

Team Leadership in Extremis: Enschede, Uruzgan, Kathmandu and Beyond

Joseph Soeters and Tom Bijlsma

Abstract In this contribution we provide an overview of the existing knowledge on (multinational) teams operating in situations where extreme dangers create, or have created, havoc and disaster. After deciphering the characteristics of extreme conditions, we describe the traditional leadership requirements that are needed to ensure that teams in multiteam-systems operate adequately. Even though the set of leadership traits that are needed in such situations is clear-cut, straightforward and familiar, there is more to say to this. Contemporary insights demonstrate that such leadership characteristics work out positively only within a certain bracket, not in all conditions. The relations between leadership traits and effective team performance are U-shaped rather than linear. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that framing, heedful interrelating and improvising are important characteristics for teams and their members to perform adequately. In this connection, the importance of the development of situational awareness, proper communication and distributed leadership can hardly be exaggerated. The latter may even imply that the actual leader steps back for another team member who has the competencies needed to lead in that particular situation. To make all this happen, training and proper preparation cannot be practiced enough. Overconfidence should be avoided at all costs.

Keywords Team leadership · Extreme conditions · Multiteam-systems · Traditional leadership skills · U-shaped relations · Situational awareness · Distributed leadership

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1 Introduction

Now and then, every country will be confronted with circumstances that are extremely dangerous to the people involved. Often such circumstances occur in far-flung areas, but Western societies are not immune to large-scale aircraft crashes, explosions and fires in industrial and urban areas or terrorist attacks. In the Netherlands the large firework explosion in 2000 in a community area in the city of Enschede caused the death of 23 people, injuring another staggering number of 950 citizens. It was a smaller version of the disaster within a chemical plant that took place in the Chinese port of Tianjin in August 2015. There have been more and there will be more crises of a comparable nature in the industrialized world.

However, such crises more often occur in so-called developing nations. Often Western people are involved as well. For the Netherlands for instance, during the ISAF mission, on average 2000 military men and women experienced the dangers of the Afghan province of Uruzgan (2006–2010), and in April 2015 some 60 Dutch professionals of the Urban Search and Rescue team (USAR) went to Kathmandu to assist in the search and rescue of victims of the earth-quakes that hit the area severely, twice in a couple of days.

Extreme conditions are exceptional by definition: they create uncertainty and fuzziness, time pressure plays a major role, and most of all there is danger to life and the wellbeing of the people who are in the midst of the havoc: the victims and the ones who are there to help. Those helpers may be trained specialists and professionals, but they may also be collaborators of organizations that suddenly find themselves in crisis or under attack (a hotel for instance, or a company); those are the employees of—in this context—so-called naïve organizations (Hannah et al. 2009). A final characteristic is that the efforts of the various teams that come to the rescue often take place in an international environment, which requires proper cooperation between teams and organizations of other nations and actors (under the aegis of the UN, the EU, Red Cross etc.).

It is without question that in such conditions assistance will be provided, quickly, generously, with the efforts of all specialists one can think of, from wherever one can imagine. Yet, it is not always clear how effective all this is being done. There is not too much research available with respect to the general effectiveness of such instant multinational operations. Is there something to gain, perhaps by improving the general leadership of, and the coordination between, such teams?

2 Extreme Conditions and Challenges

First, it seems important to define more precisely the characteristics of extreme conditions. Hannah et al. (2009) have provided more insight in this regard; in the model they have developed they point to the time factor: extreme conditions are

characterized by immediate danger, but the consequences of the crisis can also evolve much later (such as in nuclear leakages). Additionally, the size and probabilities of the consequences are important, as are the geographical and psychological distance: crises happening in one's own or a neighboring country are deemed more dramatic and important and attract much more attention than crises occurring in faraway regions.¹ In addition, the very nature of the disaster or threat is important: does the crisis imply danger to people's lives (if so, to how many?), to their happiness or welfare, to the environment, or to infrastructure and material resources only? Most often the consequences are combinations of such dangers.

Another point that needs to be made upfront is that managing such crises deals with three sorts of challenges:

- (a) the prevention of crisis and disaster (for instance the fireworks explosion in Enschede should not have happened at all because fireworks should not be stored in a community area, and if stored at some place, only under strict conditions and continuous inspection),
- (b) the action when the crisis unfolds (such as for the military under fire, or when an engine of an airplane starts to malfunction, or during a hostage situation),
- (c) the action when the crisis has occurred, in order to cope with the consequences of the event (explosion, earthquake, airplane crash), which is taking care of the wounded and the deceased, communication, repairing infrastructure etc.

Of course these three challenges are different, but to some degree they are alike as well; they require comparable and differing skills and organizational measures. All situations can be trained, yet the action when the crisis is taking place (situation b), is the most unpredictable. However, this can be trained as well, at least to a certain degree.

A final point that is important is the fact that 'crisis management' usually takes place in a multiteam-system. When teams are dispatched to provide assistance in crises and disasters, it often is not very clear where specifically and how they need to respond. Such teams do not operate in isolation; they come from all over and after arrival they need to align their activities with those of the host-national authorities and workers who have already started their actions. For this reason, providing assistance is working in a multiteam-system. The tasks of leadership in such conditions are to act strategically (goal setting, motivating) and to coordinate the activities within, between and across the teams (DeChurch et al. 2011).

It is important to distinguish between these task elements because one single team cannot achieve a lot and is not likely to be effective, if it acts without aligning and coordinating with others. In Kathmandu, for instance, the coordination of all teams' efforts was so complex that the UN was urged to ask the Dutch USAR-team to fulfil this role, even if only on a temporary basis.

¹An example can be seen in the Europe-wide protests that occurred when the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 created much more global shock, grief and response than a more or less comparable attack in Beirut just days before the Paris havoc and one in Mali a few days thereafter.

Leadership in extreme conditions can thus be characterized by the following features:

- It is full of risks and hazards. Often the victims' and helpers' lives are at stake;
- The tasks, the challenges and context are often unknown. The assignment, resources and the location, in which to operate, are often uncertain and complex;
- Providing assistance means working in a multiteam-system. The other teams may consist of other professionals but also of authorities and civil servants in other parts of the assistance chain, each with their own interests;
- Various disciplines and specialists are involved.

The complexity for leadership at a higher level contains the following elements: dealing with various languages and cultures (of countries/regions but also of other professions), ambiguity in goals and interests (in the short and the longer term), diversity of human and infrastructural resources and intense dynamics. How to perform in such circumstances? What do these leaders need to be able to do?

3 Traditionally Required Skills

In the conventional management and leadership literature, clear ideas exist about which characteristics leaders need to have in order to achieve good results in extreme conditions. For a large part these characteristics are derived from the literature on military operations, which is not strange given the fact that particularly during military operations young people are required to achieve goals in extremely dangerous conditions. American scholars who have conducted research in the military have come up with a list of characteristics, often personality traits, of the ones who are in charge (e.g., Bass and Riggio 2006; Wong et al. 2003; Krulak 1999; Hannah et al. 2009; Sweeney 2010; DeChurch et al. 2011; Campbell et al. 2010):

- *Stress resistance*. From the military world, but not only there, it is well known that not everybody can stay calm and cool and task-oriented in extreme conditions (Driskell and Salas 2013). Yet, this is a basic requirement for every aid helper and those who lead them. No one with such responsibilities can afford to panic in extreme conditions.
- *Resilience*. This concept is closely connected to stress resistance; it specifically refers to the psychological capabilities of recovery. Is the person in charge able to resume or restart his or her activities once the extreme conditions have occurred (Meredith et al. 2011; Bartone 2006)?
- *Can-do mentality*. Many service (wo)men, including their commanders, simply love this concept. It refers to a mentality of quick action—"act, act, act"—, i.e. solution oriented response without a lot of discussion, doubt and whining.
- *Being directive in a clear chain of command*. From historical times, this is a much sought after competence in the military domain, particular during extreme conditions. It goes back to the organizations' tendency to (re)centralize

management and decision making in times of crisis and stress. In times of crisis and disaster, time is always short, at least that is what humans generally perceive to be the case.² Shortage of time implies speed and speed does not allow for debate among participants who are involved as well. In such conditions leadership needs to be centralized, quick and decisive.

- *Being competent and prepared.* Extreme conditions are always full of unexpected events, but not everything that will be happening is unexpected. One can prepare oneself by training what to do, with whom, in which roles and with which human, material and financial resources. Leaders play an enormously important role in such preparations, contributing to an organizational culture and mind-set that prepares for the unexpected (e.g., Weick and Sutcliffe 2001).
- *Being trusted.* During the training and preparation stages leaders and commanders must gain trust among their subordinates. Trust among subordinates implies that these workers can take the stamina, competences, honesty and benevolence of their superiors for granted. However, trust is a precarious feature that needs strengthening continuously, particularly when the real action and the dangers that come along get started. Obviously there is a difference between training and the ‘real thing’, the real action.

This is an impressive list of required skills. But is this all there is to say? Is everything in this list clear-cut, or is reality more intricate and difficult?

4 Contemporary Demands

Many people tend to think that relations between phenomena are linear: the more one observes of A, the more—or the less—one observes of B. In reality, relations are often more complex and take the form of an inverted U-connection: in the beginning there is a positive relation (more A leads to more B), but after a certain point the connection turns around and becomes negative (more A leads to less B). It is important to be aware of the area where this turning point occurs. A couple of examples may illustrate the significance of this phenomenon with respect to our study of leadership in extreme conditions:

- A *can-do mentality* is an important feature in extreme conditions—in such situations one should take initiative and act, without doubting too much and without waiting for things to happen. More *can-do* leads to more effective action. However, too much action without doubt can cause great trouble. In the Vietnam War this mentality in the U.S. Army spawned a disastrous chain of

²In general there is a difference between the objective time that is available to respond and the perceived time to respond. Often there is more time than people in such situations are inclined to think.

events (Lind 1997). One simply and optimistically assumed that the larger numbers of American soldiers and weapon systems would inevitably lead to victory. As long as the number of casualties among the enemy would be larger than the number of casualties among their own troops, victory would come inevitably. Doubting this assumption was dangerous for military officers, particularly if one cherished one's career prospects. Finally, when the number of 'body bags' returning to the U.S.A. increased all the time, societal support for the war dropped, irrespective of the number of Vietcong casualties. The American operations ended up in defeat.

- The inverted U-connection can also be seen in discussions and negotiations: too little discussion can lead to uncoordinated actions that produce suboptimal results. Too much discussion, however, is problematic when time is short and 'windows of opportunity' will close again. There have been a series of accidents in mountain climbing, because the teams were too focused on achieving the top ("we can do it"), whereas there had been more than enough signals that indicated continuing could have dramatic consequences (Burnette et al. 2011). Powerful leadership stressing *can-do* may easily lead to *group-think* with lethal consequences. Structured, regular discussions, with possibilities for all people involved to express their views without social pressure, prevent such tragedies.
- In a comparable vein, decisive, direct leadership and decision-making are excellent qualities, especially when time is short. But here again there is a downturn: if this type of leadership is too dominating, too intimidating and too "punishing", people no longer dare to express their ideas and views, which implies that the learning, adaptation and decision making capabilities in the team as a whole decrease. In airplane crashes this dynamism in the cockpit has more than once been a dramatic factor (Flin et al. 2008). Leadership will always need to show its competence by proper coaching, asking the right questions, encouraging the team members, and creating psychological safety in the team (Hedlund et al. 2015).
- *Resilience* is an important feature for people and organizations when things turn bad; no one will deny that. But, if resilience implies that one does not learn from the events that caused the problems and the extreme conditions, resilience becomes stubbornness; in that case resilience implies lack of learning capacities.

All in all, it is important to distinguish the turning point between the contributing and the damaging impact of a can-do mentality, discussions, direct leadership and resilience.

Recent research by Baran and Scott (2010), based on insights provided by Weick (1999), shows that American fire fighters perform adequately when they allow room for three processes to happen:

- *Framing* what is happening, a process in which previous experiences are important to come to an interpretation and recognition of the situation at hand; it is important that the people in the team develop a "shared understanding" of the situation, preferably quickly, but at least at some point in time;

- “*Heedful interrelating*”; this implies that everyone and everyone’s opinion counts; leadership is sending and receiving information; it is a multi-directional process; everyone has to pay attention to one another, and leadership needs to have the orientation to delegate matters to the right levels below them, enabling processes of self-steering (Vogelaar et al. 2010);
- *Adapting and improvising*; extreme conditions always contain a lack of clarity, uncertainty and swiftly changing situations; preparation and training are therefore indispensable but they cannot solve all the problems. Therefore, one needs to be able to be adaptive, flexible and to act according to what is happening. Following the French ethnologist Claude Levy-Straus, Karl Weick demonstrated that improvisation may be life-saving. Putting out a small fire can stop a large bushfire, irrespective of how contra-intuitive this may seem. *Bricolage*, as the famous French word goes, implies being able to deal creatively with the situation at hand. This is particularly important in extreme conditions that often constitute a transition from the ‘known’ to the ‘unknown’.

5 How to Prepare and Facilitate the Leaders and Their Teams?

Following from the previous sections one may develop the idea of a leader in extreme situations as a centipede, a Jack of all trades, a spider in many webs. We have to reject the illusion of an omnipotent person right away. In contrast, in today’s organizations the leader has become relatively less important, or to express it more positively, other competencies turn out to be more valuable for a leader. Actually, the team itself has become influential in crisis situations. This new emphasis on the team itself requires the team members to have adequate competences and attitudes. From the perspective of the leader, this section will elaborate these major competences and give suggestions as to how to grow and nurture these capabilities (cf. Zsombok and Klein 2014).

Situational awareness is an important team competence, which indicates the capability as a team to keep track and oversight in a complex and dynamic context. The absence of situational awareness has been the major cause of many (near) accidents, as research at the North-American Fire Service indicates (Dow et al. 2013).

Every single team member is constantly constructing and reconstructing his or her situational awareness. From the team perspective it is important to share these various ‘social constructions of realities’ in order to build a shared mental model. Especially in a team with specialists this needs to be a serious, repetitive action. One can think of a crisis or military command center with diverse staff officers, a nuclear power plant, or a medical surgery team. It is the task of the team leader,

often a generalist, to monitor this process of constantly building and rebuilding this shared mental model.

It is essential for the team leader to work on a shared mental model; (s)he is the one to make decisions, preferably in close communication with the others. Specialists and professionals all have their own perspective and filter to look at the history, actual state and progression of an event. Constantly building an actual shared mental model by exchanging facts and expectations will force them to look and think with a wider perspective, making connections and gaining new insights. Everyone working and staying in his own ‘bubble’ will hamper the emergence of team synergy.

When a team is mastering this process of frequently (re)constructing an actual shared mental model, this team has the ability to respond to expected situations, reaching ‘the front of the problem’, moving from a reactive mode to a proactive mode. The team has increased its adaptive power (Endsley 1995), which is a decisive element in complex crisis situations.

Stress, sleep deprivation or fatigue influence situational awareness. That is why experiencing these factors in working conditions, and learning how to cope with these critical conditions are prerequisite for every team member, not least for the leader. Crisis teams working 24/7 have their policies about replacements and shifts (with a thorough ‘hand over take over’) and sleep management to prevent decreased individual and team effectiveness.

Mindfulness is a present-day popular activity helping to reduce stress. This practice helps people to experience what is happening right here and now, without their minds wandering too much in the past or the future, or elsewhere. Mindfulness training has become a standard feature in some sectors of industry and public administration such as American fire brigades. Research at the American Marines has demonstrated that mindfulness training brings positive effects on mental and physical level, especially after experiencing stressful situations (Johnson et al. 2014).

Communication was, is, and will always be a significant aspect of leadership. In connection with the previous section, without communication there will be no shared mental model. Most leaders are not short of communication skills. But are all these skills well developed (e.g., Hedlund et al. 2015)? Being silent and questioning (both at the right moments) are important skills as well. Leaders have to pay attention to the *meta-communication* in the team, which indicates the need to regard all aspects (“all senses”) of what is going on in the team. For example, leaders have to take notice if a team member is quiet, subdued, and withdrawn. This may indicate sub-assertiveness while this professional needs to share unsolicited his or her information and ideas to increase team performance.

Elaborating on ‘all senses’, meta-communication also involves the level, content and characteristics of interaction and emotion. It is related to questions like: Is there a healthy debate or dialogue? Is everybody’s behavior open and respectful to each

other? Communication even implies expression without words, it is about behavior, actions, body-language, attitude from and towards team members.

To conclude, mastering communication skills by the leader, and a sound and open professional team climate, can lead to discussions about intra-team communication (level of interaction and emotion) and—structures (procedures). When the team leader can accomplish these kinds of discussions with the team, the team members and the team itself can be successful during work. This is crucial when working as a crisis team; the last thing you want is the team itself being in crisis!

The way of leadership deserves attention as well. As we already saw, the team is the building block in crisis management, and the role of the classical leader has become less conspicuous (Olsthoorn and Soeters 2013), or to state it more accurately: leadership has changed. The almighty, omnipotent, and all-knowing leader already disappeared from most organizations some time ago. In a crisis team this leadership style will definitely not work either. A way of coping with all the internal and external challenges and opportunities is *distributed leadership* (e.g., Spillane 2012). In this conception of leadership it is normal—in certain circumstances—that at a given moment a team member takes over the leadership role because he or she has more experience or knowledge of the issues to deal with on that particular moment. For the leader this involves followership: knowing when to step back as a leader. At the team level: distributed leadership, as well as distributed followership (!) should be a common process in dealing with particular issues.

It is crystal clear that this concept only works when the previously cited elements are functioning optimally. There must be a shared mental model, so that every team member knows what is happening and one can consciously step forward to take the lead if necessary and appropriate. This requires openness and transparency at all levels of communication. Finally and not yet mentioned, the leader must have arranged the organization structure including the formal responsibilities and horizontal and vertical delegation in such a way that the professional staff can work in the most optimal manner.

Examples of such multidisciplinary teams in crisis situations were Dutch military platoons in Uruzgan, Afghanistan, leaving the barracks on patrol. Dependent of the mission and threats at hand, specialist groups were ‘clicked’ to the standard platoon, e.g., a Forward Air Controller-element, an explosive ordnance disposal-team, a radio connection unit, and Special Operation Forces units. Through this expansion the standard platoon was sometimes twice as big in terms of personnel and vehicles. The platoon leader, most often a young lieutenant, was not skilled in the use and functionalities of all this military and materiel. Thus, in case of a sudden threat or hostility (e.g., a possible Improvised Explosive Device) the interaction between the lieutenant and the specialists added to his platoon can best be defined as distributed leadership. The disadvantage of not knowing each other and the consequential absence of intrinsic trust among each other was re-installed by faith in each other’s expertise and the sharing of a common culture. Hierarchy was replaced by expertise.

Preconditions of effective teamwork are essential. When we leave the team and take a look at a higher level, managing and coordinating teams in a multiteam-system, the aforementioned applies even more. The aim of the leader, the higher purpose, then determines what needs to be done. Crisis situations are most often so complex, dynamic and dislocated that higher management cannot apply micromanagement. Only at the ‘hot spot’—where the threats and the dangers emerge—one can build situational awareness. This type of higher-level leadership—accepting that one is not in charge directly and that one needs to instruct leaders at lower levels in general terms—has become known as mission command, or, to honor the late 19th century German origin: *Auftragstaktik*. In this conception, the WHAT is clear, but the HOW is left to the commanders in the field who have the best view of the actual state and expected developments. This lower level commander is able to fulfil his mission independently, even though his unit would be cut off from his or her parent unit.

The underlying thinking also is: even though there was room for planning and preparation, once the action starts or when the disaster unfolds, the reality deviates from the written plans. The leader and his or her team members or subordinates consequentially have to adapt to the changing and evolving situation, like the *bricoleurs* we have seen before. If this is the style and approach of the team leader and his or her team members, and if they have the appropriate resources, then we can speak of a resilient but learning system; the team members, resources, and processes are robust.

An important condition for a team to become effective is professional training. *Train as you fight* is the motto of the Dutch Royal Army. Therefore, also unexpected aspects should be built into the program when training and exercising, fostering both mental fitness and dexterity in the technical domain. In this context one may be encouraged to think and act ‘out-of-the-box’. In a safe training environment errors can be made. To enable ‘failure based learning behavior’, psychological safety is most important (Carmeli 2007).

Training is one thing; to keep learning, teams have to evaluate on a regular base, even in the hot phase, during operations. In the military domain, After Action Reviews (AARs) are standard practice: a short, concise, on scene evaluation immediately after the action (of course in safe conditions). Frequently and swiftly working down the PDCA- or the OODA-loop is found to provide significant advantages, also in a dynamic context (Boyd 1987).

A leader will only receive trust from his/her team members if he or she positions himself as vulnerable, a human with a leadership position. People-oriented leadership is always important. On the other hand: the leader can be his own person as well. Role-playing will stop quickly when a team is functioning sub-optimally. That is the essential added value of the buddy system: keep each other mentally and physically fit and adroit. Two buddies are a micro-team, in a context of distributed leadership and all the other aspects mentioned before.

6 Conclusion: More Complex Than One Is Inclined to Think

In this contribution a number of important aspects of leadership in extreme situations have been mentioned: a *can-do* mentality, communication, direct leadership, and resilience. The turning points around the inverted U-shape, between the good and the bad sides of these relations have been highlighted as well. The last section has shed more light onto these turning points, providing leaders with comprehensive solutions to work on these items, and to place teams and teamwork center stage.

Nowadays the idea of idealizing strong leaders with excellent personal characteristics and traits no longer seems appropriate. Those are often leaders with a large degree of overconfidence, too much trust in themselves and the good course of things. Overconfidence is, according to the Nobel laureate and famous psychologist Daniel Kahneman, the personality trait he would like to conjure away if that were possible (Guardian 18/07/2015). Instead, even in extreme circumstances, good leaders will enable others to put forward their insights and knowledge, intelligence, experience, action skills, and understanding of the situation. At the start this may be more time consuming, but at the end, it will pay back, next to the increased quality of the process of decision making. Besides—even in extreme conditions—often more time is available than one would expect.

With this leadership style, lives may be saved, which has been demonstrated so often. The good leader enables self-leadership, mission command and distributed leadership among his team members and he or she may, as such, hardly be noted. Maybe good leadership is unobtrusive leadership: it is present but hardly noticed (Olsthoorn and Soeters 2013). For sure, this constitutes a paradox, an apparent contradiction, which perhaps is inevitable in the complexity of extreme conditions. This we simply may have to accept.

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