focal area of *leading task* cuts through the North Star vertically and depicts the competency domains of *Thinking leader* and *Adaptable leader*. *Thinking leader* is placed at the top to represent the location of our brain, which facilitates our ability to think. *Adaptable leader* is placed at the bottom as it represents the ability of leaders to stay flexible to carry out mission plans when they are “down” on the ground, as operational terrain can be dynamic.

The last focal area of *leading people* cuts through the diagram horizontally. On the left, *Inspiring leader* represented that leaders ensure that no officer gets “left” behind. *Collaborative leader* is represented on the right and symbolises that partnerships are established with a handshake, using the “right” hand. The use of these semantics and visual heuristics can potentially encourage leaders in remembering and using the framework in their day-to-day operations and conversations.

### Important Leadership Competencies

Another significant finding highlighted the important leadership competencies required for effective border security leadership and their varying criticality across leadership levels. During peacetime, lower-level leaders emphasise personal mastery and caring for the team, whereas higher-level leaders focus on team development and forming a holistic understanding of situations to anticipate challenges. Differences also emerged between peacetime and crisis context (Table 7), whereby leaders prioritised inspiring and developing their teams during peacetime but shift towards mission execution during crises. Although the underlying reasons were not examined, it is apparent that these differences enable border security leaders to fulfil the functional specialties of border security work.

## Applications and Future Research

### *Selection and Assessment*

Leadership competency frameworks provide organisations with a common language for communicating leadership expectations (Benayoune, 2017; The King's Fund, 2011), and are widely used by practitioners in selection, assessment and development work (Schippmann, 2010). Selection and assessment work that are guided by a well-defined LCF is associated with improved organisational performance (Sparrow, 2002; Winterton & Winterton, 1997) and supported the organisation in having a strong pipeline of leadership talents (Oracle, 2012).

LCF-guided selection and assessment can be useful in identifying leadership potential and readiness through measurable, behaviour-based indicators that are aligned with role-critical competencies. For instance, LCF puts forth that being an *Inspiring leader* is a core aspect of a border security leader. To demonstrate that aspect proficiently, one has to showcase the ability to motivate teams towards shared goals and instil purpose in border security work through consistent care and development of the team.

However, it should be noted that it is not necessary nor feasible for candidates to demonstrate all 11 competencies at high proficiency. Future researchers are encouraged to identify the role-critical competencies based on job complexity. For example, taking reference from the LOS (Table 7), *Communicating* may be an important core competency for entry-level candidates. Hence, this competency may be one of the critical competencies to be selected for at the recruitment stage.

### *Training and Development*

While selection and assessment ensure role-fit, LCF-guided training and development enable leaders to build competencies required for border security roles. For sustained impact within the organisation, leadership development programmes should be geared towards helping leaders acquire the leadership capacity that is aligned with the functional specialties of border security work. Past research (Lacerenza et al., 2017) highlighted the need to translate competencies into specific matching training activities. This helps to bridge the knowing-doing gap (Pfeiffer & Sutton, 2000) where leaders may have a theoretical understanding of what is expected of them but do not have the knowledge of how to execute the desired leadership behaviours.

Additionally, competencies can also structure reflection, discussion, and experience-sharing, as these activities support a holistic approach to leadership training and development, which includes the emotional, situational, and relational aspects of leadership (Bolden & Gosling, 2006). The competencies can serve as contextualised themes for conversations and feedback, which aids in self-awareness, reflection and situational relevance in training (Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Burgoyne et al., 2004).

The translation of competencies to training and development initiatives will require future researchers to work together with stakeholders like in-house trainers to design measurable, competency-aligned curriculum. An ideal training and development plan takes into account how LCF differs across the leadership levels in terms of proficiency required. For instance, drawing on the LOS (Table 7), *Thinking* is emphasised at higher leadership levels, suggesting

that middle management leadership programmes should prioritise training opportunities to develop and practice higher order thinking (e.g., systemic thinking).

Lastly, leadership competencies tend to reflect current and past performance (Conger & Ready, 2004). Although authors of the current study have attempted to capture competencies required in the near future, there is still a need for future validation of the LCF. Future researchers should also devote attention to reviewing and recalibrating the current LCF to meet the constantly changing operational demands of border security work.

## **Limitations**

A limitation of developing competency models or frameworks lies in the challenge in defining traits, such as resilience, which are not easily observable and may interact with other competencies. Bird (2013) coined the development of a competency that is dependent on the development of other competencies as “threshold traits”. Therefore, traits can only be observed as the whole context of behaviours demonstrated. To address this limitation, the study adopted multiple methods (e.g., CI interviews and LOS) to capture ground data adequately. A hybrid approach has also been adopted, capturing attitudes, traits and other personal characteristics and translating them into behaviours and performances.

Another limitation is the tendency to over-rely on competency frameworks as a be-all-end-all solution towards leadership issues within the organisation. Likewise, the LCF’s heavy emphasis on observable characteristics and behaviours may lead practitioners to overlook emotional, situational and relationship aspects of leadership, potentially inhibiting the emergence of more inclusive and collective forms of leadership (Bell et al., 2002; Bolden & Gosling, 2006).

As such, competency frameworks are not autonomous, and they should align with environmental and individual factors to support organisational goals (e.g., selecting and developing members). Hence, the authors in this study have gone further in a separate work to define organisational opportunities and support, to apply and develop the competencies adequately beyond individual behavioural capabilities (e.g., team learning). This would ensure that the LCF addresses not only individual leadership behaviours, but also other aspects of leadership to deliver organisational success today and for the strategic future. The authors have refrained from elaborating on further details as it falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Finally, the complexity of competency framework language may hinder implementation within the organisation. It would demand effort to interpret and comprehend the LCF across members of different literacy and cognitive levels. To address this, heuristics were adopted to encourage easy recall by associating the competencies to common work goals and scenarios. As seen above, besides the visual and semantic heuristics described in the present study, each of the five domains have descriptions for easy remembrance of their associating location in the North Star visual heuristics (see Table 8).

**Table 8**  
*Five Competency Domains and Their Respective Descriptives*

Core Competency Domains	Description in relevance to the visual heuristics of North Star.
Resilient Leader	Personal mastery and staying resilient in the face of challenges is “central” to leadership, and as such, <i>Resilient leader</i> is located in the middle of the North Star.
Thinking Leader	Thinking is associated with the head, which is located at the top of the body. As such, <i>Thinking leader</i> is located at the top of the North Star.
Adaptable Leader	Adaptable leaders have to be flexible when they are “down” on the ground and to stay on top of the evolving situations. As such, <i>Adaptable leader</i> is located at the bottom of the North Star.
Inspiring Leader	Leaders have to ensure that no officers are “left” behind. As such, <i>Inspiring leader</i> is located at the left of the North Star.
Collaborative Leader	Leaders form partnership with a firm handshake using their “right” hand. As such, <i>Collaborative leader</i> is located at the right of the North Star.

### Conclusion

In sum, driven by the growing demands of effective border security leadership in maintaining the safety and security of Singapore’s borders, the LCF was generated after a series of consultations across the depth and breadth of the organisation. Despite being exploratory in nature, the present LCF provided a viable platform for future researchers to advance leadership development within the organisation. Lastly, it is with great hope that the genesis of this home-grown LCF can carry the true mark of border security leadership forward to current and future generations of leaders to continually strengthen Singapore’s borders.

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### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The authors declare that ChatGPT (GPT-5.3) was used in reducing the manuscript word count. The authors further declare that, apart from ChatGPT, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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