

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR SENIOR-LEVEL CIVIL SERVANTS AT INAP TIMOR-LESTE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine strategies for developing leadership competencies for senior-level civil servants at the National Institute of Public Administration (INAP) Timor-Leste using the theoretical perspectives of competency development and human resource development. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, involving informants from policy-making, implementation, and evaluation institutions responsible for leadership competency development at INAP Timor-Leste and the Civil Service Commission of Timor-Leste. The findings reveal that leadership competency development has not yet been optimal due to outdated needs assessments, reliance on an obsolete curriculum, limited human and technological resources, inconsistent leadership commitment, and the continued predominance of conventional learning methods. In addition, inconsistencies in the regulatory framework governing leadership competency development have reduced the effectiveness of program implementation. This study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated leadership competency development strategy that combines updated needs assessment, competency-based program design, organizational resource strengthening, policy alignment, and technology-enhanced learning within the context of a developing public administration system. The findings provide a practical framework for improving leadership development policies and practices in Timor-Leste while extending the application of competency development theory to public sector institutions in emerging governance contexts.

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INTRODUCTIONS

Timor-Leste is a relatively new nation that gained independence in the 21st century. As a newly established state, strengthening the capacity of public sector human resources is essential to achieving national development goals through effective, transparent, and accountable governance. Competent civil servants are fundamental to improving organizational performance and the quality of public services (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023; Brezzi & González, 2021; Kuruppu et al., 2021; Sihombing, 2021). Consequently, developing leadership competencies has become a strategic priority for building an effective and professional public administration.

Human resource development is recognized as a continuous process of enhancing employees' knowledge, skills, and competencies through education and training, enabling organizations to strengthen institutional capability and long-term organizational performance (Garavan et al., 2021; Noe, 2019). In Timor-Leste, leadership development has been incorporated into the National Development Strategic Plan 2011–2030 and is implemented through the National Institute of Public Administration (Instituto Nacional de Administração Pública–INAP). Under Decreto Lei do Governo No. 38/2013 concerning the public administration training and development regime, INAP is responsible for strengthening

both technical and leadership competencies of civil servants. Furthermore, leadership training is mandatory for senior-level civil servants under Decreto Lei do Governo No. 7/2024, which regulates leadership positions in the public administration.

Leadership competency development is closely associated with public administration and human resource development theories. From a public administration perspective, competency development functions as an institutional mechanism to strengthen governance capacity through effective management of public human resources (Berman et al., 2015; Pasolong, 2021). Strategic human resource development emphasizes that competency development should be aligned with organizational goals, stakeholder expectations, and leadership commitment (Forth & Bryson, 2018; McClelland, 1987; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Meanwhile, human resource development theory highlights the importance of organizational resources, government policies, technological advancement, and organizational support in ensuring effective competency development (Pattanayak, 2025). Complementing these perspectives, (Spencer & Spencer, 2008) argue that competency development should follow a systematic process consisting of job analysis, competency needs assessment, competency profiling, program design, implementation, and evaluation, which is consistent with competency-based human resource development proposed by Septiadi & Ramdani (2024). These theoretical perspectives provide the analytical foundation for examining leadership competency development within INAP Timor-Leste.

Despite these institutional arrangements, the implementation of senior-level leadership competency development has not yet been optimal. According to data from the Civil Service Commission, Timor-Leste currently has 977 senior-level civil servants. However, leadership competency development programs reached only 50 participants in 2023, none in 2024, and only 20 participants in 2025, indicating a substantial gap between competency development needs and program implementation.

Table 1. Senior Leadership Competency Development Data for 2023-2025

Years	Amount
2025	20 people
2024	0
2023	50 people

Source: Researcher processed data (2025).

The limited coverage of leadership competency development indicates that existing programs have not adequately addressed the increasing demand for competent senior-level civil servants. This condition suggests that institutional, organizational, and policy-related factors may constrain the effectiveness of competency development within INAP.

Previous studies on leadership competency development have primarily examined human resource management practices, leadership training effectiveness, or competency-based development in general public sector settings. Although these studies provide valuable insights into competency development, they have paid limited attention to how institutional capacity, regulatory frameworks, organizational resources, and competency development processes interact within the public administration system of Timor-Leste. Moreover, empirical studies specifically addressing leadership competency development for senior-level civil servants at INAP remain scarce. Consequently, there is still limited evidence regarding the factors contributing to the suboptimal implementation of leadership competency development and the strategies required to improve its effectiveness.

Based on this background, this study addresses two research questions: (1) Why has leadership competency development for senior-level civil servants at INAP Timor-Leste not been optimal? and (2) What strategies can be developed to improve its effectiveness? Accordingly, this study aims to identify the factors contributing to the suboptimal implementation of leadership competency development and to formulate strategies for its improvement.

Unlike previous studies that predominantly examine leadership competency development from a general human resource management perspective, this study integrates public administration theory, strategic human resource development, human resource development, and competency development theory into a unified analytical framework. By combining these theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence from Timor-Leste, this study proposes a context-specific strategy for strengthening leadership competency development at the senior civil service level. This integrated approach constitutes the study's state of the art and contributes both theoretically to the literature on public sector leadership development and practically to improving competency development policies in emerging public administration systems.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research was conducted at the Instituto Nacional da Administração Pública (INAP) Timor-Leste and the Civil Service Commission of Timor-Leste. The study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explain and understand the phenomenon of leadership competency development by exploring the experiences, perceptions, and institutional practices of relevant stakeholders. Qualitative research primarily utilizes narrative or textual data rather than numerical data (Wijaya, 2019).

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their roles and responsibilities in policy formulation, program implementation, and evaluation of leadership competency development at INAP Timor-Leste and the Civil Service Commission. The final number of informants was determined based on data saturation, where no substantially new information emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data collection techniques are a crucial component of qualitative research because they enable researchers to obtain rich and in-depth information. According to Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman (Sugiyono, 2024), qualitative data collection is conducted in natural settings using primary data sources and emphasizes techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Accordingly, this study collected data through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the research process by coding interview transcripts, categorizing emerging themes, comparing findings across data sources, and interpreting the results based on the theoretical framework adopted in this study. To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was carried out by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and official documents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings were analyzed using the integrated perspectives of strategic human resource development (Bratton et al., 2021) and competency development (Spencer & Spencer, 2008). The analysis reveals that the effectiveness of leadership competency development at INAP Timor-Leste is influenced by a combination of internal organizational factors and external institutional factors. Based on these findings, this study also proposes an integrated strategy to strengthen leadership competency development for senior-level civil servants.

Internal Organizational Factors Affecting Leadership Competency Development

The findings indicate that the limited effectiveness of leadership competency development at INAP is primarily associated with weaknesses in the internal competency management system, which is consistent with Firladi & Hermawati (2025), who found that competency-based human resource development remains a major challenge in strengthening civil servant performance. Although leadership training has been institutionalized within the public administration system, its implementation has not yet been supported by systematic competency planning. The study found that job analysis, competency mapping, curriculum development, and competency profiles continue to rely on documents developed in 2016. Consequently, leadership development programs no longer adequately reflect the competencies required to address current organizational challenges.

From the perspective of competency development theory, Spencer & Spencer (2008), emphasize that competency development should begin with systematic job analysis and competency profiling to ensure that training programs address actual organizational competency gaps. However, the findings demonstrate that competency development at INAP remains largely administrative rather than competency-driven because program design is not based on updated competency requirements. This condition reduces the relevance of learning materials and limits the effectiveness of leadership development for senior-level officials.

Another important finding concerns the implementation of leadership development programs. This finding supports Dirani et al. (2020), who emphasize that leadership competencies should be continuously developed through adaptive human resource development strategies, particularly in responding to organizational and environmental changes. Although contemporary competency development emphasizes blended learning, coaching, mentoring, experiential learning, and case-based learning, INAP continues to rely predominantly on conventional classroom-based approaches. This situation reduces learning effectiveness, particularly for participants who are increasingly familiar with digital learning environments. These findings support the argument of Bratton et al. (2021) that strategic human resource development requires learning systems capable of adapting to organizational change and workforce characteristics.

The study also found weaknesses in the evaluation stage of competency development. Existing evaluations mainly focus on participants' reactions and immediate learning outcomes, while behavioral changes in the workplace and organizational impacts are rarely assessed. As a result, feedback from training programs has not been fully utilized to improve future leadership development initiatives. Spencer and Spencer (2008) argue that competency development should incorporate comprehensive evaluation to measure not only learning outcomes but also changes in performance and organizational effectiveness.

Leadership commitment and organizational support also emerged as important determinants of competency development, supporting OECD (2020), which identifies leadership capability as a strategic driver for building a high-performing civil service. The findings indicate that leadership support in implementing competency development policies remains inconsistent. Furthermore, weaknesses in the human resource management system, particularly the limited number of qualified personnel responsible for curriculum development, reduce institutional capacity to continuously improve training programs. Resource limitations further constrain implementation. Although INAP has sixteen trainers, many simultaneously occupy structural positions and do not fully meet the qualifications required for senior leadership development. In addition, training facilities and digital infrastructure remain insufficient to support innovative learning approaches. These findings are consistent with Pattanayak (2025), who emphasizes that organizational resources, leadership commitment, and human resource management systems are fundamental prerequisites for sustainable competency development.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the primary challenges facing leadership competency development at INAP are not limited to training delivery but extend to weaknesses throughout the competency management cycle, including competency planning, curriculum development, implementation, evaluation, and organizational support.

External Institutional Factors Affecting Leadership Competency Development

Besides internal organizational issues, the findings indicate that several external institutional factors also influence the effectiveness of leadership competency development.

The first external factor concerns government policy. Although leadership training is formally regulated through Decreto Lei do Governo No. 7/2024, inconsistencies within the regulatory framework reduce the effectiveness of policy implementation. On the one hand, the regulation requires leadership training for merit-based appointments; on the other hand, it also allows appointments without fulfilling these competency requirements. Consequently, participation in leadership development is perceived as having limited influence on career advancement, reducing motivation among prospective participants. This finding supports Banfield et al. (2023), who argue that consistent public policy is essential for strengthening human resource development systems within public organizations.

Technological development represents another significant challenge. The findings reveal that limited digital infrastructure has prevented INAP from adopting technology-supported learning despite increasing demand for flexible and interactive learning methods. Contemporary human resource development literature recognizes digital learning as an essential component of competency development because it expands learning accessibility while encouraging continuous professional development (Carbery & Cross, 2025), thereby enabling organizations to respond more effectively to digital transformation. However, these opportunities have not yet been fully utilized within INAP.

Globalization also increases expectations for public sector leadership (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2003). Senior civil servants are increasingly required to demonstrate adaptive leadership, strategic thinking, digital competence, and collaborative governance (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2003; Stewart & Brown, 2020). Nevertheless, the findings indicate that existing competency development programs remain largely focused on conventional administrative competencies and have not sufficiently incorporated emerging leadership competencies required in an increasingly globalized environment. This observation supports Stewart & Brown (2020), who emphasize that competency development should continuously evolve to respond to changing organizational and global demands.

Overall, the interaction between internal organizational limitations and external institutional challenges explains why leadership competency development at INAP has not yet achieved its intended objectives. These findings suggest that improving leadership competency development requires comprehensive institutional reform rather than isolated improvements in training activities alone.

An Integrated Strategy for Strengthening Leadership Competency Development

Based on the empirical findings, this study proposes an integrated strategy for strengthening leadership competency development at INAP Timor-Leste. This recommendation is consistent with Hasanuddin et al. (2024), who identify competency planning, leadership commitment, and organizational support as key factors for successful public management. This strategy represents a conceptual recommendation derived from the empirical findings and interpreted through the perspectives of public administration, strategic human resource development, and competency development theories. Rather than constituting an empirical finding, the proposed framework synthesizes the identified internal and external factors into an integrated model for improving leadership competency development.

The proposed strategy begins with strengthening competency planning through comprehensive job analysis, competency needs assessment, and competency mapping. Updated competency profiles should become the basis for curriculum redesign to ensure alignment between organizational needs and leadership competencies. Furthermore, competency development should adopt more innovative learning approaches, including blended learning, coaching, mentoring, case-based learning, and experiential learning, to strengthen adaptive and strategic leadership capabilities (Northouse, 2025), supported by adequate human, financial, and technological resources. Comprehensive evaluation mechanisms should also be implemented to measure learning outcomes, behavioural change, and organizational impact.

The successful implementation of this strategy depends on several enabling factors, including consistent government policies, strong leadership commitment, supportive organizational culture, adequate organizational resources, and digital learning technology. These factors collectively strengthen the competency development process and contribute to sustainable improvements in public sector leadership performance.

Figure 1 summarizes the integrated leadership competency development strategy proposed in this study. The framework illustrates how competency planning, competency development processes, organizational support, and external institutional factors interact to improve leadership competencies and ultimately enhance the quality of public services in Timor-Leste.

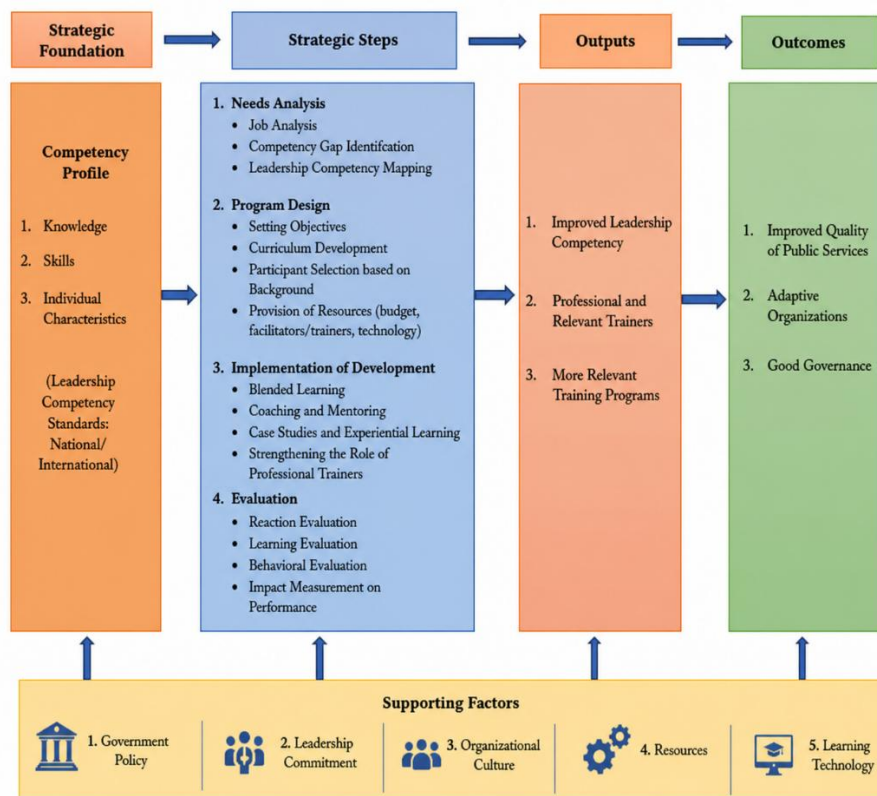


Figure 1. Scheme of Optimal Leadership Competency Development Strategy in INAP Timor Leste

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the limited effectiveness of senior-level leadership competency development at INAP Timor-Leste is not solely attributable to deficiencies in training implementation but also reflects broader institutional and organizational challenges. The findings demonstrate that outdated competency planning, inconsistent regulatory support, limited organizational resources, weak leadership commitment, and the continued reliance on conventional learning approaches collectively constrain the development of leadership competencies required to meet contemporary public sector demands.

The study further demonstrates that strengthening leadership competency development requires an integrated approach that aligns competency planning, competency-based program design, organizational resource development, policy consistency, and technology-enhanced learning. This integrated perspective extends the application of competency development and strategic human resource development theories within the context of public administration in developing countries, particularly Timor-Leste.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for the Government of Timor-Leste and INAP to periodically update competency standards and curricula, strengthen institutional capacity, improve regulatory consistency, and invest in qualified trainers and digital learning infrastructure to support sustainable leadership development.

Future research is recommended to examine the effectiveness of the proposed competency development framework through comparative studies across public institutions or by employing mixed-methods and longitudinal approaches to assess its long-term impact on leadership performance and public service quality.

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