

Extreme Teaming: Lessons in Cross-sector Leadership

Edmondson A.C. and Harvey J.F.

Emerald Publishing

Bingley

2017

ISBN 978-78635-450-1

Review DOI [10.1108/EJTD-10-2017-0089](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-10-2017-0089)

Introduction

This book explores the issues and challenges associated with managing teams of experts drawn from different professions, organizations and industries to solve complex problems, a phenomenon called “extreme teaming”. Using the results of qualitative research on five case studies of extreme teaming, the authors present a series of new insights and practical guidelines around what leaders can do to support teamwork in shifting configurations and contexts to achieve successful outcomes.

The book consists of nine chapters grouped into three sections. Part 1, titled “Trends Giving Rise to Extreme Teaming”, contains three chapters and describes how business environments are evolving to make teaming across boundaries an important new activity for success, why this is so challenging and what insights can be drawn from prior work on leadership theory in the context of teams and teaming. In Chapter 1, the authors discuss “Why Extreme Teaming Matters”, providing clarifying definitions and the reasons why organizations need to master extreme teaming. Chapter 2, “Leading Teams and Teaming”, focuses on leader-team interactions presented in the literature on leadership theory and on the creation of necessary conditions for effective team performance. Chapter 3, “The Challenges of Extreme Teaming”, delves into the literature on team effectiveness to discuss how leadership practices can affect team behavior.

Part 2, titled “Four Leadership Functions for Extreme Teaming”, contains four chapters and presents the findings from a multiyear study of extreme teaming in a set of varied industries offered as case studies from which a set of four interdependent leadership functions is developed. In Chapter 4, “Build an Engaging Vision”, the authors focus on leadership’s creation of a shared, engaging vision, why that vision matters and what it takes to create it. Chapter 5, “Cultivate Psychological Safety”, discusses lessons learned from case study project leaders who enacted specific practices that helped cultivate an environment of psychological safety. Chapter 6, “Develop Shared Mental Models”, discusses a set of activities that project leaders used to develop shared mental models, and Chapter 7, “Empower Agile Execution”, focuses on the benefits of enabling expert decision clusters and the role of execution as a learning opportunity.

Part 3, titled “Looking Back and Moving Forward”, contains two chapters and discusses implications of findings and suggestions for future research. Chapter 8, “A Model of Leadership for Extreme Teaming”, offers eight leadership practices to support extreme teaming, while



Chapter 9, “Directions for Future Research and Practice”, discusses the book’s implications for future research on extreme teaming, as well as calling for the testing of the leadership practices identified in the book in more real-world projects and contexts to inform practice.

Abstract

The opening Forward by Henry Chesbrough of UC Berkeley’s Haas School of Business establishes the book’s contribution to theory and scholarship by placing it within the framework of Open Innovation, which is a stream of innovation studies that focuses on groups of people working across organizational boundaries to come up with new products and services, and by emphasizing the paucity of research on contexts that are inherently multidisciplinary and, thus, require people to work interdependently across disciplines or locations. Each book chapter begins with an overview of the literature on the chapter topic, followed by a discussion of gaps in the literature when it comes to extreme teaming and the authors’ conceptual and empirical evidence to fill those gaps. Each chapter also concludes with a summary of the chapter’s main points, providing the reader with the chapter’s highlights in an easy-to-read format. The book’s combination of theoretical and practical insights makes it valuable to both scholars and practitioners.

Evaluation

Extreme Teaming: Lessons in Complex, Cross-Sector Leadership is not just another book about teams. The book builds upon the authors’ previous work on extreme teaming and takes it to the next level by offering a research-based model of leadership for extreme teaming. It also challenges scholars and practitioners to think more deeply about teaming and explores extreme teaming leadership in research and in practice. What differentiates this book from others on the same topic is the emphasis on teaming as a dynamic process, rather than teams as structures, and how the need to solve complex problems requiring multidisciplinary expertise calls for an agile approach to support that process. In fact, the phrase “extreme teaming” is reminiscent of “extreme programming”, a type of agile software development method in which changes are deemed to be a natural, inescapable and desirable aspect of software development projects and, thus, should be a part of project planning. The authors provide a “hook” that grabs the reader’s attention in the first chapter of the book when, in a section titled, “Extreme Teaming that Saved 33 Lives”, they discuss the 2010 mining rescue in Chile as “an extraordinary example of extreme teaming, to illustrate the enormous potential of diverse experts coming together to innovate to overcome a nearly impossible challenge” (p. 5). That example and the case studies of successful extreme teaming take the reader beyond theories to a research-based set of common practices. The value-add for practitioners is the identification of concrete actions that project leaders can take to overcome (and even anticipate) major obstacles and harness the power of extreme teaming. For researchers, the book’s value-add lies in its demonstration of the power of qualitative research in building sound theoretical constructs supported by empirical findings to take a deeper dive into a relatively unexplored area of scholarly study. The authors are spot on in describing the value-add of their research-based practices when they state, “they can help you on your journey to studying or leading extreme teaming” (p. 143).

Shahron Williams Van Rooij

*Instructional Design and Technology Program, Learning Technologies Division,
College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, Fairfax,
Virginia, USA*