Journal of Leadership in Sport and Management (2025) 1(1): 1-8
Published online: 10 June 2025
doi: 10.5281/zenodo.15631381

Original article

Leadership Competencies in the Management of High-Risk Teams - an Analysis of Experience in a High-Altitude Environment

Halemba Piotr*[1], Kubica Jadwiga[1]

[1] Faculty of Sport and Tourism Management, Academy of Physical Education in Katowice, Poland

Abstract. This article presents an analysis of the leadership competencies that shape the effectiveness of team management in extreme conditions, using the example of a high mountain environment. The study is based on a qualitative content analysis of an interview with an experienced leader from an expedition agency, as well as a critical review of the literature on adaptive leadership and team management in crises. The results indicate that effective leadership in a high-risk context requires the integration of emotional competencies, such as composure, empathy, and mental resilience, with a high level of organizational skills. Particular attention was paid to interpersonal challenges and the need to make decisions in a volatile environment, including time pressure and a lack of complete information. The article's findings have application potential in areas related to operational management in rescue, emergency logistics, the military sector, and disaster medicine.

Keywords: leadership competencies, high altitude expeditions, team management, crisis management

Introduction

Contemporary leadership research is increasingly focusing on the functioning of leaders in extreme environments, where uncertainty, risk, and changing conditions are integral to operational reality (Krauter, 2018). In such contexts, traditional leadership models, such as transactional or trait-based approaches, often fall short and prove inadequate; a leader's effectiveness depends heavily on their adaptability, emotional competence, and real-time risk management skills (Crippen, 2023). Effective leadership in such contexts relies more on adaptability, emotional intelligence, and the ability to manage risk in real time.

One of the most challenging environments for executing the leadership function is high-altitude expeditions, where leaders manage teams exposed to extreme climatic conditions, physical exhaustion, and limited resources. Expeditions of this type are characterized by a high level of unpredictability and an inability to fully control the changing environment, which poses unique challenges for leaders in terms of decision-making, team motivation, and crisis management (Wagner, Paul, Youngson, & Levin, 2023).

High-altitude leadership thus provides a unique research context for identifying the competencies and personality traits necessary to manage teams effectively in high-risk environments. Analyzing the experiences of expedition agency leaders can provide valuable lessons not only for climbing practice but also for the broader field of emergency management in sectors such as public safety, rescue, logistics, or military operations (Olinover, Gidron, Marmolovsky, Lipschits, & Geva, 2023).

Considering the above, the purpose of this article is to identify key leadership competencies, as well as environmental and interpersonal challenges that affect the effectiveness of leaders managing teams in extreme alpine conditions. The study undertaken

*Corresponding author: p.halemba@awf.katowice.pl
Received: 2 June 2025, **Accepted:** 10 June 2025

Cite: Halemba, P. & Kubica, J. (2025). Leadership Competencies in the Management of High-Risk Teams - an Analysis of Experience in a High-Altitude Environment. J Lead Sports Manag, 1(1):1-8.

combines a critical review of the scientific literature with a content analysis of an interview conducted with Tomasz Kobielski, whose experiences provide valuable empirical material. Tomasz Kobielski, a veteran of over fifty high-altitude expeditions and founder of Adventure24, brings extensive real-world experience in managing teams under extreme conditions, making him an exemplary subject for phenomenological analysis.

Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1: What personality traits and leadership competencies are key to successfully executing a leadership role under extreme conditions?

Q2: What environmental and interpersonal challenges affect the exercise of leadership in a high-altitude environment?

In an attempt to address the above questions, the article seeks to fill the research gap in situational leadership analysis in high-risk environments and to offer practical recommendations for leaders operating in sectors that require action in extreme conditions.

Literature review - situational and adaptive leadership

In the management literature, situational and adaptive leadership are considered key approaches in uncertain environments, where volatility and a lack of complete control over the environment limit the effectiveness of classical management models (Martinez, 2014). The situational leadership model assumes that a leader's effectiveness is a function of his or her ability to adapt the leadership style to the level of development and competence of the team and changing external conditions (Woodard, & Hyatt, 2024). In the context of extreme environments, such as high-altitude expeditions, leaders must dynamically adapt the actions they take to the current situation, considering not only the competency of the participants but also environmental factors such as weather, fatigue, and health risks (Bunting & Brymer, 2023). Adaptive leadership, as the ability to learn, make decisions based on changing data, and anticipate potential risks, is therefore becoming an indispensable component of successfully executing the leadership role in such conditions (Olinover, Gidron, Yarmolovsky, Lipschits, & Geva, 2023).

Importantly, situational and adaptive leadership also assume that a leader should be able to recognize his or her own limitations and effectively use the team's resources, which under conditions of high uncertainty translates into increased operational resilience for the entire group (Adamska-Chudzinska, & Andraszak, 2024).

Competence of leaders in managing risks and teams under pressure

Effective team management in a high-risk environment requires a leader to possess a broad range of competencies, encompassing both technical and social skills. Contemporary research suggests that the ability to manage one's own and team stress, rapid risk assessment, decision-making under time pressure, and maintaining team motivation and morale are crucial (Shrestha, Noppradit, Pradhan Shrestha, & Bhandary, 2025). Particularly in extreme environments, leaders must be prepared for sudden changes in operational conditions, which require a developed ability to manage ambiguity (ambiguity management) and make decisions based on incomplete information. These competencies also include the ability to build authority based on trust rather than formal authority structures, which is critical in small, mobile teams operating in border situations (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009).

In addition, managing a team under pressure requires a leader to have high emotional intelligence and the ability to create a climate of trust and cooperation even when team members are physically and mentally exhausted (da Silva, Hammett, & Low, 2025). Kobielski described calming a participant who broke down before a summit push, saying, ‘I put my hand on his shoulder, didn’t say much—just gave him the space to recompose himself. You don’t lecture people up there. You provide them with dignity, even when they’re falling apart.

Psychological aspects of leadership effectiveness under stress and uncertainty

Psychological determinants of leadership in extreme contexts play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of leaders. Research shows that leaders operating under conditions of high uncertainty exhibit higher levels of psychological resilience, emotional self-regulation skills, and the ability to make adaptive decisions (Kun & Répáczki, 2025).

The stress of being responsible for the safety of others, having to manage one's own anxiety, and managing the emotions of a team require a leader not only to have high emotional intelligence, but also the ability to maintain internal cohesion in the face of danger (Matos, Rebelo dos Santos, Pais, de Sousa, & Vasconcelos, 2024). Stress and tension management competencies are directly linked to leadership effectiveness in critical situations (Roy, Rossi, Salloum, Jarrar, & Ghose, 2025).

In a high-altitude environment, where the physical risks are real and the consequences of wrong decisions can be dramatic, these psychological resources of a leader become as important as his technical and

organizational skills (Alsheikh, Albhirat, & Alzghoul, 2025).

Methodology

The study is qualitative and exploratory in nature, fitting in with the phenomenological approach, which provides a deep understanding of the experience of a leader operating in extreme conditions such as high-altitude expeditions. In the context of managing in high-risk environments, the phenomenological study captures the complexity and dynamics of the challenges leaders face, especially in unpredictable and stressful situations (Sokteang, Legro, & de Ziegler, 2025).

The primary research tool used in this study was a content analysis of a semi-structured interview conducted with Tomasz Kobielski, owner of Adventure24 agency and an experienced high-altitude expedition leader. The interview was prepared based on a set of thematic, open-ended questions, allowing for the exploration of key characteristics and competencies of a leader, environmental and interpersonal challenges, and the impact of changes in the structure and preparation of expedition participants on team management. The respondent's free-form narrative allowed for in-depth data, considering both the operational and emotional-psychological perspectives of a leader's functioning under high uncertainty (Interview with Tomasz Kobielski, 2025).

The data analysis process followed the principles of thematic content analysis as described in recent methodological literature (Özden, 2024). The study involved multiple readings of the transcriptions to immerse oneself in the research material, identification of initial codes, their aggregation into thematic motifs, and critical interpretation considering existing theories on situational leadership, adaptive leadership, and the management of high-risk teams. During the analysis, the central motifs relating to the leader's emotional and organizational competencies, the specifics of environmental challenges, risk management, and the impact of interpersonal relationships on the effectiveness of the leadership function were distinguished.

We situated the study within a broad theoretical context through a critical review of the current scientific literature. Included were models of adaptive and situational leadership, analyses of leaders' competencies in the context of stress, uncertainty, and risk management, as well as the psychological aspects of leadership effectiveness under extreme conditions (Bonini, Panari, Caricati, & Mariani, 2024). The selection of literature was limited to sources published between 2023 and 2025, indexed in reputable databases, which ensured a high-quality and up-to-date theoretical background.

The research procedure was conducted with full respect for the principles of scientific research ethics. Tomasz Kobielski provided informed consent to participate in the study and to have his statements used in scientific publications. The anonymity of all third parties mentioned in the interview was ensured, and the data that could enable their identification was anonymized correctly. Ethical procedures were in accordance with international guidelines for conducting qualitative research (Sadeghi, & Smith, 2024). Although the study is based on a single in-depth interview, the richness of the data provides valuable insights. Nevertheless, future research should include multiple leaders across varied high-risk domains to enhance the breadth and generalizability of findings.

Results – Empirical Insights from the Interview

Through our analysis of the interview with Tomasz Kobielski and the literature, we identified the key leadership competencies and the primary environmental and interpersonal challenges that determine the effectiveness of leaders in managing high-risk teams in high-altitude environments.

Regarding the first research problem, concerning the key personality traits and competencies of a leader, the results indicate the dominant role of emotional competencies, in particular composure, calmness, and empathy. As Kobielski described: ‘When everyone else panics, the leader must stay cold inside. That doesn’t mean you don’t feel fear, but you don’t show it. You breathe through it and act clearly. Tomasz Kobielski emphasized that a leader in crises must remain calm and avoid excessive emotionality, while creating an impression of accessibility and trust for expedition participants, while maintaining a professional distance (Interview with Tomasz Kobielski, 2025). Interpreting these observations through the lens of adaptive leadership theory, it can be stated that these emotional competencies are not static traits, but rather are often strengthened through accumulated experience, exposure to uncertainty, and reflective self-regulation during leadership under challenging conditions. Theoretical and organizational competencies, such as conscientiousness in documentation, planning skills, and the ability to manage resources under changing conditions, also proved crucial. A leader who is effective in high-mountain conditions must not only be well-versed in expedition logistics but also demonstrate the ability to maintain high operational quality even

under the pressure of fatigue or adverse weather conditions.

The results of the data analysis for the second research problem revealed several unique environmental and interpersonal challenges that affect the performance of the leadership function under extreme conditions. A key challenge identified by the respondent was the variability of participants' behavior under stress, fatigue, and harsh weather conditions. Kobielski noted that during prolonged expeditions, participants often reveal their "true selves," which requires the leader to be constantly observant, adapt management strategies, and be ready to respond to the changing attitudes and emotions of team members. He recalled one instance: 'We were stuck in a storm at 6,800 meters, and one client completely shut down—no response, no movement. I had to talk to him like a child, slowly, calmly, to keep him mentally present. That's when you realize leading isn't about climbing—it's about reading people

In addition, the need to operate in extreme weather conditions regardless of the weather and to manage one's own physical discomfort so as not to lower team morale were listed among the significant environmental challenges. The leader must be prepared not only to work in conditions of low temperatures and limited visibility, but also to make decisions in situations where the priority is the safety of the participants rather than achieving the expedition's goal of reaching the summit (Interview with Tomasz Kobielski, 2025).

Table 1. Key competencies and challenges of a high-altitude expedition leader.

Category	Element	Description
Emotional competence	Mastery, calmness, empathy	Keeping a cool head and building trust without losing professional distance
Organizational competencies	Conscientiousness, planning, logistics	Meticulous in documentation, managing resources and operations under pressure
Interpersonal challenges	Unpredictable participant behavior	Adaptation to the revealing emotional and character differences during the expedition
Environmental challenges	Extreme weather conditions	Work in harsh conditions regardless of the weather and manage your own discomfort
New organizational requirements	Formal procedures	Increase in importance of qualification interviews and contractual clauses about the unquestionability of the leader's decision

The analysis also revealed changing expectations of participants in high-altitude expeditions and the need to adjust management processes, including the introduction of more detailed qualification procedures and contractual provisions for the unchallengeability of leader decisions. These practices reflect the growing need to formalize accountability and minimize legal risks in organizing high-altitude expeditions. This trend toward formalization requires leaders to develop additional competencies such as legal awareness, structured communication, and the ability to justify decisions under contractual and ethical constraints.

Because of the above, the results of the conducted study confirm the research hypotheses. Effective leadership in extreme conditions requires a synergy of emotional and organizational competencies, and environmental and interpersonal challenges have a significant impact on the exercise of leadership functions (Table 1.). These findings are in line with current theories of situational and adaptive leadership, pointing to the need to dynamically adapt management style to changing conditions and team profile (Novelli, & de Souza, 2024).

A model for effective leadership in a high-altitude environment

The created diagram presents a sequential model of competencies and processes that determine the effectiveness of a leader in extreme environments, such as high-altitude expeditions (Figure 1). The model begins with emotional competencies, which are the foundation of effective leadership in high-uncertainty environments. Competencies such as composure, calmness, and empathy are key to building trust within a team and maintaining team cohesion in the face of stress and danger (Muss, Tüxen, & Fürstenau, 2025)

Figure 1. A model for effective leadership in a high-altitude environment (own compilation based on the survey).

This foundation underpins the development of organizational competencies, which include the ability to plan, manage resources, and operate efficiently in dynamic, changing environmental conditions. A leader who can effectively integrate emotional and

organizational competencies can move to the next stage of the model, which is dynamic team management. Dynamic team management involves adapting one's leadership style to current conditions, monitoring the changing needs of team members, and responding promptly to signs of lowered morale or stress. It also includes proactively managing conflicts and maintaining high levels of motivation despite the physical and mental exhaustion of participants (Peskoller, 2025).

Another segment of the model focuses on the response to environmental and interpersonal challenges. In a high-altitude environment, weather variability, fatigue, and dynamic changes in expedition participants' behavior require the leader to be constantly observant, flexible in decision-making, and able to manage risk in real-time (Heshka, 2025).

The result of the synergistic action of the above-mentioned competencies and processes is the effective and safe achievement of expedition objectives. In the developed model, the safety of participants is a priority value, superseding the achievement of operational goals, such as summiting the peak, which aligns with the modern approach to risk management in extreme environments (Interview with Tomasz Kobielski, 2025).

The diagram illustrates that effective leadership in an extreme context is a multidimensional process that may appear sequential but unfolds dynamically in practice. In this context, a leader's emotional competence is as important as their technical and organizational abilities, and dynamic adaptation to challenges is a crucial condition for success. While the model is presented sequentially for clarity, in real operational contexts, these competencies often emerge simultaneously and interact dynamically in response to situational demands. In practice, these competencies often co-evolve and influence one another in real time. Leaders may need to shift between emotional, organizational, and interpersonal functions fluidly depending on situational demands.

Discussion – Theoretical Interpretation and Comparative Reflection

The results of the empirical study, confronted with the literature, confirm the validity of the adopted theoretical approach, according to which effective leadership in extreme environments requires dynamic adaptation of leadership style and the combined and coordinated application of emotional insight and organizational skills. The analysis of Tomasz Kobielski's statements provided empirical support for the models of situational leadership (Egan, 2023) and adaptive leadership (Nöthel, Nübold, Uitdewilligen, Schepers, & Hülsheger, 2023), showing that a leader functioning in a high-altitude environment not only adapts the management style to the current conditions and characteristics of the team, but also actively manages interpersonal tensions and operational risks.

According to adaptive leadership theory, an effective leader does not operate based on fixed algorithms of action but constantly reinterprets the situation, redefining problems and activating the team's resources to generate adaptive solutions (Soares, Da Silva, Biyanto, Miswanto, & Winarno, 2024). Kobielski points out unequivocally that a leader in the high mountains must not only process information about the physical and mental state of team members but also anticipate the escalation of tensions and counter their effects before they threaten the integrity of the group or the safety of individuals. This type of approach corresponds with Malassu's (2024) view of leadership in extreme conditions, which describes leadership in extreme conditions as a highly emergent process that requires high situational awareness and mental toughness.

An interesting and original contribution of this study is the empirical exemplification of the thesis that the leader-participant relationship is dual. Tomasz Kobielski emphasizes the need to maintain a balance between empathetic approach and formal distance, which, in light of the literature, corresponds to the concept of authentic leadership (Almutairi, Timmins, Yoder Wise, Stokes, & Alharbi, 2025), in which the leader not only maintains personal integrity, but also consistently performs the function of protecting organizational norms. In this context, a crucial distinction arises between "being an acceptable leader" and "being an effective leader" - a difference that, in high-altitude conditions, often determines the success or failure of the entire expedition.

Another important finding is the importance of formalizing management processes in extreme environments. Respondents' statements indicate an evolution in risk management strategies, including the introduction of explicit legal clauses, participant vetting procedures, and clear liability rules in emergencies. This aspect is an essential addition to the literature on high-risk project management, where the need to balance operational flexibility with legal and ethical accountability is emphasized. An apt reference point in this regard is the oil and gas industry, where the implementation of formalized safety and legal compliance procedures is an essential element of operating in environments with high levels of uncertainty and potentially catastrophic consequences of poor decisions (Bakare, Aziza, Uzougbo, & Oduro, 2024). Although the high-altitude expedition sector

differs in terms of scale, resources, and the nature of operations, the parallels regarding the need for a systematic approach to risk management are clear. Significantly, the scientific literature on alpine climbing still rarely addresses in depth the formalization of decision-making processes, legal liability, or ethical framing. Meanwhile, in high-mountain conditions, a leader's responsibility extends not only to an organizational dimension, but often to an existential one - any decision can directly impact the health and lives of team members. Therefore, reference to findings from other extreme industries, such as the oil and gas industry, is applicable in building a broader theoretical framework for leadership in high-risk environments, emphasizing the need for universal ethical and legal safeguards.

The findings of this study have important implications for management practice in other sectors operating in high-risk environments, such as emergency response, disaster medicine, military operations, and crisis logistics. While leadership under military, polar, or disaster-response conditions similarly demands resilience and rapid decision-making, high-altitude expeditions add a layer of physiological degradation and isolation that compounds psychological stress. Unlike structured command hierarchies in the military, expedition leaders often must operate with informal authority and limited logistical support, thereby intensifying the need for interpersonal sensitivity and improvisational competence. In each of these fields, leaders must integrate expertise, interpersonal competence, and the ability to make informed decisions with incomplete information. The model resulting from the case study can therefore serve as a reference for designing leadership training in sectors where mental resilience and adaptability are as important as technical competence.

Notably, the study reveals that a leader's effectiveness is not solely due to his or her characteristics, but to the dynamic interaction between the competencies he or she possesses and the situational context, which is in line with new approaches to leadership as a co-created process (Santarpia, Borgogni, Cantonetti, & Brecciaroli, 2025). This approach provides a deeper understanding of the complexity of leaders' actions in high-risk environments, considering both psychological, organizational, and cultural aspects. In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing body of literature by providing an empirical understanding of the competencies and challenges faced by leaders operating in a highly high-altitude environment. The results suggest the need for further comparative qualitative research that encompasses different types of high-risk environments, which could facilitate the development of a universal model of leadership competencies suitable for managing teams in complex situations.

Practical Implications for Leadership in Extreme Environments

Based on the analysis of an interview with the leader of high-altitude expeditions and a critical review of the literature, several conclusions of both theoretical and practical nature can be formulated. Firstly, the effectiveness of leadership in extreme environments cannot be analyzed solely through the prism of the leader's fixed personality traits. As has been shown, dynamic adaptive competencies that enable flexible responses to changing operational conditions, unpredictability of participant behavior, and external environmental factors such as weather or physical hazards are crucial.

In addition, the study's results confirmed the validity of using situational and adaptive approaches in analyzing leadership under risk conditions. The leader of a high-mountain expedition has not only a decision-making function, but also a psychological, logistical, and normative one. He must constantly balance empathy and detachment, flexibility and discipline, the individual needs of the participants, and the overriding imperative of safety. This multidimensional competency profile points to the need for thoughtful recruitment and specialized training of leaders operating in sectors with operational risks. For example, training programs should include scenario-based decision-making under time pressure, modules on stress inoculation techniques, legal risk awareness, and workshops in managing group dynamics in resource-scarce settings. Selection processes could benefit from psychological resilience screening and crisis communication simulations.

Finally, the challenges identified by the respondent, such as the variability of participant behavior under stress, the need to work under conditions of physical exhaustion, and the need to formalize contractual relationships, can be seen as universal phenomena that also occur in other areas of emergency management. This suggests the validity of transferring knowledge from research on leadership in mountaineering to sectors such as rescue, extreme medicine, military operations, or project management in politically or climatically unstable conditions.

From the perspective of managerial practice, it is essential to recognize the role of soft skills as a prerequisite for effective team leadership in complex situations. The ability to control emotions, mental toughness, and the ability to create a climate of trust and

security in the team are the foundation of crisis-proof leadership.

This study reveals the need for further research on leadership in extreme environments. It suggests the continuation of qualitative exploration with leaders from various high-risk sectors and the development of comparative approaches that would identify common competencies and structural patterns. This type of research has the potential to not only enrich leadership theory but also support the development of practical training and selection tools in organizations operating at the edge of risk and uncertainty.

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