

**J** JOSSEY-BASS

# **IN EXTREMIS LEADERSHIP**

**LEADING AS IF  
YOUR LIFE DEPENDED ON IT**

**THOMAS A. KOLDITZ**

foreword by  
**Joseph W. Pfeifer**  
deputy assistant chief  
New York City Fire Department



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

*For Kay, and Jenna, and Kerry*

“It is said that great crises create great leaders, but that does not happen magically. Some succeed and many fail the heroic tests of superhuman adversity. When leaders across sectors and industries face genuine personal risk in triumphantly completing their worthy missions, they have never had the road map to guide their preparation nor real-time decision making—until now. Kolditz seamlessly blends the priceless “battle-tested” systemic and psychological insights to prepare anyone to lead others confidently through highly risky situations. It is rare to find a book packed with such useful tools and inspirational examples.”

—**Professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld**, senior associate dean, Yale School of Management, author of *Firing Back: How Great Leaders Overcome Career Disasters*

“West Point’s mission is to produce leaders of character to serve as career Army officers; lives depend on the ability of our graduates to lead. Our Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership is committed to research and teaching on leadership in combat—but the lessons they have developed carry forward as examples for all leaders. With *In Extremis Leadership*, Tom Kolditz has successfully linked leading in dangerous contexts with the requirements of everyday leadership. This book is exciting to read, and makes the point that we should all lead as if lives depend on it.”

—**Lieutenant General Franklin L. Hagenback**, superintendent of the US Military Academy

“Colonel Tom Kolditz is a visionary in the field of leadership training and development. With this work he has pushed into an area of leadership that has not yet been fully explored. His unique insights and wisdom offer the reader a fascinating view into the role of leaders and the leadership ethos of groups who will face in extremis conditions and how this drives the cohesion and sense of shared mission among these groups. Any student of leadership who aspires to be a worthy combat leader, SWAT team leader, or who will be involved in a critical incident leadership role should read this book.”

—**David S. Corderman**, head of the Office of Leadership Development, FBI Academy, Quantico, Virginia

“Whether used to train public servants for dangerous roles or to take university students to the next level of leadership science, the concepts in *In Extremis Leadership* are novel, exciting, and chart a path to better understanding of leadership in the real world. This is a must read for leaders in emergency services organizations. Tom Kolditz knows how to lead and how to write. This book is a great example of a soldier-scholar making a difference in the art and science of leadership.”

—**Brigadier General Howard T. Prince II**, U.S. Army, Retired, director, Center for Ethical Leadership, University of Texas

“West Point Professor Thomas Kolditz gives new meaning to the phrase “hanging on every word.” His riveting book moves leadership into new and previously unexplored frontiers—where human lives, including the leader’s, are literally on the line every day. But you don’t have to be a skydiver, mountain climber, or special operations soldier living dangerously to appreciate this book. Anyone in a leadership role can learn much from what it means to live—and lead—in extremis.”

—**John Alexander**, president, Center for Creative Leadership

*For Kay, and Jenna, and Kerry*

**J** JOSSEY-BASS

# **IN EXTREMIS LEADERSHIP**

**LEADING AS IF  
YOUR LIFE DEPENDED ON IT**

**THOMAS A. KOLDITZ**

foreword by  
**Joseph W. Pfeifer**  
deputy assistant chief  
New York City Fire Department



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

## **Other Publications from the Leader to Leader Institute**

- Leadership Lessons from West Point, *Major Doug Crandall, Editor*  
The Leader of the Future 2, *Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Editors*  
Be•Know•Do: Leadership the Army Way, *Introduced by Frances Hesselbein, General Eric K. Shinseki (USA Ret.)*  
Hesselbein on Leadership, *Frances Hesselbein*  
Leading Organizational Learning: Harnessing the Power of Knowledge, *Marshall Goldsmith, Howard Morgan, Alexander J. Ogg*  
Peter F. Drucker: An Intellectual Journey (video), *Leader to Leader Institute*  
The Collaboration Challenge, *James E. Austin*  
Meeting the Collaboration Challenge Workbook, *The Drucker Foundation*  
On Leading Change: A Leader to Leader Guide, *Frances Hesselbein, Rob Johnston*  
On High Performance Organizations: A Leader to Leader Guide, *Frances Hesselbein, Rob Johnston*  
On Creativity, Innovation, and Renewal: A Leader to Leader Guide, *Frances Hesselbein, Rob Johnston*  
On Mission and Leadership: A Leader to Leader Guide, *Frances Hesselbein, Rob Johnston*  
Leading for Innovation, *Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Iain Somerville, Editors*  
Leading in a Time of Change (video), *Peter F. Drucker, Peter M. Senge, Frances Hesselbein*  
Leading in a Time of Change Viewer's Workbook, *Peter F. Drucker, Peter M. Senge, Frances Hesselbein*  
Leading Beyond the Walls, *Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Iain Somerville, Editors*  
The Organization of the Future, *Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Richard Beckhard, Editors*  
The Community of the Future, *Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Richard Beckhard, Richard F. Schubert, Editors*  
Leader to Leader: Enduring Insights on Leadership from the Drucker Foundation, *Frances Hesselbein, Paul Cohen, Editors*  
The Drucker Foundation Self-Assessment Tool: Participant Workbook, *Peter F. Drucker*  
The Drucker Foundation Self-Assessment Tool Process Guide, *Peter F. Drucker*  
Excellence in Nonprofit Leadership (video), *Featuring Peter F. Drucker, Max De Pree, Frances Hesselbein, Michele Hunt; Moderated by Richard F. Schubert*  
Excellence in Nonprofit Leadership Facilitator's Guide, *Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management*  
Excellence in Nonprofit Leadership Workbook, *Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management*  
Lessons in Leadership (video), *Peter F. Drucker*  
Lessons in Leadership Workbook, *Peter F. Drucker*  
Lessons in Leadership Facilitator's Guide, *Peter F. Drucker*  
The Leader of the Future, *Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Richard Beckhard, Editors*



**leader to leader**  
INSTITUTE

#### ABOUT THE LEADER TO LEADER INSTITUTE

Established in 1990 as the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management, the Leader to Leader Institute furthers its mission—to strengthen the leadership of the social sector—by providing social sector leaders with the wisdom, inspiration, and resources essential for leading for innovation and for building vibrant social sector organizations. It is the social sector, in collaboration with its partners in the private and public sectors, that is key in changing lives and building a society of healthy children, strong families, decent housing, good schools, and work that dignifies, embraced by a diverse, inclusive, cohesive community that cares about all of its members.

The Leader to Leader Institute provides innovative and relevant training materials and resources that enable leaders of the future to address emerging opportunities and challenges. With the goal of leading social sector organizations toward excellence in performance, the Institute has brought together more than four hundred thought leaders to publish over twenty books available in twenty-eight languages and the award-winning quarterly journal, *Leader to Leader*.

The Leader to Leader Institute engages social sector leaders in partnerships across the sectors that provide new and significant opportunities for learning and growth. It coordinates unique, high-level summits for leaders from all three sectors and collaborates with local sponsors on workshops and conferences for social sector leaders on strategic planning, leadership, and cross-sector partnerships.

Building on our legacy of innovation, the Leader to Leader Institute explores new approaches to strengthen the leadership of the social sector. With sources of talent and inspiration that range from the local community development corporation to the U.S. Army to the corporate boardroom, the Institute helps social sector organizations identify new leaders and new ways of operating that embrace change and abandon the practices of yesterday that no longer achieve results today.

#### **Leader to Leader Institute**

(formerly the Drucker Foundation)

320 Park Ave., 3rd floor  
New York, NY 10022 USA  
Tel: +1 212-224-1174

E-mail: [info@leadertoleader.org](mailto:info@leadertoleader.org)  
Web: [leadertoleader.org](http://leadertoleader.org)  
Fax: +1 212-224-2508

This is a work of the United States Government, and as such, no protection is claimed in the United States. Outside of the United States, Copyright © 2007 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., and all rights outside of the United States are reserved.

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, or on the Web at [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). Requests to the publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

**Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty:** The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not purport to reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense. While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Readers should be aware that Internet Web sites offered as citations and/or sources for further information may have changed or disappeared between the time this was written and when it is read.

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Jossey-Bass also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

---

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Kolditz, Thomas A., date.

In extremis leadership: leading as if your life depended on it/Thomas A. Kolditz; foreword by Joseph W. Pfeifer.—1st ed.

p. cm.—(Leader to Leader Institute series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7879-9604-8 (cloth)

1. Crisis management. 2. Leadership. I. Title.

HD49.K65 2007

658.4'092—dc22

2007013438

---

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

Foreword	ix
<i>Joseph W. Pfeifer, deputy assistant chief, New York City Fire Department</i>	
Introduction	xiii
1 Key Characteristics of In Extremis Leaders— and How They Are Relevant in <i>All</i> Organizations	1
2 In Extremis Lessons for Business and Life: Strengthening Your Own Leadership by Example	23
3 The In Extremis Leadership Model: What It Is, Why It Works, and How to Use It	63
4 Learning About Fear and Leadership from Dangerous Settings: Handling Emotion During In Extremis Situations	105
5 Leading When Tragedy Strikes: Learning to Cope with Loss	135
6 Building Teams That Build Leaders: An In Extremis Case Study	161
Conclusion	203
Resource: Physical Development for In Extremis Leaders	217

Notes	233
Index	237
Acknowledgments	245
The Author	249

# Foreword

Most forms of leadership, whether in the public or private sector, pose some type of risk. Traditional leadership is usually illustrated by risking power, money, or position. But what happens when people choose to exercise leadership in environments that could potentially kill them? *In Extremis Leadership* examines those high-risk environments and provides a new understanding of how to lead not only in life-and-death situations but also in everyday situations.

Thomas Kolditz defines those who elect to lead others during times of imminent physical danger as *in extremis leaders*. Under extreme conditions, leadership and life are placed on the line so that others may live. As Kolditz examines the concept of *in extremis* leadership, you begin to understand that exercising leadership in life-threatening environments requires instilling in others a confidence to succeed, a promise for survival, and a sense of resilience, while simultaneously performing almost impossible tasks. These principles are similarly applied to business, government, sports, or whenever else teams must perform under challenging conditions.

More than ever before, we see in *in extremis* leadership in the public service of firefighters, police officers, and military personnel. On September 11, 2001, many watched as firefighters entered the burning towers of the World Trade Center. As fire units arrived, we were

faced with enormous fires ninety floors above ground level and with the daunting mission of rescuing an estimated twenty-five thousand people. Fire officers led their firefighters up the narrow stairs of the 110-story office building in the hope of saving those who were in their greatest moment of need. Each firefighter at every level of command was in extreme risk while carrying out this daring life-saving operation.

In just over an hour from the start of the terrorist attacks, the South Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed, and orders were given for firefighters to evacuate the North Tower. In the process of leaving, one lieutenant stopped his engine company at the ninth floor to direct other fire units to safety. At the same time, a captain directed his ladder company to assist a woman who was unable to walk down the stairs, delaying their exit from the building. These stories of exercising leadership, along with countless similar accounts from that day, inspire us and cause us to wonder about the characteristics of in extremis leaders. What we observed on 9/11 were people doing ordinary things at an extraordinary moment in history. The aim of this book is to teach how to apply these traits to the daily workplace.

Kolditz takes a close look at the dangerous environment of the combat military officer and at the extreme sport of free-fall parachuting to explain the transformational character of in extremis leadership. These hazardous conditions magnify the role leadership plays in accomplishing basic and even insurmountable tasks, which gives us a new perspective on the meaning of authentic leadership. Kolditz's research offers a firsthand glimpse of the essential element of leadership under conditions of grave risk. Such research is rarely done because of the danger that is presented to the researcher, but it is essential to understanding the dynamics of leadership within hostile environments.

Every day fire, police, and military organizations respond to dangerous situations with leaders who personally direct perilous operations. Individuals within public service need a greater understanding

about leading in this choice of profession. Kolditz's research reveals that the most experienced individuals often exercise leadership by placing themselves at greater risk in order to protect the safety of the less experienced. Such service, along with countless other demonstrations of selfless leadership, contributes immense public value to our communities. This book defines in extremis leadership and examines the emergent pattern of behavior when leading in both extreme danger and during ordinary routine events.

Within extreme conditions, Kolditz observes four requisites for in extremis leadership. These distinctive activities are first observed in the extremis context, where those who lead are self-motivated to not only master the fundamental execution of their jobs, but also to rapidly scan the environment and make sense of new information. Effective leadership requires rapid decision making by learning from a constantly changing environment of danger. Second, the danger or risk is equally shared between those who are leading and those who follow. This shared responsibility produces a profound trust in those who lead. The third element that Kolditz observes is the minor disparity in lifestyle among those who lead and those who follow. Pay differences are minimal and most often take a back seat to other values. Finally, Kolditz asserts that followers demand a level of competence from those who are in leadership positions. For those who exercise leadership under dangerous conditions, all outcomes are personally related to their level of competence and ability. These same requisites are essential to successful leadership in every profession.

Kolditz examines what most other leadership books seldom witness: the moment when a person's true character is called on to lead. Leadership in the face of danger usually takes place within a few tense moments. There is little time to look inward to complain about conditions, point fingers, or feel self-pity. Such negativity is a luxury one simply cannot afford. Instead, Kolditz argues that leaders possess a calm demeanor and look outward to make sense of a shifting environment and find solutions for resilience. In these moments, leadership is demonstrated by providing purpose, motivation, and direction

to others. At its core, Kolditz explains, leadership is really about the success of your people.

There are many experts on leadership. However, there are few who can combine academic credentials with military and extreme sports experience to provide readers with a personal insight into leading when it counts the most. Whether you are an emergency responder, military officer, or business professional, you will be required to exercise leadership within a high-risk environment at some point in your career. Tom Kolditz's extraordinary stories will inspire you and educate you on the characteristics you need to provide effective leadership under challenging conditions. He also explains the important emotional and physical skills you will need to survive these extreme events. *In Extremis Leadership* provides a practical guide of how to lead at the most important times in your life.

March 2007

Joseph W. Pfeifer  
*Deputy Assistant Chief*  
*New York City Fire Department*

# Introduction

The many people you will read about in this book placed their lives at genuine risk—some as part of living their own exciting lives and some specifically for the purpose of researching this book. The lessons you learn from their sojourns to the edge of life and death will forever change the way you lead.

This book uncovers new leadership lessons from firsthand experience in dangerous places. I say “new” because the principles described in this book haven’t been put forth in other books you might have read about leadership. That’s because this book gets at leadership as it is practiced at a peak of intensity: by watching leaders in circumstances where lives can be lost.

In situations where followers perceive their lives are threatened, leadership literally defines the promise of future life, and those at risk desperately seek capable leaders. Such high-risk situations are ideal settings to seek and find great leaders, assess how they might differ from other leaders, and glean invaluable insights for extraordinary leadership in our everyday lives. This book is a way for you to gain those novel insights without having to put your own life at risk.

For the past three years, I have committed myself to a greater understanding of authentic leadership in circumstances where the injury or death of followers must be actively avoided. I collected experience at extreme sport coaching, leadership in combat, and

the ways that people respond to death. I originally set out to learn about leaders in dangerous settings because I thought I was going to find a form of leadership that would apply only to military, police, and firefighting—in other words, critical response organizations. It turns out that I discovered much more. I discovered that the unique leadership principles that emerge in life-or-death settings offer profound lessons for leadership in all settings.

I, and others who have worked with me, assumed risk firsthand in places that few people go and from where even fewer return. We refer to such places as *in extremis* settings, and the leadership found there as *in extremis* leadership. The leadership insights we've uncovered are bold, unmistakable, and novel; they are gems of understanding for professional life savers and life takers. Yet we never found a leadership lesson or principle in evidence in dangerous settings that didn't also inform or apply to leading in business or everyday life.

The opposite, however, was definitely true: there is much that poses as leadership in business, politics, and everyday life that is not really leadership, fails immediately when applied in dangerous settings, and, ironically, often doesn't work very well in routine settings either. What you learn from this book will help you cut through faddish, bogus leadership approaches and make you better at leading and being led.

## **You're About to Take an Exciting Ride**

There are many reasons you should read about, experience, and think through in *extremis* leadership, and first among them is that in *extremis* leadership is quite exciting. Enjoy the ride. Whether the leaders you'll read about have conquering a mountain or an enemy battalion as their goal, whether the followers are at 15,000 feet in a free-fall at 120 miles per hour or poised to ram the door of an inner-city crack house, in *extremis* leadership promises high-risk, high-payoff outcomes. This book takes you to a world where adrenaline courses through the veins of people who live extraordinary

lives and do extraordinary things. You're about to enter a world of extreme settings where "average Joe" (and even "above-average Joe") is only a spectator.

The more that I looked at leaders in dangerous places, the clearer it became that these leaders, in doing their work, could teach much about the more routine challenges of organizations, and even of political leadership. For example, in the context of the 2004 presidential election, an editorial in the *New York Times* cited the value of developing leadership characteristics under the threat of death: "People need to feel that the President is not going to be fazed by life-and-death decisions. And the only way you can demonstrate that is by showing that you've made some."<sup>1</sup>

A tour through in extremis leadership also gives a new look at public servants to whom we all owe so much. The vast majority of in extremis leaders spend their lives protecting ours, and we need to know more about the nature of their bravery and willingness to sacrifice their own safety. When danger threatens in our towns and cities, we have neither the time nor the resources to put the problem up for contract bid. Instead, a fire department lieutenant leads peers into a burning home, or a special-tactics police sergeant positions his team outside a bank full of hostages. Across the world, in cities now embroiled with anarchy or worse, military leaders thunder down nameless streets with their platoons and companies, barking orders that carry the promise of survival and victory for some and most certainly death and defeat for others. By and large, neither the leaders nor their followers who risk their lives in the public service are paid more than an average wage. All citizens should come to understand such a remarkable phenomenon.

And if you happen to be in public service, you may find that this book reads like a textbook for how to train and act in dangerous settings—whether they are common to your work or as rare as an instance of workplace violence.

The real value to most readers, however, will be in their role as organizational citizens—filling roles in teams and groups that cocoon us in our everyday lives. Most of us won't be a hero on the

side of a mountain—but maybe we can be ordinary heroes and lead better in our families, workplaces, and communities. All of the information presented here offers information that can be applied to any organizational context, and to make it even easier to consider those lessons, I've added indicators along the way in sections labeled "Why This Is Important for All Leaders." In addition, I've concluded each chapter with a summing up of the key in extremis leadership lessons presented in that chapter. Both features are intended to be helpful guides.

## **Learning from In Extremis Leaders: Retracing Pathways in the Shadow of Death**

The pathways you'll take in this book are actual experiences. Several individuals have helped with the effort to understand in extremis leadership, including at least eight who deployed to combat zones for research purposes. Most of the work, however, I had to do myself, either because of the inherent danger of the setting or because of my ability to take advantage of circumstances that developed because of my military credentials or abilities developed as a skydiving instructor. Thus, I learned a lot about in extremis leadership by watching, and sometimes living, in extremis contexts.

I define in extremis leadership as giving purpose, motivation, and direction to people when there is imminent physical danger and where followers believe that leader behavior will influence their physical well-being or survival. In extremis leadership is not a leadership theory. It is an approach that views leader and follower behaviors under a specific set of circumstances—contexts where outcomes mean more than mere success or failure, pride or embarrassment. Outcomes in in extremis settings are instead characterized in terms of hurt or healthy, dead or alive.

Defined in this way, in extremis leadership differs from the popular concept of crisis leadership. In crisis leadership, the focus is on how leaders react when thrust unexpectedly into an extreme challenge, disaster, or circumstance. It is based largely on military his-

tory vignettes and corporate case studies that seem to support recommendations for leaders to communicate better, care more, and try to stay calm in the face of calamity. In contrast, in extremis leaders routinely and willingly place themselves in circumstances of extreme danger or threat and, more important, lead others in such circumstances as well. These leaders are professional and self-selected; crisis leaders are not. Wouldn't you rather learn from pros, especially when the stakes are high?

This is a reality book. Here is how I learned, and you can learn, from the reality lived by professional, self-selected, in extremis leaders:

- Two cadets, a sergeant, and I went as participant-observers to the Special Operations Command Military Freefall School in Yuma, Arizona, to conduct observation of in extremis leaders participating in high-risk military training. We successfully completed all aspects of the course, including nighttime group free-fall jumps with oxygen and more than a hundred pounds of equipment.

- One research associate and I conducted more than 120 in-depth interviews across a range of both leaders and followers. Among the leaders (and many of them are listed by name in the Conclusion), we interviewed SWAT team chiefs from the New York City and San Francisco offices of the FBI.

- We interviewed mountain climbing guides from three states, including elite guides from the highly respected Exum Mountain Guides in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Established in 1926, the school is touted by *Outside* magazine as having some of the best and most experienced mountain guides in the world.

- We interviewed leaders of unique, dangerous teams: for example, a leader of jungle photographic expeditions to India, unarmed and in search of tigers, and a leader of large-formation skydiving events to link hundreds of people together in 120-mph free-fall.

- I studied the U.S. Military Academy's national champion parachute team. The thirty-member coeducational team operates as a three-year, high-risk leader development laboratory. In the past

six years, it has produced the academy's upper-tier student leaders, including four pinnacle cadet first captains in command of the Corps of Cadets and, equally remarkably, two Rhodes Scholars. As a comparison, we completed interviews with team leaders of conventional men's and women's college sports teams like football, softball, wrestling, swimming, and rugby.

- We talked to special operations soldiers, both live and over online chat or satellite telephone.
- And we interviewed the first armored cavalry commander to roll his tanks into the burning streets of Baghdad the day the United States invaded the city in April 2003.

Quotations from these interviews and detailed case studies of some of these exemplary people are featured in every chapter.

Our sample of leaders was rich and diverse and 100 percent in extremis. But to understand leadership, the analysis must go beyond the leaders and the context. The followers also hold an important viewpoint that too often is overlooked. So to talk to followers, three colleagues and I went to war. We talked to thirty-six Iraqi prisoners of war, interviewed by a translator in field settings in Um Qasr, Iraq, during the initial hostilities there in April 2003, and more than fifty U.S. soldier and Marine interviews done in breaks from the fighting on the outskirts of al Hillah and Baghdad. In these one-hour, in-depth interviews conducted prior to President Bush's May 1, 2003, announcement of the end of major combat operations, soldiers spoke openly of the strengths and failings of their leaders.

The greatest challenge in getting to know these incredible leaders and followers has been remaining true to the definition of in extremis leader: we had to dodge administrators who perhaps once led exciting lives but were no longer routinely in dangerous settings. We had to avoid the temptation of interviewing rear-echelon military leaders or followers, even when they were in Iraq during active combat operations. Every soldier and Marine we interviewed had had a peer killed in his or her unit in the past thirty days. We ensured that our mountain guides took clients on challenging

climbs, that they were not simply climbing-school staff working with inexperienced beginners. This book taps a pure sample of truly unique individuals.

## **An Overview of the Lessons Ahead**

In order for the unique character of in extremis leadership to take hold in everyday life, it has to be recognizable. In Chapter One, I describe the key characteristics of in extremis leaders. These characteristics paint colorful, sometimes exciting individual portraits. Although the totality of the work over the past few years points to these characteristics, some of the most compelling evidence comes from the words and deeds of followers who accompanied the leaders into combat or other in extremis settings. This opening chapter features follower comments, along with comments from leaders themselves, to complete the characterization of in extremis leadership.

With the basic characteristics of in extremis leaders established, Chapter Two focuses on the ways that in extremis leadership applies directly to the conduct of business and leadership in everyday life. To be honest, I never intended this work to be broadly applicable; I simply wanted to understand leaders who live and work in dangerous settings so that I could do a better job as chair of the Military Academy's leadership, psychology, and management programs. But in that role, I routinely talk to executives and the visiting public. I took the time to describe the in extremis work to these visitors in detail. Their reactions were powerfully illuminating: these diverse leaders drew the parallels for me, and they insisted that the lessons from the in extremis work were of value to them personally and professionally. Thus, Chapter Two is my interpretation of many comments and critiques provided by executives and leader developers from companies like GE, Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, Anheuser-Busch, and others who visited West Point, discussed in extremis leadership with me, and taught me through our dialogue.

Once it is established that in extremis leaders are useful people, it is valuable to discuss how to create them. Chapter Three discusses

how to develop such characteristics in others. The chapter may be useful in curriculum established for public service jobs such as first-responder training and police, fire, and military training applications. Far from a cookie-cutter training solution, the chapter challenges trainers to think about how to apply in extremis developmental techniques in their own work. Such an approach also enables the chapter to be of value to academic or business leaders who want to review their leader development programs from a perspective never before articulated in the leadership literature.

The challenges of dangerous environments are not simply physical; they are psychological and emotional as well. Chapter Four addresses how emotions operate under conditions of high physical threat, and it debunks the myth that controlling emotions is necessary in order to lead in dangerous settings. Fear is the emotion featured prominently in the chapter. It also serves as a proxy for a variety of feelings experienced when lives are at risk.

Sadly, our worst fears are sometimes realized. In extremis settings always encompass the risk of grave physical injury or death. Chapter Five describes how in extremis leaders cope with the tragedy of death in the organization—an all-too-frequent occurrence in public service, and especially in the Army and Marine Corps, although all of us, sooner or later, will find ourselves in an organization that has to face the death of a respected or beloved member. Lessons learned from in extremis leaders can help all of us cope with the tragic inevitability of death.

In teaching leadership, it is often worthwhile to develop a complex example or case study to show some of the principles in action. Chapter Six describes a case of developing teams using dangerous contexts, and it draws on the specific practices used to develop young people on a collegiate skydiving team. When teams practice, learn, and bond in dangerous environments, levels of leader development occur that are remarkable when contrasted with development under routine conditions. The purpose of the chapter is not merely to show how amazing leaders emerge from dangerous circumstances—though they in fact do. Instead, the real purpose is to

provide a detailed description of the ways in which high-risk teams are built, so that other team builders, whether challenged with danger or not, can draw on these same techniques.

My own developmental path, and this book is a way point, has everything to do with the people who developed me along the way. Most of my thinking about in extremis leadership has been heavily influenced by mentors, colleagues, acquaintances, and of course the subjects of the interviews and activities that led to the book. It is therefore important that you understand a bit more about these people beyond my merely acknowledging them. The Conclusion is a series of brief biographies about the in extremis leaders and followers who influenced the development of the concept beyond mere anecdotal observations. Learn from these people as I have. Many have sacrificed their lives or their livelihoods by leading in dangerous contexts. Their legacy continues to pay dividends when we learn from their experiences. Honor their commitment and sacrifices by serving the people around you, and leading as if your life depended on it.

Finally, the Resource at the end of the book articulates the unique physical demands of dangerous settings. It describes the danger of incapacitating injuries and explores how in extremis leaders can exercise in ways that reduce the likelihood that they will be incapacitated in the face of danger. The parallel for leaders in business and other less threatening settings is that there is tremendous cost—financial, interpersonal, managerial—when a leader is struck by a debilitating injury. This useful resource explains how all of us can benefit from activities that don't simply make us physically fit but that prevent injury. Employers who pay worker compensation may find it particularly worthwhile.

## **How This Book Can Help All Leaders**

I have been told by former military leaders who are now leadership consultants that although the context may change, leadership is leadership. From their perspective, based largely on cold war experience,

there is nothing particularly special about the threat of death in the context of leading. The conventional wisdom is that good peacetime leaders also make good wartime leaders. This perception is understandable, because it is the mission of the military services to train and prepare ordinary people in peacetime to fight and win our nation's wars. I know of no one, however, who has systematically investigated the assumption that leadership is leadership or has tried to characterize leadership in life-threatening circumstances. In addition, even if no unique patterns were to emerge from the study of in extremis leadership, the stakes are simply too high not to question and examine assumptions.

A universal comment from experienced warriors is that it is quite difficult, perhaps impossible, to describe the effect of being in a war to those who have not experienced it. War is serious business, and those who have engaged in the grisly matter of killing, even killing for politically, socially, or morally justified reasons, are usually quite hesitant to be forthcoming and descriptive. It's traumatic to kill, and certainly traumatic to be the object of lethal attack. Veterans solemnly admonish, "You have to have been there to know what it was like," and then fall silent.

The veil is lifted, however, by a twenty-year-old college student bubbling with excitement over her first solo free-fall with a parachute or by a mountain climber freshly returned from the summit of Everest or K2. People whose experiences are unique, exciting, and dangerous also often warn, "You have to have been there to know what it was like," but unlike the more silent and reserved combat veterans, these survivors gush for hours about the excitement and challenges that they overcame.

Their candor represents a window of opportunity for students of leadership. All leaders can learn from those who lead or work in an array of life-threatening contexts.

*West Point, New York*  
*March 2007*

Thomas A. Kolditz

# Key Characteristics of In Extremis Leaders— *and How They Are Relevant in All Organizations*

The key characteristics that in extremis leaders display are common among many types of good leaders. For example, competence, trust, and loyalty are leadership imperatives that span a variety of contexts. Nevertheless, when it comes to matters of life and death, leadership assumes a recognizable form: the in extremis pattern. This chapter explores this pattern and describes the key traits that comprise it, drawing on interviews with parachutists, SWAT teams, soldiers (both American and Iraqi), firefighters, and even a tiger hunter. We'll take a look at what they have to say about what constitutes great leadership in high-risk situations, which often has important implications for leadership in any situation.

## Getting Started: Ranking In Extremis Leadership Competencies

One of the simplest yet inherently scientific ways to learn about the nature of leadership in dangerous contexts is to directly compare in extremis leaders who are actively engaged in dangerous activity with more ordinary leaders who are not operating at risk. One group that I interviewed included the most experienced members of the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) sport parachute team, who at the time were parachuting six days a week and served in leadership roles on the team. I then compared what I learned from these interviews

with identical interviews that I conducted with senior athletes on other USMA sports teams. The athletes I talked to fell into one of three categories: team sport athletes, individual sport athletes, or competition parachute team members. I was most interested in comparing high- and low-risk sports teams. The rank-ordering of the leadership competencies was intended to represent the athletes' personal strengths in the context of their particular sport.

This simple comparison revealed powerful findings about the characteristics of good in extremis leaders. During the interviews, I asked the West Point athletes, who were mostly team captains and other leaders, to rank-order nine leadership competencies that are endorsed by the Army in its leadership doctrine, as shown in Exhibit 1.1. The rest of this chapter describes the results of this survey, which are substantiated by interviews with people working in other high-risk situations.

### **Exhibit 1.1. Leadership Competencies Ranked in the USMA Survey**

*Communicating:* The leader displays good oral, written, and listening skills for individuals and groups.

*Decision making:* The leader employs sound judgment and logical reasoning, and uses resources wisely.

*Motivating:* The leader inspires, motivates, and guides others toward goals and objectives.

*Planning:* The leader develops detailed, executable plans that are feasible, acceptable, and suitable.

*Executing:* The leader shows proficiency, meets standards, and takes care of people and resources.

*Assessing:* The leader uses assessment and evaluation tools to facilitate consistent improvement.

*Developing:* The leader invests adequate time and effort to develop individual followers as leaders.

*Building:* The leader spends time and resources improving teams, groups, and units and fosters ethical climate.

*Learning:* The leader seeks self-improvement and organizational growth and envisions, adapts to, and leads change.

---

## In Extremis Leaders Are Inherently Motivated

As you might expect, for leader athletes in both team and individual sports, the competency “motivating” was at the top of the list. After all, winning is about farther, harder, faster. One might assume that in sports with risk to life, motivation would be powerful, even more important. Astonishingly, however, among the members of the national champion competition parachutists, “motivating” ranked second from the bottom—a very significant difference. “Learning” averaged number one on the parachutists’ list.

Using interview data to explore this counterintuitive finding, I inferred two characteristics of the in extremis pattern:

- In extremis contexts are inherently motivating. The danger of the context energizes those who are in it, making cheerleading much less necessary.
- The potential hostility of the context means that those who work there place a premium on scanning their environment and learning rapidly.

It is important to distinguish between the in extremis concept of inherent motivation and the more commonly cited concept of intrinsic motivation. People who are intrinsically motivated are internally driven. Consider these definitions of *intrinsic motivation* taken from popular books about the commitment of educators:

*“Intrinsic motivation refers to motivation to engage in an activity for its own sake. People who are intrinsically motivated work on tasks because they find them enjoyable.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“Intrinsic motivation is the innate propensity to engage one’s interests and exercise one’s capacities, and, in doing so, to seek out and master optimal challenges.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“Intrinsic motivation is choosing to do an activity for no compelling reason, beyond the satisfaction derived from the activity itself—it’s what motivates us to do something when we don’t have to do anything.”<sup>3</sup>*

The inherent motivation of in extremis contexts is different from intrinsic motivation: rather than occurring for no compelling reason, it occurs as a result of the most compelling reason, and that's the consequence of death. Inherent motivation is externally derived from the in extremis context, not the internally derived intrinsic motivation. It is a new way of viewing the leader-follower dynamic in dangerous settings and is the conceptual portrayal of how the environment demands the total focus of the in extremis leader while at the same time motivating the follower.

Powerful motivation is inherent in dangerous contexts. This means that in extremis leaders don't need to do a lot of cheerleading; they're not the motivational speaker or high-pressure sales type. People need to be motivated to endure misery or physical challenge, but not through in extremis circumstances where threat of death or injury is high. Drill sergeants sometimes have to yell and scream to get trainees to function. This is usually not the case among combat leaders, because followers are inherently motivated by the grave circumstances of combat.

### **In Extremis Leaders Embrace Continuous Learning**

In extremis situations demand an outward or learning orientation, and this orientation is also heightened by threat. This is a new variation, but is similar in some ways to a well-established concept in the management literature. In a widely cited article in the *Journal of Management Studies*, noted author Karl Weick refers to an outward focus on crisis as enacted sense making. Weick recognized the dynamic between the excitement people feel in crisis and the need for the leader to add further excitement to the crisis: "Sensemaking in crisis conditions is made more difficult because action that is instrumental to understanding the crisis also intensifies the crisis." Therefore, it is more important for people in in extremis contexts to focus outward and learn than it is for them to add excitement to the situation through motivation. Weick goes on, "People enact the