

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.”¹

“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.”²

“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.”³

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

environments that constrain them. . . . Commitment, capacity, and expectations affect sensemaking during crisis and the severity of the crisis itself.”⁴

Thus, in extremis leaders need to focus outward on the environment to make sense of it and can actually make matters worse by intensifying people’s fear by trying to motivate them. To Weick, this phenomenon was evidenced in crisis. In extremis leaders are routinely and willingly in circumstances that novices would label as crises, and my findings suggest that Weick’s earlier work may help inform leadership in dangerous settings as well as in organizational crises. Such a parallel will be particularly important in Chapter Two, which directly compares leadership in dangerous situations with conventional business settings.

In Extremis Leaders Share Risk with Their Followers

Another characteristic that sets in extremis leaders apart from other leaders is their willingness to share the same, or more, risk as their followers. This is, of course, partly true because they join their followers in challenging and dangerous circumstances. We found, however, such profound and consistent sharing of risk that it clearly stands out as a defining characteristic of in extremis leaders.

Leaders themselves expressed powerful feelings about shared risk; for example, consider the following comments made from a SWAT team leader and a tiger hunter:

If you put the plan together and you’re not comfortable being up there with a foot through the door, what the hell is up?

*Special Agent James Gagliano, SWAT team leader,
New York City Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation*

I assume twenty times the risk [of my team, although] . . . there is some equal risk in the field. Any of us could fall off the elephant, and any of us could be thrown from the jeep, and we did get injured,

all of us, and hurt on a daily basis. There wasn't anybody that didn't come back bloodied or badly bruised or hurt. We have a seventy-pound tripod on top of an elephant, it sometimes got hinged against a tree and the tripod will fall. . . . Every day we got hurt. So I went through like ten bottles of Advil, which I gave to my team to help them get through that.

*Carole Amore, professional videographer, expedition leader,
and author of Twenty Ways to Track a Tiger*

These interviews also made it clear that this shared risk was not merely a form of leader hubris, showboating, or simple impression management. Rather, it's part of the in extremis leader's style or technique. It profoundly affected the followers; followers recognized it, knew what it represented in the heart and character of their leader, and deeply respected their leader as a result. This phenomenon was acute on the battlefields of Iraq, as these American soldiers described the importance of their leaders' sharing the risk the soldiers faced:

You have to learn confidence in your leaders and trust in their judgment. They are not going to throw you out into something that they wouldn't put themselves in as well.

U.S. soldier, Third Infantry Division, Baghdad, Iraq

I think that the only difference in their roles was that they got a little more information a little sooner than the rest of us. Other than that, they weren't really that much different than anybody else. . . . Other than seeing what was on the collar [their rank insignia], it's hard to decipher who was who. . . . The officers here, they showed leadership and they get out there and do the same things that me or him were doing.

U.S. soldier, Third Infantry Division, Baghdad, Iraq

Conversely, soldiers who found their leaders unwilling to share the risk had little will, and lost motivation, as in the case of this captured Iraqi soldier:

The leader . . . was a lieutenant colonel. An older man, forty-five, forty-six, forty-eight years of age. He was a simple person, but the instruction come from the command in Baghdad. Like, “do this,” but he doesn’t do that, and he ran away. . . . He told us if you see the American or the British forces, do not resist.

Captured Iraqi soldier, Um Qasr, Iraq

The common practice of providing business leaders with buyout plans, generous rollover contracts, or golden parachutes does little to inspire follower confidence. Certainly it puts business risk, compared to risk of life, in perspective. When performance means life or death, the best leaders don’t wear parachutes unless their followers do too.

In Extremis Leaders Have a Common Lifestyle with Their Followers: There’s No Elitism

A fourth unique characteristic of the in extremis pattern emerged when we asked interviewees about their remuneration and lifestyle. In an era where there are entire conferences devoted to executive compensation, it was refreshing to focus on authentic leaders who lacked materialism and instead focused on values.

When I asked public sector employees such as police officers and soldiers about the nature of their pay structure, the leader’s pay and the follower’s pay were unequal but uniformly modest. I found consistently that most in extremis leaders earn at most an average wage but that they felt it was sufficient for their needs. This made sense to me and my colleagues who also interviewed these people. In contexts that routinely threaten the lives of the leader and the led, value attached to life is morally superior to value attached to material wealth. Pay should take a backseat to other concerns. Economists might deconstruct this phenomenon differently with respect to public service jobs, arguing that the availability and skill sets of such work drive wages down. Perhaps. But the often overlooked mechanism is the irrelevance of symbolic value in the face of danger.

Money has no meaning. Even future rewards or punishments have little meaning when the promise of a future is uncertain.

Current leadership theory recognizes that symbolic value is only applicable in limited circumstances. James MacGregor Burns initially developed the notion of transformational leadership, based largely on a charismatic leader establishing vision, a way ahead.⁵ This contrasted with other theories that together were characterized as transactional, based on leader-follower transactions such as giving pay and rewards and establishing perceptions of equity and fairness. The idea that organizations could be changed by a transformational leader took root, was elaborated by Bernard Bass and others, and is a dominant theory in the art and science of leadership today.⁶

Earlier writers, however, presumed that a transformational approach was due to either a leader characteristic such as charisma or a leader approach such as visioning. For those who understand the dynamics of dangerous settings, it's clear that the immediate threat places value on human life and strips away the value inherent in transactional leadership. In fear of their life, people don't care about fairness, equity, future rewards, or anything else except being led out of the circumstances that threaten their existence. In *extremis* settings are the perfect incubator for transformational leadership. Due largely to the irrelevance of symbolic value, transactional leadership is almost completely ineffective in *extremis* settings. The nature of the context is developmental. Over time, a values-based form of transformational leadership emerges and becomes part of the operating style of *extremis* leaders. Consider what one FBI agent said that reflects the values-based conditions under which he serves:

I think it's the respect for the guys that I work with [that is] more important than anything. I don't need this job; I mean, I love my job, I love my country, I love the Bureau. But more important than any of those things, I think it's like that philosophy that you've probably heard a million times before about why does the individual

infantry soldier fight. He doesn't give a shit about his commander, he doesn't care about red, white, and blue. He doesn't care about anything else except for the guy that is on either side of him. To a man, the people I work with feel the same way, and I do too. It's their respect that they go home at night and say, "The guy who put this plan together, the guy that led us on this mission, [he's a] squared-away guy, and he's got our best interest at heart. That's more important to me than anything else.

*Special Agent James Gagliano,
FBI SWAT team leader, New York City Office*

Outside the contexts of military, police, and firefighting, the pattern of common lifestyle continues. People who live and work in dangerous environments learn to love life. They seem to live in a world where value is only loosely attached to material wealth, as one mountain climbing guide confirmed when asked to characterize his financial and material well-being:

Well, you can look at it a couple of ways. There is an old Yosemite climber that said at either end of the social spectrum, there is a leisure class. So in many ways, I am part of a leisure class in that I get a lot of free time to go and do the things I want to do. I don't have, financially, a lot, and so to answer that question, I think there are a couple ways to look at it. Financially, we aren't as well off as most of my clients. Most of my clients have corporate jobs, making good money. But they are also living in the city, places I would not want to live. [They] work nine-to-five jobs. So in that regard, I think I am better off than they are, because I think I am healthier, probably less stressed. Financially? No, but lifestyle wise, yes, and better off than most folks.

*Christian Santilices, professional mountain guide,
Exum Climbing School, Jackson Hole, Wyoming*

We believe that in extremis leaders accept, even embrace, a lifestyle that is common to their followers as an expression of values

and that such values become part of their presence and credibility as leaders. There is an inspirational Quaker saying that underscores the value of a transparent lifestyle: “Let your life speak.” The idea is that followers come to understand values by watching the leader.

In Extremis Leaders Have and Inspire High Competence, Trust, and Loyalty

Although many characteristics of in extremis leaders tend to set them apart from other organizational leaders, they also hold several characteristics that are widely exhibited by successful leaders across a range of contexts. In extremis leaders, like most other leaders, are highly competent, and they engender loyalty and trust. The following quotations, both taken within a seventy-two-hour window during the fall of Baghdad, illustrate the stark difference between success and failure at establishing loyalty in dangerous times:

We got our boy back here that we are trying to fix up, and he had a good chunk taken out of his forearm. He was definitely in some pain and he definitely had some tears, but he hung on. He was apologizing for getting blood on our boots. He was apologetic. “Sorry for bleeding on your boots.” I said, “You want to apologize for bleeding on my boots?” I got a lot of respect for him.

U.S. soldier, Third Infantry Division, Baghdad, Iraq

And then, in contrast:

Not the officers. We couldn’t talk to them. They put us in jail, they kill us. We cannot talk to them.

Captured Iraqi soldier, Um Qasr, Iraq

Competence Is Critical in High-Risk Environments

Followers demand leader competence, and nowhere is that more critical than in dangerous contexts. No amount of legitimate or legal authority is likely to command respect or obedience in a set-

ting where life is at risk, whether in a war zone or on the side of a mountain. This is the ironic contradiction of the common stereotype of the military leader: an authoritarian martinet who commands subordinates who must robotically obey. That's not how leadership in the military works, at least not the Army and the Marine Corps units we visited, and certainly not in combat. The average troop is likely to find court-martial to be a more attractive option compared to following the orders of an incompetent leader in a war zone. Only competence commands respect, and respect is the coin of the realm in in extremis settings. For example, witness the respect that this American soldier fighting in Iraq had for the leader of his unit:

He took charge every time that he needed to take charge. He was doing a hundred things, while I am down there doing one thing. At times, I knew he was overwhelmed, so I would hop up and say, "Hey, sir, I got the con [meaning "I can lead": originally, a reference to manning a conning tower], I can battle track [keep track of where everybody is in order to focus on fighting the battle], I got a lot to do with this, we have been together for a while, you need some rest." He was overwhelmed, but he handled it very well. He did everything that he had to do. He maneuvered the troop or parts of the troop when nobody else was around to do it. He did more than you could ask of him.

U.S. soldier, Third Squadron, Seventh Cavalry, Baghdad, Iraq

Respect accrued from competence does not imply that in extremis leadership is merely technical or somehow emotionless or soft. Much to the contrary, dangerous settings often demand leadership styles that are unambiguous, pointed, and aggressive to the point of grating on followers. For example, consider how another American Marine described the leader of his unit:

I don't like the guy. I don't know how to deal with him when we get off work, but as far as being a professional and being out there in the

trenches, he is a great squad leader. He [will do] the right thing, but sometimes it's a very unpopular thing, because he's the squad leader. I admire him. He definitely deserves the Marine Corps Achievement Medal for Valor. We put him in for that.

U.S. Marine, First Marine Division, al Hillah, Iraq

Leadership in dangerous contexts places incredible demands on leaders, who view virtually all outcomes as related to their personal competence and ability. These leaders work hard to achieve situational awareness and control. Yet the truth about in extremis settings is that awful things happen, often without warning and without leader competence casting a deciding vote. Nonetheless, the perception of control and personal efficacy is critical to the functioning of an in extremis leader. Imagine trying to accommodate feelings of inefficacy in a setting where effectiveness is the only link to life itself. In contrast to those who lead in settings that are benign enough to allow finger-pointing and denial of responsibility, in extremis leaders tend to assume responsibility for outcomes, even when any objective observer would let them off the hook for circumstances obviously outside their control. Here's how one leader described the disastrous outcome of a situation he was in charge of:

My worst day, well, back in 1980 something . . . , I forget when, it's been so long and I try not to think about it, . . . I was instructing some students, and got invited onto a jump, onto a larger skydive, . . . there was a [high-speed, midair] collision, a friend of mine was tumbling through the sky, and I went down and missed him, and he went in [slang for hitting the ground at penetration speed and dying on impact]. . . . That's a performance failure.

Guy Wright, professional skydiver, leader of large-formation and world-record skydiving events

Competence is the building block for leader-follower trust relationships in in extremis settings. As one might expect, then, the competence in extremis leaders exhibit must be authentic, like their

leadership style. Organizations run by appointed leaders without legitimate competence can muddle through mundane events, but they will predictably crumble when pushed in a crisis that poses genuine threat. People in fear of their lives will not trust or follow leaders if they question their competence. The incompetence of bureaucratically appointed leaders exudes from this comment from a captured Iraqi soldier about officer appointments:

There is some kind of government decree that simple soldiers can go to the [Baghdad Military] Academy for six months, end up graduating as an officer. So you can see soldiers becoming officers. [Others] become officers without ever entering the military academy. Some of these are part of the Army of Amquds [Jerusalem]. And some of them are members of the [Baath] Party, and being members of the Party they become officers. They become officers without even special training or the like. All you have is the government decision and they become promoted to officers. So you find intelligence Muqaddim [sergeant], Amid [higher officers], their expertise is very weak because their schooling is limited and they have too wide experience [that is, no experience specific to the role], very limited throughout the years. It used to be before the [First] Gulf War, the officer who graduated first in their class at the military academy, they would go to like Sandhurst [the British military academy] or to India. So we are talking about a total of one or two or three officers from eight hundred graduating. The study at the military academy is a far cry or does not correspond to the reality of the battlefield. All of the studies are theoretical. The practical side or the practicum is not taken seriously.

Captured Iraqi soldier, Um Qasr, Iraq

High-Risk Situations Demand Mutual Trust Between Leaders and Followers

If competence is the building block of in extremis leadership, trust is the house. The leaders we interviewed often spoke of competence leading to trust relationships in dangerous contexts:

It's taken a year and a half to get to the point where I think we are still six months away from being where I fully want them to be, but I think we are now at the point where to make an entry, if I'm the third guy in the door and the first guy goes left and the second guy is going right and he is driving his corner, he's not worrying about the guy on his left, he knows that that guy is taking care of any threat in that corner. And that's a good place to be.

*Special Agent James Gagliano,
FBI SWAT team leader, New York City Office*

In addition, it was made clear that such relationships were not incidental but were built quite deliberately:

I mean, really, I established a relationship with all my subordinate leaders and the soldiers. They weren't just a name on a battle roster, a voice uttered into the radio to me, and I wasn't just a voice uttered on the radio to them. Everything I was saying, basing on where I wanted to go on, was building a team, a group that completely trusted each other. You aren't going to establish that if you can't talk with each other, if you can't interact with each other. It wasn't just my XO [executive officer] or one or two platoon leaders, it was all my platoon leaders, all my platoon sergeants, my first sergeant, all the leadership of the troop. You know, I didn't do anything without that cast of ten or twelve buying off on it. We went to lunch every day together, you name it. I mean, I had high standards, but I communicated those standards and they knew why I had high standards, but to be some dictatorial commander with blinders on that just says "This is the path we are going to follow," I don't think that kind of leadership style and mentality could succeed with today's soldiers and NCOs [noncommissioned officers].

*Captain Clay Lyle, Commander,
A Troop, Third Squadron, Seventh Cavalry*

And, predictably, when such trust-based relationships were never built, organizational cohesion was nearly nonexistent in in

extremis conditions, as indicated by this Iraqi soldier describing how his own leader failed in this regard:

The Mair Liwa [brigadier] left and went to his family. He was an authoritarian, and left everyone afraid of the other. Saddam [Hussein] made a situation where even a brother cannot trust his own brother. We don't trust anyone.

Captured Iraqi soldier, Um Qasr, Iraq

Interestingly, at the same time I was conducting interviews in Iraq and back at West Point, someone else was in Iraq collecting information on trust in in extremis conditions. Lieutenant Colonel Pat Sweeney had left the safety of graduate school at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, to accompany the 101st Airborne Division into combat. He had formerly commanded in the division and was in graduate school to finish his doctorate in social psychology, en route to West Point and a teaching assignment.

Sweeney has boundless energy, and he decided to gather some data from his vantage point in the division's headquarters. The two main purposes of his interviews were to map the attributes of a leader who can be trusted in combat and explore the relationship between trust and influence in combat as scientifically as possible in an in extremis environment. Pat interviewed dozens of soldiers, and seventy-two of them completed an open-ended questionnaire that was designed to explore trust and leadership in combat. The soldiers were conducting combat and civil military operations in northern Iraq, and Pat visited them at their respective base camps in Mosul, Tal Afar, and Qayyarah West Airbase.

Sweeney's questionnaire asked soldiers to describe in their own words the attributes they look for in leaders they can trust in combat. They then were asked to discuss why each attribute influenced trust, rate the relative importance of each attribute to the establishment of trust, and share their perceptions of how trust and leadership were related.

The soldiers Sweeney interviewed cited leader competence as the most important attribute for influencing trust in combat. In in extremis conditions, followers depend on their leaders' technical expertise, judgment, and intelligence to plan and execute operations that successfully complete the mission with the least possible risk to their lives. After organizing the followers' responses into categories of attributes, Sweeney quantitatively determined the top ten attributes soldiers look for in leaders who can be trusted in combat. They are listed in order of importance in Exhibit 1.2.

I consider Sweeney's work to be the fullest explication of trust and competence in in extremis conditions to date,⁷ and his findings reinforce and underscore the in extremis pattern:

- Trust and loyalty follow after competence in terms of relative importance.
- Leading by example in dangerous conditions means sharing risk and requires confidence and courage.
- Self-control is necessary to be a level-headed, low motivator focused outwardly on the environment.

Exhibit 1.2. Attributes of Leaders Who Can Be Trusted in Combat

1. Competent
 2. Loyal
 3. Honest/good integrity
 4. Leads by example
 5. Self-control (stress management)
 6. Confident
 7. Courageous (physical and moral)
 8. Shares information
 9. Personal connection with subordinates
 10. Strong sense of duty
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Note: The attributes are shown in rank-order of importance as rated by their followers.

- Integrity, sense of duty, and personal connection bind leaders and followers through a common lifestyle that reinforces trust.

The in extremis pattern emerges consistently when danger is present.

Dangerous Work Demands Mutual Loyalty Between Leaders and the Team

In extremis leaders sometimes have short-term relationships with their followers. Climbing guides, skydiving organizers, expedition leaders, and even astronauts can rapidly inspire trust and confidence among followers. In police, military, and fire departments, however, leaders have long-term associations with followers that can grow into deep loyalties. These loyalties are both personal and professional in nature, and the value of loyalty between leaders and followers is abundantly clear when the followers speak:

I think what makes him [his leader] better is that he is there for what he can do for us, not what the soldiers can do for him. He has proved that many times, to the whole platoon, that it's about what he can do for us, not about what we can do for him. The whole platoon will do anything for him, anything he ever asks.

U.S. soldier, Third Squadron, Seventh Cavalry, Baghdad, Iraq

What did I learn about him as a leader? I think he likes his job. He likes doing what he's doing. He likes to be in control. He doesn't like to sleep very much. He needed to be out with Marines. He always puts his Marines first. That is an awesome [trait] of a leader. No matter what, if something wasn't going right, he would get up, do whatever was needed, and he would say, "get it done." He is always there for everybody.

U.S. Marine, First Marine Division, al Hillah, Iraq

Such loyalty from followers is usually engendered by loyalty on the part of leaders. It has been well established in the leader development literature that loyalty is a two-way street. We found this point to be especially striking among in extremis leaders:

I told them to go [flee from the fight]. Because there is an expression in Arabic, “somebody is in my neck,” meaning I am totally responsible morally and especially morally for that person. These soldiers were in my neck; in other words, I was responsible for them. I am responsible for those people in front of guard, and I am not going to let them perish if I don’t have to. I am not going to let them die for something that’s not worthwhile.

Captured Iraqi lieutenant who had graduated from the Baghdad Military Academy only twenty-one days prior to this comment, Um Qasr, Iraq

My personal heroes are the people I work with, many of the people I work with. Many of the people I have the privilege of working with, even many of them who are younger than I am, are sincere, genuine, trustworthy, competent, caring people, that were really working hard, in many cases against the odds, to do what they really feel is the right thing. And they are motivated not by money and not by anything but the ultimate objective of doing something good for somebody else. And that’s difficult to do, day after day.

Special Agent Steve Carter, senior team leader, FBI SWAT, San Francisco Office

It was always for them. It was for my soldiers. . . . By the time I took command, [I felt] that I loved them. That it was more than just a job or some people I worked with, and certainly by the one year point, [they] were as close as any family member. I felt they needed me.

Captain Clay Lyle, Commander, A Troop, Third Squadron, Seventh Cavalry

Final Thoughts: Consider Your Own Leadership Competence

Obviously, and as we've seen in this chapter, followers are profoundly influenced by their leaders in combat and other dangerous settings. The interviews I (and Pat Sweeney) conducted with people working in in extremis situations give testament to that, and those who lead in dangerous circumstances should take careful note of the unique pattern.

It does not follow, however, that the positive effects of in extremis leadership are necessarily limited to dangerous contexts. Proper levels of motivation, a learning orientation, sharing risk, living a common lifestyle, competence, trust, and loyalty can help build a leadership legacy among followers in many walks of life.

Leaders' most enduring legacy exists in the people they have led. They can build corporations, make loads of money, write books, name buildings after themselves. In the end, however, for leaders, the only lasting effect is in the people they develop by giving them motivation, direction, and purpose. It may be insightful for those building a leadership legacy in their own organization to contemplate how an expert in extremis leader might behave if the stakes were just a bit higher regardless of the nature of the work. Leadership principles from routine settings don't necessarily transfer well to in extremis settings like combat, but in extremis leadership may have a lot to contribute to leadership in everyday organizations.

Those who lead in more ordinary contexts might do well to decide the relative importance of their own competencies. Work through the list of nine leadership competencies shown in Exhibit 1.1, and identify your top five or six personal strengths. Does the pattern suggest that you are ready to lead in dangerous settings or in organizational crisis or that you will need to adapt? In either case, it may be worthwhile to consider the need for both steady leadership and an outward focus the next time you find yourself in a sticky situation.

The in extremis project is essential to understand leadership under conditions of exceptionally grave risk. If you lead in other circumstances, you have the opportunity to take the in extremis pattern to an equally relevant level of application. It takes some attentiveness and effort to peer into the soul of people led in times that are often best forgotten and to understand fully what their leaders gave to them. For those of you who lead professionally, a look at in extremis leadership can be a magnifier, adding clarity and detail to what you already sense: that leaders can make anything possible, and without leadership, even basic tasks can seem insurmountable.

Summing Up

1. In extremis leaders are inherently motivated because of the danger of the situations in which they're working; therefore, leaders don't need to use conventional motivational methods or cheer-leading. If you're leading in a more conventional situation, consider how you need to motivate the people on your team.
2. In extremis leaders embrace continuous learning, typically because they and their followers need to rapidly scan their environments to determine the level of threat and danger they're facing. Leaders in other environments are fortunate in not facing physical threats; nevertheless, they should continually scan their environment for competitive or market threats and embrace learning so they can stay ahead of the pack—or at least on top of solving problems.
3. In extremis leaders share the risk their followers face. This isn't just grandstanding; leaders truly share—and even take on greater—risks in in extremis situations. Leaders in other environments should keep this in mind: don't ask your followers to do anything you wouldn't do yourself.

4. In extremis leaders share a common lifestyle with their followers. Leaders and followers in high-risk situations don't earn the same amount of money, but the pay is uniformly modest. In recent years, there has been much attention paid to executive compensation, and all leaders should consider how much they truly have in common with the rest of their organization.
5. In extremis leaders are highly competent, which inspires their followers to emulate that level of competence. Whatever type of organization you're leading, you'll obviously gain more respect if you show that you know what you're doing.
6. Dangerous situations demand a high level of mutual trust. In extremis leaders trust their team, and they themselves can be trusted. And even if someone's life isn't at stake in an organization, his or her livelihood may be, so do everything you can to be trustworthy and to trust your team to do what you've hired them to do.
7. High-risk environments demand mutual loyalty between leader and followers. And although corporate America has changed from the era when workers stayed with a single company for fifty years and retired with a gold watch, leaders should do everything they can to foster a culture of mutual loyalty.

