

Michael Holenweger, Michael Karl Jager & Franz Kernic (eds.), *Leadership in Extreme Situations*, Cham, Switzerland, Springer International Publishing, 2017, 390 pp.

Reviewed by Thomas A. Kolditz

In 2005, the United States journal *Leader to Leader* published a special edition dedicated to leadership as taught at the United States Military Academy at West Point. The lead article, “The *In Extremis* Leader,” was based on interviews in Iraq by multiple researchers with access to the combat theatre from 2003 to early 2005 and more conventional research with civilian and military leaders with experience in dangerous contexts. *In extremis* (Latin for “at the point of death”) leadership was defined psychologically, with respect to follower beliefs, as leading in contexts where followers believed that leader behaviour would influence their physical well-being or survival. This specificity in definition led to the notion that leadership in dangerous contexts had unique qualities worthy of serious scientific study, and the timing coupled nicely with increased access of both researchers and journalists to combat contexts in Iraq, Israel, Afghanistan, and the Horn of Africa. From 2005 on, a growing body of scientific work on leadership in extreme settings has increasingly informed leaders in the military, law enforcement, emergency services, and extreme sports.

The current work, *Leadership in Extreme Situations*, is an important addition to the burgeoning scholarly literature around extreme contexts. This book, the broadest and most pragmatic written to date, is designed to be used across a wide target audience of military, political, civic, and economic leaders. In order to accomplish such breadth without sacrificing sophistication, the editors formed some of the top leadership researchers in the world from an ETH Zurich congress of leadership in extreme situations, as well as a subsequent morale, cohesion, and leadership working group at the 2015 European Researcher Group on Military and Society Conference in Ra’anana, Israel. The result is a superb work full of evidence-based analysis on social dynamics in extreme situations.

Although access to extreme or dangerous settings has increased, this book is much like previous edited books on the topic in that the authors have spent little time, and have gathered little data, in the actual settings of interest. Most of the work is based on first- or second-hand historical accounts, surveys or interviews of returnees from dangerous settings, and other indirect methods. Thus, readers who are thirsty for data or research findings taken *in situ* may be left wanting ; social and behavioural scientists and historians lag somewhat behind journalists in terms of professional access to dangerous settings for the purposes of their research.

That said, each chapter in the book is tied strongly to the situations of interest, and in reading the book, one feels confidently close to the action, lending the overall work a sense of

legitimacy and high quality. One of the immediately apparent indicators of quality in *Leadership in Extreme Situations* is the clearly and consistently drawn distinction among the effects of extreme situations (defined by danger in the context itself), *in extremis* situations (where follower perceptions about threat are manifest), and crisis (where organizations and associated processes are under stress). Such distinctions are often blurred by other editors and authors, particularly in less sophisticated trade books, and by authors attempting to relate exciting stories about extreme situations to business audiences thirsty for insights and solutions to their administrative crises. In exploring every chapter, it is clear to the reader whether they are learning about extreme situations, *in extremis* contexts, or more general crisis states.

The book opens with a chapter by co-editor Franz Kernic on the impact of death on leadership and group behavior. He examines the disruptive aspects of death and how people and organizations can absorb the powerful experience of death. Experiencing a death in an organization is an exceptionally common occurrence in all organizations of any size, and dealing with death is a common responsibility among leaders, whether the death occurs due to work-related or non-work-related accident, military action, illness, or other cause. Using social phenomenology and Levinas' social theory as a lens, he dives deep into the dynamics of leading people through these experiences with death. At the moment of this writing, the CEO of Save the Children is dealing with the aftermath of a cowardly attack by ISIL on the Save the Children/ United Kingdom offices in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Her task would be enormously informed by Kernic's work, as would that of any leader who has a company or business unit thrust into the tragic consequences of a death.

One important challenge in the extreme situations literature is in defining precisely what a crisis is or is not. It's been both defined as a psychological state in individuals, as well as by attempting to describe inherently dangerous situations – environmental definitions. Carmit Padan puts forth a compelling chapter where she studies the construction of crisis events in the Israeli military. She uses three case studies taken from Israeli infantry units engaged in combat in periods from 2006 to 2011 to examine perceptions among different levels of leaders as to what constitutes a crisis and how differently individuals of different rank and grades perceive and categorize the same events. The chapter draws heavily from eyewitness accounts and, from a lay perspective, is exciting to read. From the perspective of experienced combat or crisis leaders, her work is particularly compelling, because she goes into great detail on how leaders use military doctrine to make sense of events and arrive at appropriate responses. From the scholarly perspective, her extension of Karl Weick's famous work on sensemaking is both thorough and useful. Thus the chapter is a must read for any serious thinker or practitioner in the crisis area. Her findings, first, are that crisis events are defined and perceived subjectively, based on the function, the level of perceived control, and the organizational order; crisis is defined differently according to position and role. Such

findings strongly support a psychological approach to defining crisis or dangerous situations, rather than some sort of objective assessment of the nature of the events themselves. They also reveal, in a useful way, that by making sense of events, commanders construct tactical solutions for the event as it occurs, and in its aftermath—the fundamental purpose of leadership in military organizations.

Every chapter in the book holds promise for both theory and practice. Deirdre Dixon and Michael Weeks used phenomenological interviews with US Army officers recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan as a method to derive suggestions for leader improvement in *in extremis* settings. Guided by multiple theoretical perspectives, including sensemaking, situational awareness, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, complexity leadership theory, communication theory, and sensegiving, they constructed a superb interview protocol – provided verbatim at the end of the chapter – and worked in-depth with 30 respondents. They found that mental flexibility, a sense of duty, and self-efficacy were key to effectiveness, and that *in extremis* situations were a special case of dynamic states with leaders committed to a perpetual cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving. The chapter is an exceptional example of the value of even a relatively small sample provides to help inform the nature of leader development and leadership training, particularly in the military.

The most famous, early modern combat researcher was of course S.L.A. Marshall, a historian who participated in all wars from World War I through Vietnam as a thinker and writer. Marshall's writings do not qualify him as a leadership scholar, although his observations on combat motivation were viewed as critically important for his contemporaries to understand how to maximize the combat effectiveness of their soldiers. Subsequent research strongly suggested that Marshall embellished some of his experiences. Marshall nevertheless represents the first keen example of a researcher willing to stay and work in *in extremis* settings in order to test assumptions and understand behaviour in such dangerous contexts. Several chapters in *Leadership in Extreme Situations* use oral histories of primary and secondary sources to extend modern thinking about *in extremis* leadership into contexts that pre-date the term by 50 to 150 years. Hitoshi Kawano wrote about combat leadership in Guadalcanal in World War II. The interviews supporting Kawano's chapter were taken more than 20 years ago from veterans of the battle from both the Japanese and US perspective. Kawano concludes that principles of *in extremis* leadership were largely consistent across the two otherwise distinctive cultures. He did find less information shared by leaders of Japanese soldiers, and that extreme vertical cohesion leading to near blind obedience was characteristic among the Japanese. His chapter shows that bravery in dangerous situations is complex and may have multiple sources across cultures and perhaps organizations.

In a closing, memorable chapter, Alfredo Gorrochotegui merges modern leadership theory – principally authentic leadership theory and servant leadership principles – with the life and heroic combat death of Arturo Prat. Prat, a Frigate Captain in the Chilean Navy, died

at the age of 31 in the Battle of Iquique on May 21, 1879. The most interesting part of this historically informed chapter is not the life and death account of Prat, although that is colorful and fascinating in its own right. The most interesting part describes the ideal character of a leader in dangerous situations as “magnanimous”, a leader quality dating to Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics. Gorrochotegui’s characterization of magnanimity in leaders connects ancient writings with modern works of authentic and servant-based leadership. This is an important contribution, because it is easy to believe that modern leadership writers, many of whom are anointed as “thought leaders,” work with purely original concepts. In reality, most who have successfully written about the nature of leadership are extending the thoughts of those who came before, and providing data to improve our understanding of historically fundamental truths about leaders and leadership. This is particularly true in the service leadership literature, a body of writing that started far earlier than its most famous purveyor, Robert Greenleaf. Mary Parker Follett – aptly, a social worker and management theorist – was developing servant leader concepts prior to Greenleaf’s birth in 1904. Gorrochotegui takes us even further back in history, and in doing so demonstrates that leadership tested by dangerous situations is deep and fundamental in the human condition.

Chapter by chapter, *Leadership in Extreme Situations* pulls the reader quickly through clean writing across multiple disciplinary perspectives on *in extremis* leadership : psychological, sociological, organizational, historical, and even philosophical. It is an enjoyable yet sophisticated read. The generous breadth, quality scholarship, and the book’s practical value should be a signal to researchers and thinkers that leadership research in dangerous contexts is ripe for a comprehensive review. Those who will take on that challenge, and all of us who are fascinated by leadership in dangerous situations, should begin with this book.

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