

STAYING ALIVE: THE EXPERIENCE OF *IN EXTREMIS* LEADERSHIP

Abstract

In extremis situations present unique and difficult demands on a leader because they involve highly unstable conditions and life threatening danger for all involved. Not surprisingly, leading during *in extremis* situations is one of the least studied areas of leadership. This research helps to fill this gap by using a mixed-methods approach that includes three distinct phases. Each phase utilizes the *in extremis* setting to distill core elements of leadership that emerge in that unique context. The goal is to help leaders to be more effective when entering situations where their lives and the lives of others are in immediate danger.

In the first phase, I interviewed thirty US Army platoon leaders who had recently returned from Iraq and/or Afghanistan about their experience of *in extremis* leadership. The findings that emerged were modeled and tested with a 494 leader sample from all military branches. Those findings were then extended to professions that are often considered to be facing similar life threatening situations, with a sample that included 514 *in extremis* leaders from police and fire fighting as well as the military.

Results of the first qualitative study included finding a simultaneous, rather than a sequential occurrence, of sense-making and sense-giving during *in extremis* situations. This suggests that the process proceeds best when leaders are in a heightened state of situation awareness. Training facilitates leaders' sense-making by freeing up cognitive capacity, and sense-giving can be an interdependent social activity with subordinates in certain circumstances.

The second study revealed that situation awareness and team training were most relevant to outcomes. The final study explored leader characteristics and their impact on situation awareness and self-efficacy across a broader set of professions facing *in extremis* situations. The findings show that a leader's mental flexibility can be a delicate balance between being too

flexible and not enough. Surprisingly, it was found that leaders in the dangerous occupations of police, fire, and military experience perilous environments in different ways. This suggests that understanding the different *in extremis* experiences of these three occupations is imperative, especially because they are often grouped together for social science studies.

Keywords: *in extremis*, leadership, situation awareness, sensemaking, sense giving, self-efficacy, mental flexibility, stress tolerance, military, Army