

2011

Leadership When It Matters Most Lessons on Influence from In Extremis Contexts

Angela Karrasch

Army Research Institute, Fort Leavenworth

Alison Levine

United States Military Academy

Thomas Kolditz

U.S. Army, United States Military Academy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usarmyresearch>

Karrasch, Angela; Levine, Alison; and Kolditz, Thomas, "Leadership When It Matters Most Lessons on Influence from In Extremis Contexts" (2011). *US Army Research*. 346.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usarmyresearch/346>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the U.S. Department of Defense at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in US Army Research by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Angela Karrasch, Ph.D., Army Research Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS
Alison Levine, Adjunct Professor, United States Military Academy
Thomas Kolditz, Col, U.S. Army, United States Military Academy

CHAPTER 12

Leadership When It Matters Most

Lessons on Influence from In Extremis Contexts

Angela Karrasch, Alison Levine, and Thomas Kolditz

None of us would study or read about leadership if we did not think that leadership is important to people. Assuming that leadership is, indeed, important to people, it then follows that it is most important when people's lives are at risk. This chapter is a discussion of the most important niche in leadership thinking and analysis—leader influence in dangerous contexts.

There is social benefit to such a discussion. When one adds up the publicly released figures for numbers of active duty military personnel, law enforcement officers, and firefighters—all people who live and work in dangerous contexts—the total is in the millions. Adding mountain climbers, skydivers, and other extreme sports enthusiasts to the list swells this figure. Not to be overlooked are ordinary individuals suddenly and unexpectedly thrust into a dangerous circumstance (for example, shootings, floods, mine disasters, airline incidents) where leadership matters or could have mattered. Dangerous contexts are ubiquitous, and leadership during them can make a difference.

Dangerous contexts are among the most difficult subjects to study, because they are inhospitable to researchers and hard to define. Those interested in discussing or studying such contexts may be tempted to simply define danger as actual physical threat. Such an approach falsely assumes that danger is merely the quality of an environment. True, there are certain environments that are easier to negotiate than others, but what is dangerous to one person may not be to another, even in rather extreme environments. For example, a dangerous climb for a novice adventurer may pose little actual risk for an

expert climber; the former may be terrified while the latter remains completely unconcerned. Was the environment itself dangerous? No. Danger is created only when a person interacts with the environment. Danger is what we label circumstances when an individual is in an environment that he or she cannot adequately control without the threat of negative consequence. It makes no sense to attempt to define dangerous contexts by focusing on the environment itself.

To study leadership in dangerous contexts, it would be empirically sound to define a measurable interaction between individuals and their perceptions of the environment. One way to do this is to measure or assess beliefs. For example, one may define a dangerous context as one where followers believe that a leader's behavior could affect their physical well-being or survival.¹ Beliefs are easily measured and have a relationship to behavior. This chapter focuses on the perceptions and beliefs of followers and how they relate to leader influence.

A CASE OF *IN EXTREMIS* LEADERSHIP: POLAR EXPLORATION

Alison Levine is an avid adventurer and explorer who has traveled to some of the world's most remote regions, many of them inhospitable and dangerous. She has climbed peaks on every continent and in 2002 served as the team captain of the first American Women's Everest Expedition. This is her firsthand account of how she was influenced by an *in extremis* leader:

In December 2007 I found myself embarking upon one of my most physically demanding, mentally challenging adventures—a ski traverse across west Antarctica to the South Pole. I was a part of an international team of adventurers, led by Eric Phillips, who had been awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for achievements in polar exploration. Physically, Eric wasn't the largest person on the team, but pound for pound he was the strongest of us all, and his experience level earned him our respect.

This adventure entailed six weeks of skiing across 600 miles of the coldest, windiest, harshest environment on the planet, while each hauling 150 pounds of gear and supplies in sleds harnessed to our waists. Our route was a remote one that few people had ever followed because of the considerable amount of crevasse danger and challenging terrain. The skiing often required maneuvering over and around mounds of ice that could be up to a meter high—making the surface conditions exhausting and treacherous. Frostbite, malnutrition and incapacitating exhaustion were constant threats. In addition to the physical risks involved in this type of extreme journey, polar explorers face mental challenges that are unique to

the Antarctic environment. Because everything is white and there is relatively little visual stimulation, on cloudy days it is impossible to determine where the ground stops and where the sky starts, and this causes mental confusion and dizziness. And because there is 24 hours of sunlight in the summertime it can be very difficult to sleep. Lawrence Palinkas and Peter Suedfeld published a paper several years ago that defined a condition known as “polar madness,” where people on polar expeditions or working at polar research stations deteriorate psychologically because of the lack of visual stimulation, sleep deprivation, and physical and mental exhaustion. People become increasingly irritable, agitated and depressed. Palinkas’ paper mentions examples of polar expeditions that ended in disaster because of psychological stress, including a scientific expedition in the 1880s that led to suicide and cannibalism.

In order to avoid some of the pitfalls and disasters that had plagued previous polar expeditions, Eric urged us to show up prepared, both physically and mentally. Once we were out on the ice Eric required us to rotate tent partners each night so that everyone spent time with everyone else and got to know each other. This created loyalty and cohesion amongst expedition members. And throughout the journey Eric continually stressed the importance of teamwork because in order to get to the Pole, everybody had to be willing to share various responsibilities, including navigating the route, making critical decisions, organizing camps and sharing the workload.²

LEADING TEAMS *IN EXTREMIS*

People who view a leader as increasing the likelihood of their physical well-being or survival may find themselves in such a context without intending to be in such circumstances. Often, however, as in Alison Levine’s example, groups of people willingly go into harm’s way to achieve a goal. When a team voluntarily puts themselves in potentially dangerous situations to achieve goals, its members are committed. This represents an opportunity for an *in extremis* leader to go beyond using influence to change behavior, attitudes, or beliefs. Rather, the leader can use influence to maintain the teams’ commitment to a shared goal when extreme and dangerous conditions would have them change. The *in extremis* leader uses competence, credibility, and trustworthiness to maintain the high level of commitment from the team.

Influence Process

Three types of influence processes—instrumental compliance, identification, and internalization—take into account different motives and perceptions on

the part of the person being influenced.³ While these processes are separate and distinct, more than one process may occur at the same time. Instrumental compliance occurs when the follower (the person being influenced) accepts influence from another in order to attain a reward or to avoid punishment. In this case, the leader (the person attempting to influence another) has power that stems from controlling rewards and punishments. In many jobs, the follower's performance will depend partly on surveillance by the leader. Many people hold jobs for the paycheck and find no intrinsic value in the work itself, but a leader can provide rewards (paycheck or bonus) or punishments (dock pay, fire) depending on performance. If no surveillance were in place, the follower's compliance with the task (performance) would drop off, because he simply does not care about the work; he only cares about the rewards and avoiding punishment. In a dangerous environment, a leader cannot afford to be constantly monitoring team members' compliance with their assigned tasks, roles, and responsibilities. The leader in dangerous situations must be assured of rapid compliance or commitment regardless of surveillance. Instrumental compliance will not suffice as the main process of influence in dangerous situations.

Personal identification occurs when the follower imitates the leader's behavior or adopts the same attitudes in order to gain acceptance and esteem and to maintain a relationship with the leader. This relationship may help the follower's need for esteem from others, and becoming more like the leader improves the follower's self-image. The source of power that makes the leader attractive may be status, esteem, or resources. Compliance or commitment by the follower depends on the salience of his relationship to the leader. The more closely a follower personally identifies with the leader, the more likely it is that he will take on the leader's mission as his own.

The U.S. Army employs security force advisers that it embeds with foreign militaries to promote and support security in other nations. These advisers use their expertise and resources to support and train foreign militaries. Reports from American foreign security force (FSF) advisers indicate that Iraqi and Afghan soldiers, in their respective countries, would emulate their behaviors in order to gain status among their units and with the advisers, but often without understanding. Advisers quickly recognized that the Iraqi and Afghan soldiers consistently desired to simply be "seen with" coalition forces. Knowing that their actions would be emulated, FSF advisers took their responsibilities as role models quite seriously and were able to use role modeling as an effective influence strategy. Of course, this is true within the U.S. Army as well. Junior leaders watch and emulate senior leaders, and senior leaders are aware of their responsibilities and the power associated with being a role model.⁴

Internalization occurs when the follower accepts the leader's influence because there is consistency between what the leader proposes and the follower's values, beliefs, and self-image. The follower is committed to the ideas of the leader, not to the leader. The source of the leader's power stems from credibility. The leader is a credible prototype of the group's shared values and beliefs. Transformational leadership is associated with inspiring followers to internalize values that promote group interest over self-interest.⁵ Alison Levine's story reflects this type of influence process. Her team members all valued exploration, and their passion for learning and their beliefs and need for survival aligned with the leader's beliefs and needs. Eric consistently demonstrated these values and competence, which gave him the credibility he needed to sustain their commitment.

Gaining Influence

The social exchange theory is useful in understanding how power is acquired.⁶ Essentially, this theory proposes, the team members assess the relative potential contributions of others and then attribute status and power to a leader based on that assessment. So, if someone repeatedly demonstrates competence and integrity, she will be afforded power or the ability to influence the behavior of group members. As long as the leader produces such things as resources, solutions, and vital information, the team will grant her power. They exchange power for the security provided by the leader. In the example of the arctic explorers, the team members recognized Eric's ability to survive multiple polar expeditions, which gave him credibility in their eyes. Because of his ability, they placed their confidence in him, giving him the power to make decisions about the route, logistics, and communications. Social exchange theory applies to leaders in both safe and dangerous situations. It is likely, however, that fewer mistakes are forgiven in the dangerous context, because followers may be more "tuned in" to leader performance; their survival depends on it.

The transformational leadership theory suggests that leaders gain influence by using individual consideration (attention to needs, aspirations, and abilities), intellectual stimulation (promoting new ideas and relevant mind-sets), and charismatic or inspirational leadership (energizing motivation). The expedition group knew that their leader understood basic needs for climbing, but what maintained their trust in him are instances when he recognized individual needs and worked to address these needs. In one instance, he saw a lack of strength due to dehydration, so he removed weight from that member's pack and carried it himself. In taking care to help the team member regain strength, Eric served as a role model for teamwork.

Trust and Expertise

In dangerous contexts, leadership is a product of today's actions and yesterday's groundwork. When leaders ask followers to change current practice, it is their leadership not just at that moment, but also previous experiences with their followers that will determine whether they maintain power or lose it. In August 1949, the U.S. Fire Service sent sixteen smoke jumpers into the Gates of the Mountains region in Montana to put out a fire.⁷ Wagner Dodge led the group of jumpers. Dodge was a man of few words, but he had the technical expertise to lead this type of mission. The team members had not trained with him or with each other.

Dodge scouted a safe landing zone. At first glance, the fire seemed nothing out of the ordinary, but Dodge recognized the fire was far more dangerous than he had estimated from his aerial reconnaissance, so he instructed his men to move toward the mouth of a gorge. This made sense because he wanted to get his crew between the fire and the river. If the fire forced them into the river, they could swim out until the fire swept by. As they moved toward the mouth of the gorge, Dodge saw that fiery eddies had closed the escape route, so he reversed course, without saying anything to his men. Within minutes Dodge passed word for the men to drop all their equipment and move as fast as they possibly could. When a fire fighter drops his equipment, he is no longer a fire fighter, and his mission turns to simple survival. The men began to run.

The region they were in was a transition zone, where mountains turn to grassy plains. Dodge realized he and his crew would not be able to outrun the fire, which was consuming the shoulder-high, dry dense grass. He stopped, lit a match, and threw it into the grass in front of him. His crew had never seen anything like it and didn't understand when he jumped across the blazing ring and moved to the smoldering center. They thought maybe he was lighting a backfire, which would make sense in some cases, such as when there is thought to be some time before becoming engulfed. Dodge, however, was not thinking about a backfire. He could not be heard over the roaring flames but was waving frantically for them to join him. At this point, the men didn't understand how this could possibly save them; they thought he had gone crazy. They ran past his smoldering ring of fire and up a hill. Thirteen men died that day.

Dodge's instinct to create a safety zone by burning potential fuel for the main fire has become an accepted practice in firefighting, and after the incident, a board of review concluded that all of his men would have survived if they had heeded Dodge's efforts to get them into the escape-fire area. The innovative tactic that firefighters now practice as a lifesaving measure

was not accepted by Dodge's crew because he had lost his ability to influence them. The crew had not personally worked with Dodge before this incident, so they did not have a sense that he knew or cared for them. They did not know Dodge. There was no bond of trust between them to carry them through a situation that did not make sense to them. They were only willing to follow as long as they saw the benefit or could make sense of what Dodge was doing. He had a quiet nature, and although he provided specific and direct instructions, he offered no rationale for his decisions. The nature of the fire caused Dodge to continually change course and revise previous instructions. According to the social exchange theory, followers will concede power only as long as they believe the leader will provide some form of security. According to transformational theory, group members follow leaders who communicate openly and demonstrate care.

If conditions for survival change drastically, power can shift dynamically. Team members may recognize that competence in one area is no longer relevant. They will reassess the type of expertise needed to address the new conditions and shift power to the leader that meets the new requirements. This happens in the competitive corporate world as well as within the military. General Stanley McChrystal replaced General David McKiernan in overall command of NATO forces in Afghanistan because of a need for "new thinking." McChrystal had spent most of his career specializing in counterinsurgency (COIN), which requires a different way of thinking than high-intensity combat does. Although McChrystal had the appropriate competence, some of his actions led the president and coalition members to lose trust in him; hence he was replaced by General David Petraeus. McChrystal's rise and fall highlight the criticality of both competence and character in maintaining influence.

Regardless of whether a leader works at a strategic or tactical level, followers need to know that the person with the most relevant capability is in charge. On one particular FSF adviser team, the chief was a major with an infantry background. Infantry are very disciplined, and legitimate authority is key to mission accomplishment. Infantry traditionally relied heavily on positional power, inspiration, and strict compliance for influence. As team chief, this major was frustrated by the lack of influence he had within his team and among Iraqis. He did not modify his leadership approach; he had legitimate power by rank and assumed that he could rely on it. The team realized early on, however, that their effectiveness, and indeed their survival, depended on building relationships with the local populace and by gathering intelligence from them. Many of the traditional infantry competencies and leadership techniques would not be relevant in this type of mission. The team looked

to the one other major on the team, whose background was in the military police. This major knew how to talk to locals, he had experience “reading people” and asking questions to get good intelligence for raids and general security purposes, and his leadership style was less authoritarian. The formal leader with legitimate authority lost power within his team, because he could not adapt fast enough. Kolditz’s research with *in extremis* leaders indicated the importance of “learning” above all other leader competencies.⁸

Mutual Influence

With highly committed members like the polar explorers described above, a team can be highly effective through reciprocal influence, that is, although the leader has a strong influence, he or she listens to and empowers the team members. They participate in critical decisions that empower them and promote their commitment. Reciprocal influence also allows the leader to get a good sense of how team members think and what motivates them. In one FSF adviser team in Iraq, the team leader had to tell team members that his job was their job too. This team used main supply routes (MSRs) that were known to be dangerous due to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) planted by insurgents. Insurgents changed tactics at a rapid-fire pace, making it hard to keep up through counter-IED strategies. The team leader felt responsible for bringing his guys home alive, so he required every member on the team to contribute intelligence every day on what they had seen and heard in the area of operations. Some team members did not think they had the experience or the credibility to speak about suspicious behaviors on the MSRs. The leader told them that even if it was “out of their lane,” he wanted them to participate in collecting information and proposing solutions. The team recognized that this leader had their best interests in mind and respected his commitment to gathering as much information as possible to increase their chances of survival. Thus the leader maintained his ability to influence the group.

This example is a case in which a leader relinquishes some power to a team that is highly committed to survival. Contrast this leader with the infantry officer who refused to relinquish any control and attempted to maintain power through rank. Research indicates that effective leaders in “safe” conditions also create relationships in which they have strong influence but remain receptive to influence from subordinates. They empower team members to discover and implement new and better ways of achieving goals in order to stay competitive.

SOURCES OF POWER AND INFLUENCE

Broadly speaking, sources of power can be conceptualized along two lines.⁹ One source is power derived from the authority that comes with one's job, role, or status. This type of power is referred to as positional power. It includes potential influence derived from control over information, resources, rewards, punishment, and things like the physical work environment. Given an *in extremis* condition, this type of power to influence will fall short. Followers who face a real possibility of death or dismemberment are not concerned about rewards or punishments; they only care about survival.

The other source of power is personal power, which may stem from a person's expertise or competence, character, integrity, friendship, loyalty, or other attributes that make the person attractive. Referent power, a subtype of personal power, is typically acquired easily by someone who is attractive, charismatic, charming, friendly, and trustworthy. Authentic leaders increase their power to influence by showing care and concern for other's needs and developing trust within their organization. When leaders promote trust they create a bond that allows for cooperative and committed work as a team. (See Chapter 9, in this volume, for an in-depth discussion of trust development.)

A second subtype of personal power is expert power, which is influence gained from knowledge or competence that is needed by others to perform well or survive. The more rare and important the competence is to the group, the more power the group will concede to the leader. More research is necessary to determine how important competence is compared to trust and integrity when people face *in extremis* conditions.

A survey of upper-middle and executive level leaders by the Center for Creative Leadership identified the top three sources of power as the power of expertise, the power of information, and the power of relationships.¹⁰ Participants in the study reported that the power of relationships would become the most important source in the next five years. The least popular source of power was the power to punish. Given extreme conditions, it is hard to imagine that the power to punish would in any way be effective when followers are faced with survival. *In extremis* leaders must develop the relationships that promote trust and commitment.

Understanding Those Whom You Wish to Influence

A dangerous context leader should understand the motivation of team members. Kurt Lewin describes a common psychological phenomenon called approach/avoidance motivation.¹¹ In essence, people act out of desire for something or fear of something. To create motivation to act, a leader can

heighten a follower's desire for something, lower the follower's fear, or both. Leading in extreme conditions often involves the strong emotions of fear. FSF advisers found that Iraqi soldiers could be inspired to participate in dangerous operations when they focused them on the vision of a secure neighborhood for their children to play and attend school in, that is, something the soldiers desired. They also found that driving the Taliban out of villages in Afghanistan (i.e., lowering fear) was effective in gaining locals' cooperation in rebuilding communities. *In extremis* leaders can use transformational leadership to develop an understanding of followers' needs, fears, and values. This caring quality supports leaders' ability to determine the most influential actions they can take to help their followers and accomplish missions.

Leader and Leadership Development Implications

An *in extremis* leader is only effective because followers maintain trust and want him or her to be their leader; the dangerous context strips away the validity of other sources of leader authority and power. An understanding of why followers choose to concede power improves the leaders' ability to assess the most effective means of influence. A leader should ask, "Is the follower motivated by rewards and avoiding punishment, or does the follower want to be like me, or even believe as I do?" The answers inform the leader about the follower's level of commitment. They also provide insight into appropriate influence techniques. For example, if the follower only seeks reward, a leader knows that positional power is at play and that in a crisis, this follower may not comply with requests. In situations when lives are on the line, the power that comes from positional authority often will be insufficient to influence followers. In this case, the leader needs to get to know the follower better so he or she can determine how to build commitment. Personal authority that comes from competence, trust, and credibility with followers may be more influential than positional power. Ironically, the same principle likely holds true for ordinary circumstances, where there is no danger, yet leaders in quiet contexts may lean on their positional authority like a crutch. This sets the conditions for leaders to suddenly lose the ability to influence when an unforeseen crisis raises the stakes. This may explain why the concept of crisis leadership has gained in popularity in recent times as nations struggle through the challenges of economic downturn, terrorist threats, and natural disasters. Leaders in all contexts need to engage in interactions with followers that demonstrate care and build relationships and eventually gain commitment.

It is also important for a leader to understand how to use reciprocal power while also maintaining power. In today's complex environments, it is unlikely

that one leader will have all the answers to volatile, uncertain, and chaotic challenges. A leader must, therefore, be humble enough to empower others to develop solutions and be confident enough to execute the best solutions regardless of the source.

The most fundamental lesson from dangerous contexts is recognizing that the emergence of a perceived threat—when followers believe that a leader's behavior will profoundly influence their well-being—is a game changer. Leaders in all contexts struggle constantly to maintain influence and give purpose, motivation, and direction to their group, but a perceived threat to that group may require a shift in influence strategies. The ability to gauge followers' needs and apply the right strategies to influence their perceptions of one's leadership and the context is a ubiquitous ability, suited not merely to the dramatic circumstances presented by danger, but in all circumstances where people look to a leader for direction and purpose. The focus of studying *in extremis* leadership is not merely to understand leadership in dangerous contexts. It is to better understand leaders in all contexts. As put so aptly by Jack Bovender, the CEO of Hospital Corporations of America during the successful evacuation of the Tulane Hospital during Hurricane Katrina, "I couldn't become in 30 minutes what I hadn't been in 30 years."¹² None of us can.

KEY TAKE-AWAY POINTS

1. Leaders in dangerous contexts need to gain influence based on competence, character, and trust prior to asking followers to engage in life-threatening duties.
2. Commitment from followers is earned by knowing their needs, values, fears, and capabilities, and by being willing and able to put their interests first, and by inspiring group members to do the same for each other.
3. Commitment from followers is hard won, but much more effective than attempting to impose compliance in *in extremis* conditions.
4. Every interaction with followers should build the leader's influence and build the relationship with them so that when a leader has to expend influence, it is there to use.
5. Influence strategies should be aligned with the leader's source of power, the follower's needs, and the situation.

KEY REFERENCES

- Kelman, H. C. "Interests, Relationships, Identities: Three Central Issues for Individuals and Groups in Negotiating Their Social Environment." *Annual Review of Psychology* 57 (2006): 1–26.
- Kolditz, T. *In Extremis Leadership: Leading As If Your Life Depended On It*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Yukl, G. *Leadership in Organizations*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education International, 2006.

NOTES

1. T. Kolditz, *In Extremis Leadership: Leading As If Your Life Depended On It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007); Thomas A. Kolditz and Donna M. Brazil, "Authentic Leadership in *In Extremis* Settings: A Concept for Extraordinary Leaders in Exceptional Situations," in *Authentic Leadership Theory and Practice: Origins, Effects and Development*, ed. William Gardner, Bruce Avolio, and Fred Walumbwa, Monographs in Leadership and Management, vol. 3 (Oxford: Elsevier, 2005), 345–356.
2. On polar madness, see L. Palinkas and P. Suedfeld, "Psychological Effects of Polar Expeditions," *Lancet* 371 (9607) (2008): 153–163.
3. H. C. Kelman, "Interests, Relationships, Identities: Three Central Issues for Individuals and Groups in Negotiating Their Social Environment," *Annual Review of Psychology* 57 (2006): 1–26.
4. A. I. Karrasch, "Indirect Influence: Foreign Security Force Adviser's Lesson Learned" (paper presented at the Joint Center for International Security Force Advisor Conference, Quantico, Va., October 26, 2008).
5. J. M. Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).
6. E. P. Hollander, "Leadership and Social Exchange Processes," in *Social Exchange: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. K. Gergen, M. S. Greenberg, and R. H. Willis (New York: Winston-Wiley, 1979).
7. M. Useem, *The Leadership Moment* (New York: Times Books, 2006).
8. Kolditz, *In Extremis Leadership*.
9. G. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education International, 2006).
10. V. Bal et al., *The Role of Power in Effective Leadership* (Colorado Springs: Center for Creative Leadership, 2008).
11. K. Lewin, *A Dynamic Theory of Personality* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1935).
12. Kolditz, *In Extremis Leadership*, 44.