

In Extremis Leadership: Leading As If Your Life Depended On It

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Abstract

Colonel Thomas Kolditz is Professor and Head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. He is a distinguished speaker and author. The following annotated summary may be useful in discussions of leadership development for crisis situations.

Is leading in a "life or death" situation different from managing in more routine, or even in crisis, circumstances? Kolditz answers "yes" based on his own experience as a military officer as well as the experiences of others in the military, firefighters, and practitioners of extreme team sports (such as free-fall team parachuting and mountain climbing). His findings, therefore, might also be relevant for those of us who will be involved with humanitarian, emergency and post-conflict situations.

It is indeed in situations when our lives (or businesses, or careers) are at risk that general principles from standard management practice need to be sharpened, and their relative degree of importance modified. For Kolditz, the most crucial factor for the *in extremis* leader is to concentrate on the external environment and learn from it what action to take, rather than focus on motivating his/her team. The intensity of the external threat itself energizes those exposed to it.

Second, the leader must be willing to share with his/her followers the risks with which they are confronted, rather than look for cover (as is often the case among the military in highly hierarchical societies, but is also increasingly observed in business when top managers make sure to get golden parachutes for themselves).

Third, leaders must find their personal reward in the value of their life and that of others (i.e., by doing something good for somebody else), rather than in material wealth.

Finally, *in extremis* leaders, just as other organizational leaders, must be highly competent (and perceived to be so) so as to engender the team's trust and loyalty -- and reciprocally: "leadership is about the success of your people, not about you" (p. 41). According to Kolditz, we are looking for authentic leadership emphasizing the development of hope, resilience and optimism within a highly ethical perspective¹. "To be a leader is not to hold down a position or perform a job: it is to develop a character that is inextricably linked to giving purpose, motivation, and direction to others" (p.71). Therefore "impression management" merely intended to make sure that the leader appears to be selfless, concerned and humble is doomed to fail (p 36/37). And so is leader development training that focuses solely on knowledge, skills (such as decision making, communication, and planning), and abilities. On the other hand, critical analysis allowing thorough problem definition is a fundamental aspect of all leadership. Such analysis should apply to risk assessment so as to determine when it is time to halt an activity and walk away – and not be afraid to tell the truth about it—and when to continue such activity (p. 87). Critical analysis should also apply when an organization has had a major performance failure, which is when it must "look for weaknesses throughout the organization, not just the area that was initially afflicted" (p.50/51).

At the personal level, rather than attempt to control their emotions in the face of adversity or a crisis, *in extremis* leaders should focus their attention so intently outward that it will be "difficult, if not impossible [for them] to experience emotions" (p 116): they will "become progressively calm in the face of adversity" (p 118). And, if necessary, they will take a deep breath and exhale slowly as in yoga (p 122). Needless to add, they will be physically strong and healthy so as to avoid becoming incapacitated during the course of a critical task (e.g. by a spasm in the neck or back), and to that intent they should practice exercises that reinforce joint stability, balance, and muscular flexibility (pp. 217-232).

What does this all mean for leadership development? Kolditz recommends that we go beyond "skill-focused" leader training and use a more inspirational, more spiritual approach, which should include (i) telling stories of real situations, particularly about what young leaders will be facing immediately after graduation, (ii) peer-to-peer mentoring and sharing of knowledge incl. through video-conferencing, and (iii) study not only historical cases but also "live" cases. It would have been helpful if, in addition, the author had recommended the simulation of cases involving difficult ethical issues.

¹ The author, unfortunately, did not explore thoroughly this topic, in particular when the military are asked to commit unethical acts (e.g. torture)—or participate in an unjustified war. Instead, he implicitly assumed the moral justification of all military ventures undertaken by his country (and other countries), and this despite the contrary evidence he provided when he referred to the Vietnam War's 788 incidents of "fragging" during which soldiers attempted (and sometimes succeeded) to kill their commanders (p.55). The author's ethical concerns appeared to be limited to the cases when organizations that profess values-based leadership merely seek to embed such values in their leaders and followers e.g. through laminated cards (GE) and "values dog tags" (US Army) thus failing to recognize that values are "caught, not taught" (p 68-69).