

LEADING IN EXTREME CONTEXTS: SHARED AND VERTICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

It increasingly solidifies in research that both vertical and shared leadership are necessary for coping with extreme contexts (Vessey & Landon, 2017; Gibson et al., 2015; Hannah et al., 2009) but corresponding research is still in its infancy. Thus, we explore these two leadership types related to team performance in extreme contexts, illustrated by European refugee crisis in Austria. Methodologically, the paper draws on a sequential explanatory design of a mixed-method-study consisting of a mediation analysis and a qualitative study based on 57 problem centered interviews of relief teams in refugee camps all over Austria. Findings show that both leadership types are important to ensure team performance in extreme contexts. On the basis of clear condition and goals provided by vertical leadership, shared leadership in its mediating role enables the necessary common understandings, synchronized actions, flexibility, and trust to deal with the challenges.

Keywords: Shared leadership, vertical leadership, performance, extreme context, refugee crisis

1. INTRODUCTION

The so-called European refugee crisis posed a major challenge for civil society organizations (CSOs), public authorities and civil society (Meyer & Simsa, 2018; Kaltenbrunner & Reichel, 2018). The scenario may be characterized as an extreme context for leadership. Based on a mixed-methods-study, we investigated different forms of leadership and their performance effects in this situation.

Extreme contexts are high-risk settings with considerable task, social or environmental demands (Driskell et al., 2018, 435). They entail high levels of emotional and physical strain for the involved individuals (Hannah et al., 2009, 898). To cope with the challenges of extreme contexts, the responding agents primarily deploy teams (Bell et al., 2018; Subramanian et al., 2010) such as first responder teams of emergency organizations, reconstruction teams, law enforcement teams or spontaneous emergent volunteer initiatives (Ramthun & Matkin, 2014, 244). These so-called extreme teams (Burke et al., 2018), though, often underperform or even easily fail to provide relief, because extreme environments often entail overwhelming stress, fear, decreasing prosocial behaviors, and inadequate decision-making (Burke et al., 2018, 716; Hannah et al., 2009).

Leadership is a lever to reduce team failures and to improve team performance (Geier, 2016). Leadership may be vertical and thus ascribed to a single person with certain qualities who holds a formal position within a hierarchy and exercises authority, and involves a distinction between leaders and followers (Collinson, 2011). In contrast, shared leadership is distributed within a team (Pearce & Conger, 2002). It represents a dynamic, interactive process among team members (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009) with fluid processes of taking leadership roles according to contextual conditions and individual competences (Pearce & Sims, 2002) in a collaborative act (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016, 469).

It is becoming increasingly clear based on research that both vertical and shared leadership are appropriate for facing extreme contexts by enhancing team performance (Buchanan & Höllgren, 2019; Burke et al.,