

## LEADERSHIP SKILLS DEVELOPED WITHIN EU-FUNDED PROJECTS

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**Abstract.** The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the leadership skills that were developed by the UE funds. We will address the importance of developing leadership skills through EU funds. EU funds are an important tool for the development of the business environment in Romania. The main objective of the research is to identify the main leadership skills developed through programs implemented with EU funds. Research methodology: exploratory analysis of case studies, case studies taken from organizations that have accessed EU funds for the development of leadership skills. The outcome of this research is to produce a map of the main leadership skills developed and to draw up examples of good practice in the field.

**Keywords:** Leadership, European funds, Lifelong Learning; Leadership Development.

**JEL Classification:** I25, A29, E24.

### Introduction

The concept of leadership has been the subject of numerous studies and theories around the world, in fields as varied as psychology, management and education. The new definition of leadership is centred around the idea of sustainability and sustainable development; thus, leadership creates and sustains lifelong learning, ensures access to resources, addresses social justice issues, develops diversity and environmental capacity, and actively engages in environmental (Di Fabio & Peiró, 2018). Leadership involves teamwork, and the quality of leadership depends on the leader's relationship with the team. Warren G Bennis (Sibbald, 2006) mentions that Leaders are made rather than born. Thus, in order to develop a good relationship with the team, the leader must possess certain skills that allow the relationship to be based on respect and trust, recognition of merit, and loyalty. In this way, leadership skills can be learned and developed, and the results will translate into employee performance, employee loyalty, and then into the financial results of the organization. The research question is what leadership skills have been developed through the EU Funds and whether these skills are among those needed to overcome these current crises/changes. Change is one of the "constants" of the world we live in. Therefore, change can be seen as a necessity; and more than that, as a process

with the potential to adapt and evolve for each person, organization, and society. In this case, the role of the leader is extremely important in the process of adapting to the requirements of the future. Leadership is the most important criterion for the growth and survival of an organization, so we will analyse whether the skills developed through EU Funds can be transferred or can complement the leadership skills needed by the current crisis. We will map those skills and see which ones were needed. The EU funds have been successful in adding value in many areas and in this article, we will focus on case studies/examples of good practices that have focused on developing leadership skills.

Leadership is a combination of human qualities and actions. The leader's main goal is to inspire the team so that together they commit to achieving a goal (Gell, 2017).

The article is structured as follows: the literature analysis part refers to leadership and EU funds, and the second part includes the presentation of the main leadership skills developed through EU funds projects; which involves the analysis of some EU-funded projects that aimed to develop leadership skills. The third part includes the presentation of the skills that are impetuously necessary for the current moments of VUCA (Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) word, skills identified from articles, relevant specialized research, and the last part, the conclusions of the research.

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## 1. Literature Review

### 1.1. Leadership

Leading people well is difficult to do. As the circumstances of change continue to accelerate, the questions that arise are what skills need to be developed, what is the way forward to improve the leadership development process. Our research aims to highlight the leadership skills developed in EU-funded projects and then to analyse whether those skills are reflected in the skills required during the current crises (Covid, war).

Peter Drucker said that “the only definition of a leader is someone who has followers”. But to have followers, it is necessary to possess some knowledge and skills. A popular saying says: “the only way to have friends is to be a good friend yourself”. The same can be extrapolated to followers and leadership qualities. Leadership skills can be developed (Adair, 2010). John Adair warns that no one can teach us to lead: leadership is something that needs to be learned. Leadership learning begins with the possession of skills and then through experience/practice. It is important to note that all these qualities, principles and ideas, combined with experience, result in successful leadership. In order for leadership to grow, it is necessary to invest in developing leadership skills. The biggest step towards successful leadership is to improve your own leadership skills. Excellent leadership characteristics include having the necessary skills, taking on responsibilities; and overcome the current challenges. (Cripe & Burleigh, 2022).

For an organization to remain competitive and therefore sustainable, organizations need to ensure that leadership skills development initiatives are consistent and make an effort to address the complex challenges of today’s world. (Muller & Pelsler, 2022). Businesses with bold and sustainable goals will invest in talent development, and this investment will bring them significant rewards. Indeed, developing talents and leadership skills requires lifelong learning, responsibility, and the desire to surpass oneself. The Chinese philosopher Confucius said: “A journey of a Thousand Leagues begins with the first step”. The first step in leadership is the possession of skills and then the continuous improvement of them to adapt to the new conditions of life. In today’s radically transformed business climate, leaders are looking for solutions to help their companies become resilient.

Leadership skills are critical to having a healthy work environment and keeping employees happy and satisfied. In leadership, it is important to master the methods, competencies, and skills of communication and to form a culture of communication (Kodiraliev, 2022). For example, 79% of employees resigned due to a lack of appreciation (Octanner, n.d.); which indicates deficiencies in communication and in providing descriptive feedback. It is important to mention a study by the global leadership consulting firm DDI entitled *Global Leadership Forecast*, in which it is mentioned that only 5% of companies have implemented opportunities to develop leadership skills

in 2021. (DDI, 2021). On the other hand, in the DDI study 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic with its uncertainty, leaders want two things: more time to learn and greater external validation that the learning is addressing the right things.

The CEO of Mack Trucks, The American subsidiary of Renault V. I., said that changing “human behavior” would allow the company to make permanent improvements (Duluc, 2017). Therefore, behavior modelling is done through a learning process, in which employees must be coached/guided by leaders. Dedicated leaders who focus on learning will begin this process with themselves, and then continue with their followers. Leadership learning involves developing skills based on experience.

In the book *Leadership from the heart* (Kallel & Maselot, 2018), the authors propose a framework for leadership development based on new discoveries in neuroscience. These findings refer to the development of skills that allow the leader to feel at ease, to face the unknown, and to view change with serenity.

Boston Consulting Group (2021) study shows that successful leaders lead with a combination of the head (envisioning the future, setting priorities), heart (inspiring and empowering others), and hands (providing the means to execute well). Displaying qualities of the heart was most important, specifically consideration (37%), empathy (33%), listening skills (31%), and team building (29%). These can be favourable attitudes and behaviours that support psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019).

John Maxwell said that “leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less.” (Maxwell, 2013). He believed that leadership comes from influence and that influence must be gained. Gaining people’s trust requires a heart-centred, human-centred attitude with real values. We are not born leaders... we become! The first step to becoming a good leader is to start with yourself, know yourself, and invest in yourself. Education and training are presented here as two different aspects of the learning process. Education encompasses a broad base of knowledge, values, attitudes, and basic skills on which more specific skills can later be built. Training is a process aimed at developing specific skills, knowledge, or attitudes for a job or task. Adequate and effective training can only take place if the foundations for the development of these skills, knowledge, or attitudes have been laid by previous education. The question is why do these skills need to be developed? Skills are important because they (effective communication, decision-making, and maintaining a team, etc.) are the steps to productivity and performance. Successful leadership typically encompasses strong skills that enable leaders to motivate and inspire followers. In addition, the ability to lead successfully often depends on a leader’s ability to listen, provide feedback, and incorporate the ideas and inventions of his or her team (Indeed, 2020). Developing leadership skills and lifelong learning is extremely important to meet the complex challenges and changes we face in today’s society. Inspiring others to follow you requires a lot of discernment,

a good knowledge of values, and respect for them, so your influence is a beneficial one, reaching the hearts of your followers and inspiring them positively. The main advantages of high-performance leadership are reflected in improving the image of the organization, improving the productivity and retention of employees, and improving the confidence of investors. It is about a higher level of performance that can only be achieved through a life-long learning process.

To survive and thrive, organizations must adapt to change and choose the best ways to achieve their goals. Consequently, leaders must find ways to achieve their goals for the organization to thrive. Thus, finding ways forward in these difficult times can be made easier by developing new leadership skills, skills that help the leader find viable solutions suitable for this VUCA world. The selection and implementation of actions to achieve the objectives is a form of problem-solving that makes the generation, evaluation, and implementation of proactive and reactive solutions the key to leader effectiveness (Mumford et al., 2000). Knowledge and skills are the most direct determinants of performance. The development of leadership skills requires the desire to be in situations where these skills can be exercised and the desire to exercise these skills in solving significant organizational problems (Mumford et al., 2000). Some competencies can offer increased chances of success at the leadership level. They can be summarized as follows (North-East Regional Development Agency, 2012): intelligence, agility, communication, originality, judgment; level of preparation, knowledge, skills, physical progress, responsibility: initiative, perseverance, self-confidence, desire to excel; sociability, cooperation, collaboration, sharing, adaptability, humour. In our analysis, we will see what skills have been developed in projects funded by EU funds and then we will see what skills have been needed to go through the periods of change we are going through.

It is important to note that without a program of proper training, learning, and development experience, even the most intelligent and motivated person is unlikely to become an effective leader in the organization.

One of the most important challenges of many organizations is the creation of a successful leadership development program (Mehrabani & Mohamad, 2015). The author notes that development skills must include: being honest, communicating, being informed, trusting, listening, motivating, and supporting staff.

## 1.2. Romania's relations with the EU

On January 1, 2007, Romania became a member state of the European Union. Being a member state involves both rights and obligations. All this derives from the treaties and legislation adopted by the European Union from its creation to the present day. For the period 2014–2020, the investment priorities for our country were established in the partnership agreement between the Romanian government and the European Commission; Romania has

identified a series of 5 Challenges for which funding is provided through cohesion policy: (people and society, infrastructure, economic competitiveness, Resources, Administration and governance). The cohesion policy framework shall be established for 7 years.

The cohesion policy implementation framework for the period 2014–2020 is based on the Europe 2020 strategy, which proposed a new economic vision, a smart, sustainable, and inclusive economy (European Commission, 2010). The Europe 2020 strategy is based on three priorities: smart growth; sustainable growth: promoting a more resource-efficient, greener, and more competitive economy; inclusive growth (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, 2010).

Absorption capacity is given by the competence of the state to spend efficiently the financial resources allocated from the funds, namely: macroeconomic absorption capacity; financial absorption capacity; administrative capacity of Central and local authorities to design and coordinate programs and projects.

Currently, Romania can finance investments both from money guaranteed by the NPRR (a program designed for the economic recovery of Europe after the Covid-19 pandemic) and from European funds available before the pandemic, for which Romania has not developed feasible plans to attract the total amount of money (European Commission, n.d.). There is a total amount of EUR 42 billion that could be used for development by Romania in the next 5 years, provided that it develops the investment plans to spend the money.

Over the years, Romania has accessed many European funds to develop sectors such as entrepreneurship, culture, tourism, national and regional infrastructure, education.

Among the Operational Programmes available in Romania is the Operational Programme Human Capital [POCU] (2014–2020) focused on human resources, thus continuing the investments made through the European Social Fund [ESF] in the period 2007–2013, but also achieving the objective of reducing disparities in economic and social development between Romania and EU Member States. The POCU, through integrated employment, social inclusion and education interventions, functions as a means to foster growth and cohesion and supports the achievement of the objectives set under other development challenges – competitiveness, infrastructure, administration and governance. Thus, the POCU contributes to the achievement of Romania's Europe 2020 objectives (POCU Strategy, 2014).

POCU is composed of 7 priority axes. Priority Axis 1 – Youth Employment Initiative. Priority Axis 2 – Improving the situation of young people from the NEETs category. Priority Axis 3 – Jobs for all. Priority Axis 4 – Social inclusion and fight against poverty. Priority Axis 5 – Community Led Local Development (CLLD). Priority Axis 6 – Education and skills. Priority Axis 7 – Technical Assistance (POCU 2014–2020). The POCU mentions that one of the key factors in promoting competitive

economic growth and stimulating economic activity in less developed areas is to ensure the availability of a “ready-to-work” workforce to meet the growing needs of the business environment. This workforce can only be made ready for work through the implementation of projects that aim to develop certain key skills and competences (POCU, 2014). Increase access to and participation in lifelong learning programs; Strengthen the capacity of education and training providers to develop and implement quality programs relevant to the labour market, in particular by fostering partnerships with business.

In our analysis, we focused on priority axis 3 Jobs for all. The specific objective of Axis 3 is to improve the level of knowledge competences/ skills related to the economic sectors. In order to achieve this objective, the following actions were taken: participation of employees in professional training programs and stimulation of employers to organize learning programs at work. On its axis, on January 31, 2023, were accessed 651 projects, and the value of these projects is 1.408.773.689,12 euros. Of the 651 projects, almost 20% of them were on the development of leadership and entrepreneurial skills.

## 2. Methodology

To achieve the objective defined for this research, we used an exploratory analysis of case studies, case studies taken from organizations that have accessed European funding for leadership skills development. All these projects we analysed were selected taking into account the quality of the data presented and the samples used. In our research to explore leadership skills, we focused on the opportunities that EU funds offer for developing leadership skills and therefore increasing the performance of organizations. The entire database of the 651 projects implemented under Priority Axis 3, was analysed. The projects were implemented in Romania using the operational programs available in Romania the Operational Programme Human Capital POCU (2014–2020). Among these projects, 133 projects were selected that aimed at developing various competencies necessary for the development of human resources and included leadership skills. From these 133 projects, a prioritization of projects was made, thus projects that carried out training specifically for the development of leadership skills were selected, then the value of the implemented project and the target group were taken into account. Thus, a map of leadership skills developed in EU-funded projects was made. The next step in our analysis is the literature review on leadership competencies that were and are needed in the context of the current crises (Covid, War). Based on the literature review, a table containing these competencies was made, and then analyzed whether there is transferability between the leadership skills developed in the 2014–2020 periods, and whether these skills are among the new competencies.

## 3. Results and discussions

The first project analyzed is the one implemented by Ascendis Romania. Ascendis is the largest consulting and training company for corporate organizational development in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, founded in 1997. The Ascendis team consists of over 70 consultants and facilitators and has a portfolio of over 300 returning clients with 7500 training days and over 1000 corporate events. As a beneficiary, in the period 2018–2019, Ascendis Consulting is implementing a project with European funding. The total value of the project is over 4.2 million lei. The title of the project is “Competitive Advantage for Romania – developing leaders for Innovative and successful companies at the European Level” (code SMIS117989) and is co-financed from the European Social Fund through the Operational Programme Human Capital 2014–2020. “Through this project, Ascendis has set out primarily to help managers and entrepreneurs become aware of the importance of investing in human capital – the only element of long-term differentiation”, said Andrei Goșu (Ascendis, 2019). The main objective of the project is the sustainable adaptation of employees, entrepreneurs, and the activity of companies in economic sectors with competitive potential/smart specialization to the dynamics of the changing economic environment and labor market, by increasing in all less developed regions the number of beneficiaries of tools, methods, standard practices of human resources management. One of the specific objectives of the project is the development of competencies and skills for 495 managers and entrepreneurs and 10 staff of HR departments. The project’s target group consists of 505 people, employed in SMEs and large companies that have their main or secondary activity in one of the economic sectors with competitive potential, active in all the less developed regions of Romania (South East, North East, Centre, South Muntenia, South West, West, North West) divided as follows: 495 employees providing strategic management of the enterprise, or entrepreneurs managing their own business; 10 employees in human resources departments; At least 152 women in the whole target group; At least 10 persons who have their domicile or residence in rural areas/are of Roma ethnicity. The project is dedicated to all priority sectors with a focus on the following sectors: Automotive and Components, Information Technology and Telecommunications, Health and Pharmaceuticals, Food and Beverage Processing.

The training program for managers/ entrepreneurs is structured into 3 modules: Module 1: Conquering Everest; Module 2: Leadership, team management, and emotional intelligence development; Module 3: Strategic Management.

In our research, we focus on the skills developed in the second module. Module 2 – Leadership, Motivation, and Team Management which includes the following aims: Building a positive climate and culture of trust and accountability, Motivational factors, Visionary leadership

practices, Team management, Conflict management, Impact of psychological safety in fostering entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship, Linking innovation, creativity, initiative, voluntary effort and taking responsibility, Developing personal leadership skills based on emotional intelligence competencies. Among the leadership skills developed were: innovation, creativity, initiative, voluntary effort, and taking responsibility.

The second project analyzed has the beneficiary of the Spiru Haret National Society for Education, Science, and Culture. The name of the project is EduForm – Inclusive quality education through continuous vocational training and is co-financed by Operational Programme Human Capital 2014–2020. Implementation period: 2018–2020 (EduForm, 2020). The total value of the project is 6.657.492,05 lei. The target group of the project consists of 360 teachers in pre-university education, from 2 counties (150 from Ialomita, and 210 from Caras-Severin). The project aims to develop leadership skills in education. The general objective of the project is to develop the professional and transversal competencies of teachers and school managers at the level of the counties involved in the project, to increase their motivation and job stability to ensure the improvement of the quality of education, equitable access to education, prevention, and reduction of early school leaving. Specific objectives: to improve the professional competencies of 360 teachers; to improve the competencies of the management teams in the target schools for the sustainability of quality improvement interventions in education through in-service training programs and the development of educational leadership and entrepreneurship skills; to create a core of qualified and motivated human resources in the target schools for the dissemination of knowledge/methods/practices of quality assurance in education through the exchange of best practices.

The most important leadership skills developed were interpersonal skills, building a positive climate, responsibility, relationship with students, and the importance of lifelong learning.

An important aspect of this project is the focus on developing women's leadership and the skills necessary for women to become leaders. It is well known in education that women outnumber men. However, the share of career women in Romania is slightly above the EU average and represents 40% according to the Top 50 Women in Business published in 2019. Romania recorded the highest share of women in leadership positions – 37%, above the EU average (Deloitte, 2021).

Thus, in the projects, the following women management skills were identified and developed: confidence in followers's qualities, curiosity to discover the needs of others, finding simple and effective solutions, creativity, developing empathy, emphasizing the importance of learning from mistakes, anticipating risks, self-sufficiency, ambition, and the motivation. Also, within the project, an online database was developed that includes various resources for the development of leadership skills and an online database with resources for developing

quality entrepreneurial institutional management in disadvantaged schools. (EduForm, 2020).

The third project analyzed is called TISA – Training, Innovation, specialization, adaptability for Companies from the West and North West regions and is co-financed by the Operational Programme Human Capital POCU (2014–2020).

The budget of this project allows 60 companies, both SMEs and large enterprises, to benefit from the free services offered by the TISA project. Thus, a total number of 532 employees of these companies, belonging to the following categories: management, human resources, and entrepreneurs, will directly benefit from the measures of the TISA project.(TISA, 2019). This project has developed competencies: Increasing the ability to use leadership techniques in team coordination; Increased ability to analyze driving styles; Increasing the ability to update knowledge and leadership techniques specific to leadership; Increasing the capacity to develop the personal and professional development plan for adapting the leadership styles; Increase the ability to plan the change process; Increasing the capacity to mobilize staff to change and innovate; Increase the ability to communicate with all parties involved in the change, as well as to create a flexible and fast decision-making chain.

Another interesting project on the development of leadership skills was carried out by the North-East Regional Development Agency [North-East RDA].

Project Name: LEADER-improving management and leadership skills in regional development for human resources managers funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme-Leonardo Da Vinci (Vetpro Mobility). Within the project was made a handbook of good practices of Leadership in regional development.

In the handbook, leadership models are presented but also the skills that are needed to be developed to be a successful leader. Attributes are honesty and integrity, cognitive ability, and knowledge. They also mentioned the skills needed in the public sector, such as good



Figure 1. Map of leadership competences developed through projects financed with EU funds (source: author's own)

management skills, knowledge of different statutes, and the ability to follow instructions correctly and efficiently. Also, the handbook emphasizes the importance of life-long learning and the establishment of an individual development plan for leaders. The individual development plan is the first step in your desire to develop your skills and acquire new capabilities.

On the other hand, we are going through some important changes, crises due to a pandemic, and war and we can see that these changes have also generated changes in leadership trends. Contexts have changed considerably; new elements have appeared on the list of uncertainties and volatility that define new types of behaviours necessary for leaders in 2023, as well as new trends in the needs of teams and leaders. The International Institute for Management Development [IMD], with over 75 years of experience in developing leaders who transform organizations and contribute to society, describes the 8 key leadership skills you must know in 2023 (IMD, 2023). These qualities are: Relationship building, Agility and adaptability, Innovation and creativity, Employee motivation, Decision-making, Conflict Management, Negotiation, Critical Thinking. The 2023 index of family business conducted by EY and the University of St. Petersburg. Gallen shows in the context of the current crises, family businesses have managed to grow faster than the global economy (Global Family Business Index, 2023).

Successful family businesses are recognized by their ability to be agile, innovative and purposeful. They are also ready to adapt to social and economic changes. More than three-quarters (76%) of family businesses in the 2023 Index are older than 50 years. Many of these businesses have weathered market volatility over several generations, highlighting the extent to which family

businesses are able to maintain both their success – and their success – over time. This reveals the importance of having a leadership able to adapt quickly to new changes, make quick decisions and have a vision.

Thus, new studies (KPMG, 2020) demonstrate that the road to hope the new economic reality requires agility and resilience and sustainable actions from the leader.

Another study, having as target group Nurses and the Covid period (Gökkaya et al., 2023) mentions that current leadership has five core values: (1) human dignity, and (2) integrity, (3) autonomy, (4) altruism, and (5) social justice. In healthcare, leaders have a significant effect on patient well-being and reduce anxiety during periods of uncertainty. Medical leaders are needed to find direction for action and problem-solving in complex situations full of uncertainty and high emotional intensity.

In the Table 1 below are exemplified the new skills needed for the leader 2023.

## Conclusions

Our research reveals that developing leadership skills is a priority in EU-funded projects. What is interesting to note from the analysis of projects financed by EU funds is that the target group for projects was very diverse, so organizations developed leadership skills for all employees. This can contribute to their productivity, but also to some empowerment of employees. As a result, employees may find themselves in favourable situations for career advancement. The results of effective leadership include a stronger team and increased productivity.

Another important aspect of our research is that we have identified certain skills only for the public sector, which indicates a problem with the qualifications of people in the public sector in Romania.

One of the leadership skills that has often been encountered in projects and has a great impact on organizations is the ability to guide staff when they need it, in other words, the ability to communicate implicitly and provide feedback. We believe that this ability to provide feedback is related to cooperation, collaboration, and empathy. Leaders need to have relationship skills, listen to employees, provide and solicit feedback, and develop an environment in which employees have the means and confidence to grow themselves.

The results of the research on EU projects indicate that successful leaders require possessing the skills of motivation, empathy, and creativity.

On the other hand, amid the many changes in the recent period, a set of skills has been identified that is necessary for leaders to possess. It is important to note that there are skills developed in EU projects that have also been transferred and used in the current context. These leadership skills are innovation, creativity, and employee motivation. On the other hand, studies demonstrate that there are new leadership skills that are needed in the current conditions, namely: agility, adaptability, resilience, vision, and sustainable actions.

Table 1. New skills for the leader 2023 (source: author's own)

No	Skills
1.	Agility
2.	Adaptability,
3.	Innovation
4.	Creativity,
5.	Employee motivation,
6.	Decision-making,
7.	Conflict Management,
8.	Negotiation,
9.	Critical Thinking
10.	Purposeful
11.	Visionary
12.	Resilience
13.	Sustainable actions
14.	Affective, social support
15.	Listening, and expressing concern or empathy



It is interesting to note that over time and due to global changes, leadership skills need to be enriched and developed. The extreme context has an impact on leadership perceptions and decisions. The findings support the fact that initially there are certain skills, talents, and responsibilities, but depending on the context, these skills need to be developed and improved. Finally, this research may be a notable call for future research, to highlight the need to pay more attention to the consideration of the global context as a significant factor affecting leadership behaviour.

## Contribution

All authors contributed to the article. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare that they have no other competing financial, professional or personal interests from other parties.

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