

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of “In Extremis Leadership: Leading as if Your Life Depended on It”

Thomas A. Kolditz, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint (2007)

Review by: Rob Marshall, Lt Col, USAF

In Extremis Leadership, by Thomas Kolditz (Brigadier General, USA, Retired) is a collection of leadership lessons for both life-and-death situations and the general business environment gleaned from General Kolditz’s 34 years of military service, combined with accounts of various leaders successful in high-stakes situations. In his book, Kolditz offers requisites for effective in-extremis leaders, a variety of lessons for business and life, a leadership model, recommendations for dealing with tragedy, and a case study on in-extremis team building. Most importantly, Kolditz reminds us that actual experience, under intense and consequential conditions and not just in a classroom or office, is critical to producing great leaders.

Kolditz had a distinguished career in the Army, making an especially positive impact at the U.S. Military Academy (West Point), where he led the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership for 12 years. Additionally, Kolditz was the founding director of the West Point Leadership Center, is a fellow in the American Psychological Association, and is currently the founding Director of the Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University.

His body of research in *In Extremis Leadership* comes from survey evidence collected from in-depth interviews of over 120 leaders who excel in high-stakes scenarios such as mountain guides, SWAT members, parachute teams, and combat-hardened military members. Kolditz defines those who elect to lead others during times of imminent physical danger as in extremis leaders (IELs). These leaders excel at instilling in others the confidence to succeed, imbue a sense of resiliency, deliver a promise of survival, and are simultaneously capable of performing multiple difficult tasks. He establishes four requisites for effective leaders in these no-fail conditions:

1. Those who lead are self-motivated to not only master the fundamental execution of their job, but actively seek and rapidly assimilate new information. (In the military this is often referred to as a high degree of “situational awareness.”)
2. IELs equally share risk with their followers; there is no “Golden Parachute” for the leader.
3. There is little to no disparity between the lifestyle of the IEL and his/her followers.

4. IELs are highly competent in the skills of their job. Their competence and leadership must be seen as authentic versus appointed.

When these four requisites are met and the leader's aim is the success of his/her people, trust and loyalty will be inspired in their followers even in the direst of situations.

In addition to detailing the qualities of an in extremis leader, Kolditz expands upon the value such traits have in daily business and life. He purports that IELs bring a heightened moral and ethical perspective that earns the trust of followers who interpret their motives in a positive way. These leaders have a profound impact on the purpose, motivation and direction of their followers through their passion, authenticity, and selfless motivations. "The best leaders passionately want to be leaders. They truly want to lead followers to success; they don't want just to be higher up on the ladder" (p. 61).

One message that Kolditz highlights several times throughout his book is that leadership effectiveness may be conditional. "Organizations that are not under stress can be headed up by a relatively poor leader, and neither the organization nor the leader may realize the leader's lack of skills until a crisis occurs" (p. 61). Senior leaders should take note of this warning and seek IELs who combine real-world experience with measured optimism, hopefulness, resiliency and emotional intelligence necessary to overcome crises and turbulent times. We have the most to lose during the rare moments our organizations or people are in danger. Kolditz makes clear that is not the time to find out that your appointed leader is unable to excel under in extremis conditions.

Later in the book the reader will find recommendations on how to develop IELs. It is important to note that they cannot be forged through academics and degrees alone. Rather, young leaders

must be coached in actual in extremis settings. Such settings may include wild environments found in mountaineering, off-shore sailing, or skydiving, where experiential learning takes place with real-world consequences. Kolditz highlights the pitfall of allowing civilian contractors and those with minimal in extremis experience to derive leadership training curriculum and courses. He argues the generic result is unsatisfactory for lieutenants headed for the battlefield.

In Extremis Leadership is a valuable book for any leader or leadership developer curious about the inner-workings of those who excel while leading in high-stakes situations. It reminds us that no class or book, including this one, can adequately prepare leaders to lead their teams to success under threat of extreme loss or death. Rather, it takes many repetitions under actual high-stakes conditions to forge the passionate, competent leader who will inspire her or his followers to perform valiantly against profound risk.