

Developing and Mentoring “In Extremis” Leaders

Lessons Learned from Special Operations

MAJ CHAVESO “CHEVY” COOK, USA

MAJ CHRISTOPHER WEBB, USA

1ST LT JAMIE VANSICKLE, USAF

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed or implied in the Journal are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government. This article may be reproduced in whole or in part without permission. If it is reproduced, the Air and Space Power Journal requests a courtesy line.

As you maneuver your team, the sudden crack of bullets whipping past and the puffs of dirt indicate that enemy rounds are landing near you, heightening your fear and your adrenaline.

Exhausted as you near the end of a marathon, an improvised bomb explodes, and there is utter chaos as fellow runners cry out in agony for help, others lay seemingly lifeless, and you try to direct the few able-bodied folks around you to safety, not knowing if there are other bombs in the area.

You cannot see or breathe as smoke fills the building after an airplane has crashed into it, and for some reason your office mates look to you to decide which stairwell to take because you have a habit of making good decisions.

A viral pandemic affecting the entire globe cripples your workforce as sickness, new work schedules, and layoffs that were not forecasted in the department you manage grind business to a halt, but you still somehow must meet the needs of your clientele.

In all of these situations, ranging from armed conflict to health catastrophe, one’s ability to lead in an emergency must be forged well before the emergency is at hand. As Hospital Corporation of America chief executive officer Jack Boven-der said during Hurricane Katrina, “you cannot change yourself in 30 minutes into something you have not been for 30 years.”¹

Regardless of what side of the “born leaders versus made leaders” debate people may find themselves on, many would agree that leadership is not an easy undertaking and for some is a crucible. Context matters, however, as leadership lies on a spectrum of difficulty regarding the circumstances within which leaders find themselves. Leadership effectiveness is mainly dependent upon the environment.² For example, leading large, unwieldy, or geographically spread groups, leading others through organizational change, or leading in dangerous or high-stress en-

vironments is undoubtedly, highly arduous. Leading in high-stress or dangerous settings is fundamentally the same, yet qualitatively different, even from leading in other difficult contexts. These situations are known as *in extremis*, defined by Thomas Kolditz as situations where leaders and followers are in physical danger or where followers believe that leader behavior will influence their well-being.³ *In extremis leadership* is defined by this work as leading when life, limb, eyesight, or livelihood is on the line. Outcomes mean more than success or failure, pride, or embarrassment—they can mean being hurt or healthy, dead, or alive.⁴ The purpose of this article is (1) to expand upon the background and developmental needs of in extremis leaders; (2) to provide a theoretically-based model meant for developing these types of leaders; and (3) to deliver examples of what could work for applicable organizations.

While complexity has certainly been discussed in leadership literature, empirical verifications of complex phenomena are challenging.⁵ As such, in extremis situations, and the leaders therein, remain one of the least researched areas in the leadership field.⁶ Additionally, Bass concluded that the prior research on leadership and groups operating in extreme circumstances has tended to treat such situations as homogenous.⁷ This conclusion is partly due to an underdeveloped sense of the definition and the experience of leaders and followers in these uniquely contextualized and arduous settings. Across the literature, in extremis conditions are different than a crisis scenario (i.e., Wall Street collapse, insurance company hacking, identity theft). The life, health, livelihood, and safety of multiple individuals is inherently at risk *now or very soon*, where the threat is of intolerable magnitude within an imminent timeline. Decision-making, then, becomes of the utmost importance in the circumstances requiring “supererogatory” action—acts “done beyond the call of duty.”⁸

Aside from the accident, disaster, or mission itself that leads to in extremis conditions, studies show that the second major source of negative outcomes derives from errors from leader reaction during and in the direct aftermath of said event.⁹ After years of study, Kolditz introduced the in extremis leadership concept in a 2007 book appropriately titled *In Extremis Leadership: Leading As If Your Life Depended On It*. Therein, Kolditz found that successful in extremis leaders (1) possess an inherent motivation for the task, (2) share risk with their followers, (3) embrace continuous learning, (4) adopt a lifestyle in common with their followers, and (5) are highly competent and inspire trust and loyalty in others.¹⁰ In extremis leaders understand that human judgment deteriorates under pressure and they, in turn, anticipate critical intervention points where their action (or potential inaction) determines performance and potential for positive outcomes.

Examples of in extremis leaders abound in the military, but others include emergency technicians, first responders, law enforcement, members of fire departments, and even those in certain industrial settings. In extremis conditions include, but are not limited to, combat situations, natural disasters (i.e., floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes), major accidents involving human life (i.e., traffic collisions, arsons/fires, mine collapses) and terrorism (i.e., indiscriminate public bombings, school shootings, coordinated random acts of violence). They also include many other organizational circumstances regardless of whether the people involved operate in what would be considered regular in extremis. Sean Hannah et al., further defined these conditions as “discrete episodes or occurrences that may result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to—or in close physical or psycho-social proximity to—organization members.”¹¹

In extremis leaders today find themselves combatting more networks than natural disasters, be it technology or pockets of people. Developing the capacity to mentor leaders who will operate, fight, and survive during in extremis circumstances can appear to be a riddle inside an enigma. However, a tailored and holistic developmental approach, which is presented here, will often be the answer for mentors, their dyadic relationships, and the learning organizations and learning environments they create for in extremis leaders. Designing, executing, and evaluating complex leader developmental systems that build leaders who cannot only contest high-risk threats but highly perform in various high-stress conditions will produce more professional forces at the individual and collective participant levels (e.g., *in situ*), and at the observer/controller level (i.e., the trainer, instructor, mentor, etc.).

Building high-performing leaders begins with crafting a learning environment that fosters the development of agile thinking, decision-making, and deliberate focus under duress. Taking this into account, *learning* should be differentiated from *development*. *Learning* is an increase or change in knowledge or skill as the result of a process. In contrast, *development* is an ongoing, longer-term change or evolution that occurs during many learning experiences.¹² Furthermore, *leader development* focuses on individual knowledge, skills, abilities, and other competencies, whereas *leadership development* focuses on collective social capacities, roles, and processes.¹³ Leader and leadership development are both misunderstood as processes even at the highest levels of the armed forces, as each includes more than just training and operational experiences.¹⁴ Furthermore, whereas experience and training have long been analyzed to discover their relationship to higher performance, different types of experience and training certainly have differing effects on outcomes.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, mentors who understand developmental processes beyond solely training scenarios, for both leaders and their leadership

capability, can craft crucible experiences to fill these gaps and greatly impact performance. As such, coaching, teaching, and mentoring in extremis leaders necessitates specialized approaches and systems for developmental experiences.

Constructing developmental experiences for those who will endure dangerous or in extremis settings requires a skillful understanding of individual, leader, group, and organizational development. In addition, the in extremis leader himself must also become an educator in developing team-level competencies, taking it beyond the mentorship dyad; and team dynamics change as high-performance teams mature and develop new competencies and trainers. Mentors or instructors simply will not be on the battlefield, objective, or at the dangerous site.¹⁶ These competencies are both task-related and process-related types that build toward a *meta-competency* of team building. The ability to adroitly build teams imbues leaders with an ability to adjust task- and process-related competencies *on the fly* to quickly identify how to fine-tune, develop, and solve problems regarding improving and sustaining team performance.¹⁷ One of the keys to both individual and unit growth at the team level comes from explicitly operating together under combat-like or high-stress conditions, through realistic and evaluative, but semi-controllable environments.¹⁸ To develop the competencies and the abilities required for both realistic training and actual conditions, mentors must use a specific developmental *approach* with an associative developmental *model*.

Like an in-extremis scenario, a developmental model for in extremis is certainly complex, but at its core is the developmental experience. The Center for Creative Leadership states that a *developmental experience* is comprised of three key elements: *assessment*, *challenge*, and *support*.¹⁹ A variety of these experiences couple with other leader(ship) developmental aspects and a fostered ability to learn within an organizational or environmental context to create a developmental process. To be clear, development is a process and not a sole event or circumstance; very rarely will a single developmental event be enough to create lasting change regarding leadership.²⁰ Additionally, the individual cannot be stricken from their environment. Vice versa; there is a bidirectional relationship between the individual and their environment developmentally, within and across further social, cultural, ecological, and historical modifiers.²¹ Linking developmental experiences together should also not be seen from a linear perspective or sequence but should be seen through a lens of interrelated psychological capacities at both these previously mentioned individual and contextual levels, consisting of various skills and traits. As seen in the figure, five psychological capacities in particular—self-awareness, self-regulation, agency/motivation, social awareness, and worldview—should be viewed from a systems-based perspective due to the inherent interconnectedness of the individual, group and organizational level.²²

These capacities make up the core of the *In Extremis Mentorship Development Model* to be offered here.

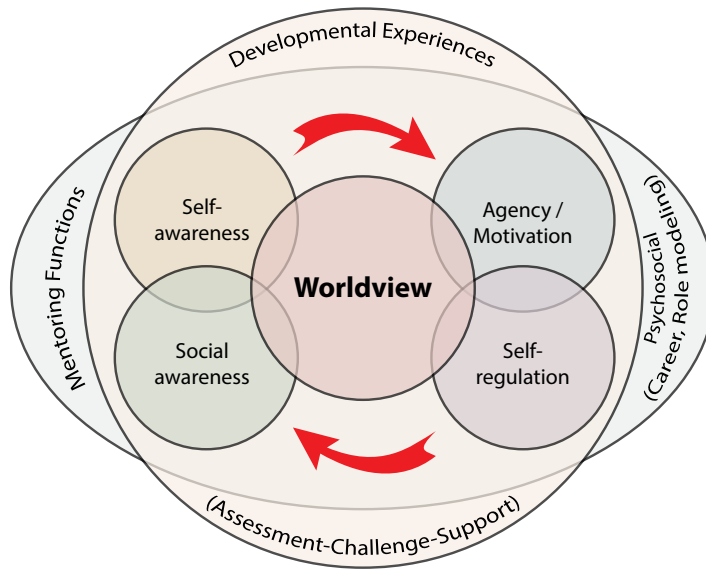


Figure. In Extremis Mentorship Developmental Model

The components of the model are a combination and synthesis of three separate but related theories.²³ The five psychological capacities are chosen from research into the unique demands required to build higher trustworthiness, more psychological hardiness, tighter cohesion, and stronger leader-follower partnerships in comparison to leaders of nondangerous settings.²⁴ One may notice that there are some similarities with Daniel Goleman’s famed Emotional Intelligence Model (EIM), specifically regarding self-awareness and self-regulation. A few distinctions should be noted therein. Regarding EIM, identifying one’s own emotions or the emotional expressions of others is the primary focus, whether it is to facilitate good personal decisions or to resolve conflicts. Whereas these outcomes surely help the in extremis leader, it falls short of what an in extremis leader needs as EIM does not offer perspectives about high stakes or high-stress management or leadership contexts.²⁵ A second key distinction is our emphasis on including mentoring perspectives and crafted developmental perspectives not only in addition to but *in support of* building one’s psychological capacities. Crafting developmental experiences and involving mentors is not specifically discussed as a part of EIM; in particular, Goleman mainly focuses on reflection and coaching techniques.²⁶

To further understand the components of figure 1, some definitions are due. Worldview is seen as foundational to all the others, encompassing one’s core values and beliefs, identity, and character. It includes how one finds truth, vision, and

meaning, as well as the lens through which leaders observe, interpret, and make sense of the environment. Self-awareness is understanding one's perspectives, identity, role(s), and purpose introspectively and reflectively. Self-awareness is also about managing the stress of intense situations through an understanding of the capabilities one brings to bear. Social awareness is related to self-awareness but focuses more on connectedness with others and how these relationships make meaning and provide feedback to oneself. Additionally, social awareness is about transcending self-interests to not only cooperate with others, but to maximize the bonds of trust critical to social resilience. Self-regulation is the ability to not only monitor and control one's emotions, but also one's behaviors, thoughts, and foci. This regulatory function expressly deals with effective decision making and a sense of control during in extremis scenarios. Finally, agency and motivation is associated with self-regulation but concerns the desire, drive, and self-efficacy for action. Being agentic and motivated here specifically concerns the will to survive and the associative trust in fellow comrades necessary to endure high-stakes environments.

The five capacities are fluid, interactive, and are embedded within the previously discussed concept of developmental experiences. They are also embedded in the three mentoring functions (e.g., career, psychosocial, and role modeling) as defined by long-term workplace mentorship scholar Kathy Kram, *tying it back directly to the mentor's role in facilitating the developmental of these core attributes*.²⁷ The career mentoring function deals with duty, challenge, and job skills, the psychosocial deals with personal competency, identity, interpersonal skills, and mental well-being, and role modeling involves observational learning and example setting.²⁸ The career mentoring function deals with duty, challenge, and job skills; the psychosocial deals with personal competency, identity, interpersonal skills, and mental well-being; and role modeling involves observational learning and example setting.²⁹ As displayed, there will be some mentorship that happens outside of the context of an associative specific developmental experience (i.e., discussions about family). Also, some developmental experiences will happen that do not directly involve mentorship (i.e., unit-based training) that are still relevant to the five psychological capacities.

Unlike other mentorship situations, mentoring for in extremis leaders must never separate the team or unit context. At a basic social and organizational level, Wendell French (2001) tells us that most people desire to be accepted and wish to "interact cooperatively with at least one small reference group," and "one of the most psychologically relevant reference groups for most people is the work group, including peers and the superior."³⁰ He goes on to say that "most people are capable of greatly increasing their effectiveness in helping their reference group solve problems."³¹ In extremis conditions are the ultimate leadership problem to

be solved by a cooperative and highly effective reference group. As shown in the model the psychological capacity for social awareness, the significant influence that membership in a variety of social conditions, be it unit, team, profession, and so forth, have on the developmental experiences of leaders and followers is accounted for, as is the interconnectedness within the process.

At this juncture, the importance of mentorship for in extremis leaders should be stressed, and it deals mostly with the high-stress situations and their inherent psychological effects. There are three phases in the temporal progression of dangerous settings: (1) anticipatory, (2) in situ, and (3) post hoc.³² Mentorship is a significant matter within the context of in extremis leader(ship) development because of a mentor’s role in two of the phases, namely the *anticipatory* and *post hoc* portions. Of the three mentoring functions described earlier, the anticipatory and post hoc phases require the psychosocial function the most. This particular function and its components help develop the behavioral skills and interpersonal abilities needed to reflect, understand, and process the complexity of in extremis events with someone who cares and is invested.³³ Leaders in dangerous environments have the greatest need for support networks to assist in the management of stress and making meaning of their experiences.³⁴ *Care* is one of the three unique psychological demands (alongside *character* and *competence*) that facilitates both effective performance *during and after* high-stakes contexts.³⁵ It should still be emphasized, however, that a leader’s adaptability across *all* temporal phases allows for the preparation for, functioning during, and recovery from in extremis contexts. Whereas conventional wisdom might assume that extremity will be highest during an actual extreme event, Herman Leonard and Arnold Howitt suggest that what constitutes effective leadership will vary over the stages of preparation, response, and recovery from an extreme event.³⁶ All told, mentors help mentally ready and recuperate in extremis leaders—the psychosocial function is displayed separately in figure 1 to acknowledge this importance.

Mentorship has largely been excluded from the conversation surrounding in extremis leaders and their associative dynamic situations. Having leaders who have been in high-stress or high-impact situations pair with and develop relationships with those who will do so is the golden standard for any set of developmental experiences. To enact the model offered here, a formalized and programmatic methodology, when done correctly, is the optimal approach. A few things must be considered to create a program that allows for the use of the model offered here. First, pinpoint the right type of organizational design required, create calendar space for enactment, and advertise the program’s occurrence. Build interest by showing the program’s importance, the science behind it, and how its implementation will be custom-tailored. Second, provide mentorship training for mentees

and mentors that explains the model but also lays out your organizational expectations going forward. This should be more than one meeting—understanding the theoretical underpinnings, discussing the way forward, and then engaging in a few opportunities to habituate toward the practices involved should all be separate engagements. Ensure the folks involved are planning out possible developmental experiences. Third, take a “top-involved” but “bottom-driven” approach to program action. In other words, organizational leaders should be a part of every phase of the program, including getting involved in mentoring and the use of the model, while mentees and followers in the organization provide feedback as to what is working, what is not, and where to possibly take the program. Finally, track progress using objective outcome measures, hold personnel accountable, report the findings, and adjust as necessary. Activity must be correlated to impact rather than good intentions, and progression is only possible through data acquisition, reflection, and refinement.

To conclude, although individuals in business or those not in combat, fighting fires, or delivering a high-risk warrant may not be facing death, they often find themselves in stressful situations that could mean the death of their enterprise, their organizational culture, or other negative impacts that affect the livelihood of their employees and teammates. The current global pandemic regarding COVID-19 is a relevant example of this fact. Synthesizing lessons learned after one is in an *in extremis* circumstance is critical to development, but it is tantamount to deliberate and holistic developmental approaches before the onset of danger or chaos—the key is to develop leaders and their leadership *beforehand*, given that the stakes are so high. While it may not be easy, as shown here through background, theory, and example, the development of high-stress or high-impact leadership is not unfeasible, nor is it reserved solely for elite teams with unique missions or roles. Given the threat, risk, and the potential traumatic circumstances that can arise, a tailored, innovative, and robust mentorship approach like the one presented can be just the competitive edge that any organization needs to build and maintain in *in extremis* leaders who grow while practicing, achieve victory under pressure, and show resilience beyond. 🌟

Maj Chaveso “Chevy” Cook, USA

Major Cook (MA, Columbia University; MA, University of Texas-El Paso; BS, United States Military Academy) is currently a PhD student at Tufts University, studying Human Development.

Maj Christopher Webb, USA

Major Webb (MPS, Georgetown University; BA, Grambling State University) is a public affairs officer for the Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve in Kuwait.

1st Lt Jamie Vansickle, USAF

Lieutenant Vansickle (MBA, BA, University of Maryland University College) is the deputy program manager for Airborne Network Global Information Grid Interface in the Air Force Life Cycle Management Center at Hanscom AFB, Massachusetts.

Notes

1. Thomas Kolditz, *In Extremis Leadership: Leading as If Your Life Depended On It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 44.
2. Richard Osborn, Jerry Hunt, and Lawrence Jauch, “Toward a Contextual Theory of Leadership,” *Leadership Quarterly* 13 (December 2002).
3. Kolditz, *In Extremis Leadership*.
4. Kolditz, *In Extremis Leadership*.
5. Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems* (London: Routledge, 1998); Jamshid Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking—Managing Chaos and Complexity: A Platform for Designing Business Architecture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999); Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe, *Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); and Mary Uhl-Bien, Russ Marion, and Bill McKelvey, “Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting Leadership From The Industrial Age to The Knowledge Era,” *Leadership Quarterly* 18 (August 2007): 298–318.
6. Sean Hannah et al., “A Framework for Examining Leadership in Extreme Contexts,” *Leadership Quarterly* 20, (December 2009): 897–919.
7. Bernard Bass, *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research and Managerial Applications* (New York: Free Press, 2008).
8. Chris Walsh, *Cowardice: A Brief History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 6.
9. Russell Dynes, *Organized Behavior in Disasters* (Newark, NJ: Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, 1974); and Russel Dynes, Enrico Quarantelli, and Gary Kreps, *A Perspective on Disaster Planning* (Newark, NJ: Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, 1981).
10. Kolditz, *In Extremis Leadership*.
11. Hannah et al., “A Framework for Examining Leadership in Extreme Contexts.”
12. Noah F. Palmer, Sean T. Hannah, and Daniel E. Sosnowik, “Leader Development for Dangerous Context,” in eds. Patrick Sweeney, Mike Matthews, and Paul Lester, *Leadership in Dangerous Situations: A Handbook for Armed Forces, Emergency Services and First Responders* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011).
13. David Day, “Leadership Development: A Review in Context,” *Leadership Quarterly* 11, (Winter 2000): 582.
14. Joe LeBoeuf, “Case No. 3: The 2000 Army Training and Leader Development Panel,” in eds. Don Snider and Gayle L. Watkins, *The Future of the Army Profession* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 487–504.
15. Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* (London: Julian Friedman Publishers, 1979); and K. Anders Ericsson, “Attaining Excellence Through Deliberate Practice: Insights from the Study of Expert Performance,” in ed. Michel Ferrari, *The Pursuit of Excellence Through Education*, 21–55 (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002); K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Römer, “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance,” *Psychological Review* 100, no. 3 (July 1993): 363–406; K. Anders Ericsson and Andreas Lehmann, “Expert and Exceptional Performance: Evidence of Maximal Adaptation to Task Constraints,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 47, no. 1 (February 1996): 273–305; and K. Anders Ericsson et al., *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2006).
16. William Dyer, W. Gibb Dyer, and Jeffrey Dyer, *Team Building: Proven Strategies for Improving Team Performance*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

17. Dyer, Dyer, and Dyer, *Team Building: Proven Strategies for Improving Team Performance*.
18. Thomas Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2006).
19. Ellen Van Velsor and Cynthia McCauley, *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
20. Ellen Van Velsor, Russ Moxley, and Kerry Bunker, "The Leader Development Process," in eds. Ellen Van Velsor and Cynthia McCauley, *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
21. Rich Lerner and William Overton, "Exemplifying the Integrations of the Relational Developmental System: Synthesizing Theory, Research, and Application to Promote Positive Development and Social Justice," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23, no. 3 (March 2008): 245–55.
22. Patrick Sweeney, Sean Hannah, and Don Snider, "Domain of the Human Spirit," in eds. Don Snider and Mike Matthews, *Forging the Warrior's Character: Moral Precepts from the Cadet Prayer* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008).
23. Kathy Kram, *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985); Scott Foresman, Patrick Sweeney, and Mike Matthews, "A Holistic Approach to Leading in Dangerous Situations," in eds. Patrick Sweeney, Mike Matthews, and Paul Lester, *Leadership in Dangerous Situations: A Handbook for Armed Forces, Emergency Services and First Responders* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011); and Ellen Van Velsor and Cynthia McCauley, *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
24. Sweeney and Matthews, *Leadership in Dangerous Situations*.
25. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).
26. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*.
27. Rajashi Ghosh and Thomas Reio, "Career Benefits Associated with Mentoring for Mentors: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 83, no. 1 (August 2013): 106–16.
28. Ray Kimball, *The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring* (West Point, NY: Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning, 2018).
29. Kimball, *The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring*.
30. Wendell French, "Organizational Development," in eds. Walter Natemeyer and Timothy McMahan, *Classics of Organizational Behavior*, 3rd ed. (Long Grove, CA: Waveland Press, 2001), 446–65.
31. French, "Organizational Development."
32. Palmer, Hannah, and Sosnowik, "Leader Development for Dangerous Context."
33. Kimball, *The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring*.
34. Patrick Sweeney, Mike Matthews, and Paul Lester, *Leadership in Dangerous Situations: A Handbook for Armed Forces, Emergency Services and First Responders* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011).
35. Sweeney, Matthews, and Lester, *Leadership in Dangerous Situations*.
36. Herman Leonard and Arnold Howitt, "Against Desperate Peril: High Performance in Emergency Preparation and Response," in ed. D. E. Gibbons, *Communicable Crises: Prevention, Response and Recovery in the Global Arena* (Charlotte, NC: Info Age, 2007), 1–25.