

# In the Danger Zone: A Conversation with Colonel Thomas A. Kolditz

Colonel Thomas A. Kolditz is a professor in and head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. He has served in a range of military tactical command and technical staff assignments on three continents and has been a leadership and human resource policy analyst at the Pentagon. His department at West Point is responsible for teaching, research, and outreach activities in the areas of leadership, psychology, sociology, and management.

Since 2001, Kolditz has served as a coach and mentor for the U.S. Military Sport Parachute Team. He has woven his personal experiences and abilities as a soldier, skydiver, and scholar into the first-hand study, analysis, and practice of leadership in dangerous circumstances—and of the ways such in extremis leadership can inform the practice of leadership in more conventional settings across the private, public, and social sectors.

Kolditz has published more than fifty articles in academic, military, and leadership journals and serves on the editorial and advisory boards of several academic journals. His most recent book, the critically acclaimed *In Extremis Leadership: Leading as If Your Life Depended on It* (Jossey-Bass, 2007), is based on more than one hundred interviews, many of them conducted on the ground in Iraq during combat operations.



Kolditz is a fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society and is a member of the Academy of Management and the Society of Psychologists in Management. In 2007, he was named a leadership thought leader by the Leader to Leader Institute, and in 2008, he was named a top leader development professional by Leadership Excellence magazine.

Kolditz has presented leadership content to more than one hundred governmental, corporate, and social sector audiences worldwide. As a professor he has led academic seminars or given lectures to students from Babson, Wellesley, and Olin Colleges; the University of Missouri; Columbia, Duke, Yale,

and Peking Universities; the Military Psychology Center of the Israel Defense Forces; the Beijing International M.B.A. program; Harvard University's Center for Public Leadership; seven national and international service academies; and more than ten major metropolitan law enforcement, firefighting, and public service academies and assemblies.

Kolditz holds a Ph.D. degree in social psychology from the University of Missouri and two master's degrees, one in military arts and science from the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the other in strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

He has a Web site at [inextremisleadership.com](http://inextremisleadership.com) and is an invited discussant on leadership at [blogs.harvardbusiness.org/frontline-leadership](http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/frontline-leadership).

Leadership in Action managing editor Stephen Rush recently spoke with Kolditz about a range of leadership topics, including in extremis leadership and how leaders in any field can learn from it.

**SR:** The term *in extremis* is derived from a Latin phrase and means “at the point of death.” You define in extremis leadership as leadership displayed under the life-threatening circumstances often experienced by soldiers, police officers, firefighters, and

**others. But leaders in the business world and in the public and social sectors, although they may regularly face situations that are stressful or entail high risk, rarely if ever are in peril of their lives. So how can such leaders adapt and apply the lessons to be learned from in extremis leaders to their own leadership situations and behaviors?**

**TK:** There are really two ways to look at crisis leadership and to learn about crisis leadership. One way—and it’s the dominant way in business—is to look at case studies of ordinary individuals who were thrust into crisis circumstances and had to claw their way out. Another way is to look at people who expect to be in crisis and who are routinely with individuals who are in fear of their lives and their physical well-being. Those individuals have therefore developed professional levels of ability in dealing with individuals who are in crisis conditions. Consequently, the lessons that we can learn from those professional in extremis leaders show us the most important elements of crisis leadership, which we can then adapt to our own circumstances regardless of the level of risk or stress.

**SR: Are the key characteristics of in extremis leadership particularly relevant for business leaders in today’s dismal global economy, and if so in what ways?**

**TK:** One of the characteristics of in extremis leaders is that they tend to share risk and hardship with the people they’re leading. So leaders in dangerous contexts would never create circumstances in which they are personally advantaged relative to the people they are leading—otherwise they would lose the trust of those individuals forever. In easier times in business, leaders sometimes fall into the habit of feeling entitled and reward themselves in ways that set

themselves apart from the people they’re leading.

That’s tolerated when there’s no crisis. But in a crisis environment, just like a dangerous environment, people become mistrustful and resentful of leaders who have advantaged themselves when things are so bad for their followers, and we see that in many ways right now in our own economy, where people are disgruntled about golden para-

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chutes, about bonuses being paid to CEOs, and about the overall level of compensation provided to leaders. So it’s an important lesson for leaders to understand that when the stakes go up for their followers, advantaging themselves can lead to significant levels of mistrust and resentment.

**SR: That leads to a question I was going to ask about a point raised in your book, that in extremis leaders share a common lifestyle with their followers. President Obama recently addressed the**

**issue of excessive corporate compensation by imposing a \$500,000 annual pay cap on executives in companies that receive government bailout funds. Do you think this means that the days of CEOs and other senior executives receiving compensation packages sometimes in the tens of millions of dollars are over, and if so would this ultimately be a good or bad thing for the quality of leadership and overall organizational performance?**

**TK:** The bigger issue here is the communication to followers about what the leader really values. Our lifestyle, however we decide to express it, always indicates what we value. If you look at the way we spend our money and the way that we spend our time and you take an accounting of that, it’s a reflection of individual values.

So when executives and boards make decisions about compensation they have to also understand that those decisions are communicating the way the executives value the organization. So although I would not predict whether salaries will be high or low or in between, what I will predict is that people will have a better understanding of how to communicate to the members of the organization that they value that organization and that they’re not leading the organization merely because it’s a good deal for them economically but rather because they believe in the mission and goals and priorities of the organization and also in the people who are working there with them.

**SR: In your book you talk about inherent motivation versus intrinsic motivation. What are the differences between the two, and what are the implications for leaders in any context?**

**TK:** The Hollywood stereotype of a crisis, whether it’s an urgent mili-

tary situation or a crisis in some civilian context, usually shows leaders who are very animated, perhaps screaming into a radio or a telephone, and often trying to motivate their followers much like a drill sergeant might motivate recruits. The reality is that in most crises, people are already spun up. They don't require that kind of motivation. What they require is a quiet leader who is competent, who can show them the way ahead. That doesn't make for a very good action movie but it happens to be the truth when you study professional crisis leaders or in extremis leaders. That's how they lead—in a very quiet fashion that tends to lower people's inherent motivation rather than spinning them up or cheerleading.

**SR: You have done research on the value of moving from a transactional approach to leadership to a more authentic, transformational approach. How can examples of in extremis leadership inform this process?**

**TK:** One of the characteristics of life-or-death situations is that transactional elements don't have much value. For example, it doesn't do any good to offer a bonus to an employee or a medal to a soldier if the perception is that they might not be around long enough to enjoy that reward, and likewise it makes no sense to threaten someone with punishment in a circumstance where the potential outcomes are worse than any punishment you might be able to levy. So the beauty of studying leadership in dangerous contexts is that most of the transactional elements are stripped away and what you're left with is pure transformational leadership.

**SR: How important in any leadership context is the role of mutual trust between a leader and his or her team?**

**TK:** In dangerous contexts, trust is extremely important if the leader is to have any influence on followers, and good data from combat environments about the basis of trust in those settings shows that far and away the most important determinant of trust in a dangerous or crisis

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setting is competence. This contrasts with the perceptions that people sometimes hold about the social basis of trust. In other words, people often try to build trust in their organization through social means such as taking people out to dinner or playing a round of golf with them to get to know them better. However, in a crisis circumstance, all that social capital takes a back seat to competence.

So it's much better for leaders to develop trust by becoming good at their jobs instead of trying to

socialize it into their organization. That's particularly true during crisis situations because those social relationships may carry some weight in times that aren't difficult, but as soon as the stakes go high and people are afraid for their own position, then it's all about competence.

**SR: I recently read an article in the *Washington Post* sports section in which you were asked about the importance of candor in leaders of high-risk enterprises, especially those who seek to improve the performance of their teams. Can you expand on that?**

**TK:** In dangerous contexts it's very important that communication between leaders and followers is clear and honest, because actions taken on information that's false can have serious consequences. Candor is highly valued. In the situation I was commenting on in the *Washington Post* article, a player for the Washington Redskins was called out by the team's leader—the head coach—for blowing game assignments after missing practices. It was important in that instance for the leader to publicly criticize that violation of organizational norms and to make clear that the intent was not to embarrass the player but to communicate to the organization what the norms were and that the leader would not tolerate those norms being challenged or changed.

But there is a flip side to candor in that sometimes the leader wants the followers to believe that there's a clear and certain way ahead even when that may not be immediately apparent to the leader. In crisis circumstances too much honesty can be a dangerous thing, so leaders have to be able to use judgment in communicating to followers the exact seriousness of the circumstances and the exact probabilities of success.

**SR: You write that conventional approaches to leader development, such as skill-focused training, often fall short of their goals. How can the lessons learned from observing leaders in in extremis settings improve leader development in general?**

**TK:** One of the characteristics of in extremis settings and crisis contexts in general is that they tend to be ambiguous. Therefore it's difficult to teach specific skill sets to individuals who will work in these uncertain and ambiguous environments. Consequently it's important that leader development go beyond the transfer of skills to the transfer of a leader identity. That way, regardless of the circumstances, those leaders are likely to step up and assume a leader role with whatever skills they have. Leadership is much more than an aggregation of skills.

**SR: How can adding an element of risk or danger when building and developing a team lead to superior-performing teams and superior-performing team leaders?**

**TK:** It gives people the experience of leading under conditions where the stakes are high and it teaches them in a very direct way how to focus on their environment. When an environment carries an element of risk or danger, individuals tend to focus intently on it, and one of the things that people need to carry them through crises is the ability to focus intently on resolving the issues without turning that focus inward and reflecting on their own personal feelings and circumstances. Leaders in crisis situations are not paid to be in touch with their feelings. They're paid to resolve the cri-

sis and to carry people through to the other side.

**SR: Even leaders of organizations that don't at first glance appear to be in the line of fire sometimes have to deal with tragedy and death, as 9/11 and Hurricane**

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**Katrina made clear. How can the principles and lessons of in extremis leadership help such leaders prepare for and deal with such tragedies?**

**TK:** Virtually all of the in extremis leaders who I interviewed in my research had lost peers or followers to tragedy in the conduct of their operations. People who engage in warfare or law enforcement or extreme sports unfortunately become adept at recognizing fallen comrades and have learned to keep organizations focused on their goals

and to turn tragedies into bonding experiences and ways to move organizations forward. Consequently, the same principles used in those types of organizations can be applied in organizations where the tragedies and deaths are thankfully less frequent.

**SR: What do you see as the main leadership challenges facing President Obama in his new role as commander in chief?**

**TK:** Certainly one of those challenges will be assuming the role of an in extremis leader, because he is now leading in a context where lives will be lost. Secondly, he has to assume the leadership of [Department of] Defense principals—the secretary of defense, other senior defense officials, flag officers. His relationship with those individuals who may have greater experience at leading under life-or-death circumstances will come to define his level of effectiveness. And the last and perhaps most important task he'll have as president is balancing the application of all elements of national power. The solutions to our country's challenges are not just military but include issues of politics, issues of economics, even issues of religious tolerance and recognition. The president can't afford simplistic military solutions to international crises that require the focus of all the elements of national power. ✍

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*Editor's note: The comments by Colonel Kolditz are his and do not reflect official positions of the Department of Defense, the Department of the Army, or the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York.*

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