

# Extreme Leadership

Leaders, Teams and Situations Outside  
the Norm

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NEW HORIZONS IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

**Edward Elgar**

Cheltenham, UK • Northampton, MA, USA

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Published by  
Edward Elgar Publishing Limited  
The Lypiatts  
15 Lansdown Road  
Cheltenham  
Glos GL50 2JA  
UK

Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.  
William Pratt House  
9 Dewey Court  
Northampton  
Massachusetts 01060  
USA

A catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013946802

This book is available electronically in the ElgarOnline.com Business Subject  
Collection, E-ISBN 978 1 78100 212 4



ISBN 978 1 78100 211 7 (cased)

Typeset by Columns Design XML Ltd, Reading  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by T.J. International Ltd, Padstow

# Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii

## PART I EXTREME EXPEDITION LEADERS

1	Extreme leadership: lessons from Ernest Shackleton and the <i>Endurance</i> expedition	3
	<i>Cristina M. Giannantonio and Amy E. Hurley-Hanson</i>	
2	Extreme leadership and decision-making: Scott and Amundsen and the race to the South Pole	15
	<i>Leon Mann</i>	
3	Leadership and organizational learning in extreme situations: lessons of a comparative study from two polar expeditions – one of the greatest disasters (Franklin, 1845) and one of the best achievements (Nansen, 1893)	34
	<i>Pascal Lièvre and Géraldine Rix-Lièvre</i>	
4	Leaders in Antarctica: characteristics of an Antarctic station manager	47
	<i>Ian Lovegrove</i>	
5	The Darwin mountaineering expedition in Patagonia: a case of successful leadership failure	62
	<i>Linda Rouleau, Geneviève Musca, Marie Perez and Yvonne Giordano</i>	
6	Leadership at the edge of the summit	72
	<i>Betty S. Coffey and Stella E. Anderson</i>	
7	The ghosts of shared leadership: on decision-making and subconscious followership in the ‘death zone’ of K2	83
	<i>Markus Hällgren, Marcus Lindahl and Alf Rehn</i>	
8	Greenland: creating world-class teams	96
	<i>James G. Clawson</i>	

## PART II EXTREME WORK TEAMS

- |    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 9  | Dr Lehman: extreme healthcare leadership along the shores of Lake Tanganyika<br><i>Robert O. Harris</i>                                 | 107 |
| 10 | Bringing up the Thirty-Three: emergent principles in multi-tiered leadership<br><i>Michael Useem, Rodrigo Jordán and Matko Koljatic</i> | 117 |
| 11 | Team leadership: the Chilean mine case<br><i>Terri A. Scandura and Monica M. Sharif</i>   | 131 |
| 12 | Where pure leadership is revealed: our police in harm's way<br><i>Mark D. Bowman and George B. Graen</i>                                | 141 |

## PART III EXTREME INDIVIDUAL LEADERS

- |    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 13 | Glenn Miller: leadership lessons from a successful big band musician<br><i>Michael J. Urick and Therese A. Sprinkle</i>                                     | 165 |
| 14 | Extreme leadership as creative leadership: reflections on Francis Ford Coppola in <i>The Godfather</i><br><i>Charalampos Mainemelis and Olga Epitropaki</i> | 187 |
| 15 | Lost in a fog? Power comes from values<br><i>Andrea Hornett, Peggy Daniels Lee and James G. Perkins</i>   | 201 |
| 16 | Jeanne's story: a leader and her team's journey through crisis<br><i>Connie S. Fuller</i>   | 214 |
| 17 | The Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings<br><i>Amy E. Hurley-Hanson and Cristina M. Giannantonio</i>  | 224 |
|    | <i>Index</i>  | 237 |

## 14. Extreme leadership as creative leadership: reflections on Francis Ford Coppola in *The Godfather*

**Charalampos Mainemelis and  
Olga Epitropaki**

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### INTRODUCTION

How do extreme leadership situations arise? According to one view, they are triggered by environmental factors that have nothing or little to do with the leader. The term ‘extreme’ in that case refers to some form of external adversity, such as environmental perils (for example, physical disasters, financial crises) or other external threats deeply embedded in the context of specific types of organizations (for example, the military, law enforcement, crisis response units and so on). In such settings, the role of leadership is mainly viewed as reactive to the extreme contextual conditions. Leaders respond to externally induced crises and attempt to handle them in the most effective way possible (for example, Hannah et al., 2009). According to a second view, extreme leadership situations are triggered by leader behaviors that have nothing or little to do with the external environment. The term ‘extreme’ in that case refers to severe group dynamics directly caused by the actions of the leader. Past research has linked leader-induced extreme situations to dysfunctional leader behaviors such as abusive (Aryee et al., 2007), toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005) and destructive leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007).

In this chapter we offer a third view which focuses on extreme leadership situations that arise from the leader–context interaction, rather than from the environment or from the leader alone. Unlike the first view, we focus on extreme leadership situations that are internal to the organization and social in nature; and unlike the second view, we suggest that leader-induced extreme situations are not always dysfunctional but can lead to superior creative performance. We illustrate this third type of extreme leadership with a case study of the film director Francis Ford

Coppola and the making of the film *The Godfather*, which was produced by Paramount Pictures in 1972. We select *The Godfather* because its monumental success (in artistic acclaim, financial performance and lasting cultural impact) emerged from a collaborative film-making process that is still remembered today as one of the most extreme, chaotic and tenuous in the history of Hollywood (see Browne, 2000). Furthermore, Coppola's personal behavior during the film's production serves as an exemplar of an extreme leader who is at once creative, visionary, risk-seeking, stubborn, aggressive, deviant, deceiving and even abusive.

We first present the case study, and then we draw on extant leadership and creativity theories in order to analyze the emergence and effectiveness of extreme leadership in the *Godfather* case and, more generally, in collective creative endeavors.

## THE UNLIKELY MAKING OF A CINEMATIC CULT

### The Historical Context

In the 1960s the auteur movement sought to establish cinema as an art (versus a craft or product) and the director as an artist (versus a machine operator) (Mainemelis et al., 2008). Positioning itself against historical determinism, the auteur movement posited that it is the director's distinctive individual stamp that distinguishes the artistic value of a film (Sarris, 1962, 1968). A parallel development at that time was that ticket admissions started to decline in the early 1960s and reached a then historic low by 1971. According to Peter Bart, then Paramount's vice-president of production, 'The movie industry was more on its ass than any time in its history, literally almost wiped off the face of the earth' (in Biskind, 1998, p. 20).

Up to that time directors were older men who worked with limited creative freedom. In the late 1960s the studios opened their doors to a generation of young directors in an attempt to save Hollywood. Director John Boorman recalls that 'There was a complete loss of nerve by the American studios at that point. They were so confused and so uncertain as to what to do, they were quite willing to cede power to the directors' (in Biskind, 1998, p. 22). As soon as the young directors walked into the studio system, however, they found themselves fighting a fierce battle against the old establishment. According to Steven Spielberg:

It was not like the older generation volunteered the baton. The younger generation had to wrest it away from them. There was a great deal of

prejudice if you were a kid and ambitious. When I made my first professional TV show, *Night Gallery*, I had everybody on the set against me. The average age of the crew was sixty years old. When they saw me walk on the stage, looking younger than I really was, like a baby, everybody turned their backs on me, just walked away. I got the sense that I represented this threat to everyone's job. (Biskind, 1998, p. 20)

In the early 1970s, Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) and Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) were hailed as the first blockbusters in history. The phenomenal financial success of these films, in conjunction with the rising influence of the auteur movement, revitalized Hollywood, shifted power among the professional roles in it (Baker and Faulkner, 1991), and bestowed upon the role of the director supreme power and prestige (Allen and Lincoln, 2004; Hicks and Petrova, 2006). As studios started to look at the blockbuster as a formula for high profits (Mezias and Mezias, 2000), some directors were able to 'cash' their box office success by gaining more power and creative freedom. The movies made during that era did not merely reach unprecedented creative heights and massive financial returns; they also brought battalions of young people to the movie theaters and elevated the status of film-making as an art form in US society (Sontag, 1996). Peter Gruber, ex-head of Sony Pictures, has described that period of Hollywood as follows: 'It was like the ground was in flames and tulips were coming up at the same time' (Biskind, 1998, p. 14).

### **The Events**

In 1968 Paramount acquired the movie rights of Mario Puzzo's novel *The Godfather*, but it was reluctant to produce it because other gangster movies had just flopped, including Paramount's *Brotherhood*. The studio reconsidered only after Puzzo's novel started ascending the bestseller list and Universal Studios offered Paramount \$1 million to purchase the option (Biskind, 1998). Robert Evans, Paramount's head of production, commissioned Puzzo to write a script that diverged in many ways from the book. After several directors turned down the offer to direct the film (including Bogdanovich, Brooks, Costa-Gavras, Leone, Pechinpah, Schaffner and Yates), Evans's vice-president Peter Bart suggested Coppola, who had made a name as a scriptwriter and had also directed smaller films (Sragow, 1997). In his memoirs, Evans (1994, p. 220) recalls his initial reaction: 'That's your esoteric bullshit coming out. The guy made three pictures: *You're a Big Boy Now*, artsy-fartsy, no business,

*Finian's Rainbow*, a top Broadway musical he made into a disaster, and *Rain People*, which everyone rained on.'

Bart managed to persuade Evans, but Coppola rejected the offer because he considered it a low-quality commercial movie. Coppola envisioned himself as a writer-director who would maintain complete control of his creative work, and he believed that 'The way to come to power is not always to challenge the establishment, but first to make a place in it and then challenge and double-cross the establishment' (in Pye and Myles, 1979, p. 83). According to George Lucas, 'Francis could sell ice to Eskimos. He has charisma beyond logic. I can now see what kind of man the great Caesars of history were, their magnetism' (in Bock, 1979, p. 9). Coppola (1994) has described how in the early 1960s he made a movie, when producer Roger Corman:

gave me a check for \$20 000 and I went to Ireland. When I was in Ireland this guy offered me to buy the English rights for \$20 000. So I had now \$40 000. Roger, of course, expected to get his \$20 000 back, still make the movie for the 20 with the English rights, and get the film for free. But I sort of just duped him. I took both checks and I put it in the bank Then I made the movie for \$40 000, which was this little black-and-white horror film called *Dementia 13*.

Director John Milius remembers that, when Coppola was making *Finian's Rainbow* at Warner Brother Studios in 1967: 'Francis had this closet in the producer's building. He was stealing film stock and equipment and putting it in there. He said, "Someday when they finally throw me out of here, we'll have enough and we make another film".'

In 1969 Coppola, Lucas and others founded American Zoetrope in San Francisco. Marcia Lucas recalls that 'Francis left LA because he didn't want to be a small fish in a big pond. I think he wanted to be a big fish in a small pond' (in Biskind, 1998, p. 91). When Coppola rejected Paramount's offer, Zoetrope had started accumulating debt and Coppola was also unable to pay back his substantial personal debts to Warner, Corman and other people. Bart kept on pressing Coppola and, eventually, Lucas persuaded him that they desperately needed Paramount's money.

Coppola accepted under the condition that he would rewrite the script, which he did in collaboration with Puzzo. He first removed all 'sleazy commercial elements', including hippies, an Italian-American singer's dipsomania, and a girl with an oversized vagina. Next, he infused the story with personal experiences from his own Italian-American family. He then got the idea that this was a family story as much as a crime story, where the Mob was just a metaphor for American capitalism (Sragow, 1997). Later the *New Yorker's* Pauline Kael would call the book



‘trash’ and others would give Coppola full credit for turning a gangster plot into a bold allegory (Murray, 1975). Puzzo has said that ‘To this day, I can’t even remember what’s mine and what’s Francis. I feel it’s Francis’s picture’ (in Sragow, 1997). According to Coppola:

It wasn’t trash if the two movies are strong, it’s because of what Mario originally put in his book that was strong and valid I have great respect for Mario. He created the story, he created the characters, even in Part II which I wrote more of than Part I. But all the key elements go back to his book. (Quoted in Murray, 1975)

After persuading the studio what the story ‘is really about’, Coppola fought to increase the budget and shoot the film in New York in a 1940s setting. Paramount wanted to shoot the film in Los Angeles in a contemporary (1970s) setting in order to keep the budget below \$2 million. Coppola hired New York-based crew members, hoping that the studio would rather shoot the movie in New York (a very expensive location) instead of paying an equal amount of money to fly the entire crew to Los Angeles (Shanken, 2003). The huge sales of Puzzo’s book at that time also influenced the studio’s decisions, and what got started as a \$2 million gangster movie that was set in the 1970s and was to be filmed in Los Angeles was transformed by Coppola into a \$6.2 million grand allegory set in the 1940s and filmed in New York (Lewis, 2000).

Coppola then clashed with Evans about casting. The common practice in Hollywood was that extras were professional actors, but Coppola spent several hours in the streets of New York screening barbers, bakers and other non-actors who looked and talked like genuine Italian-Americans. Coppola also insisted stubbornly that the leading roles should be played by Marlon Brando (Don Corleone) and Al Pacino (Michael), but Evans rejected both. ‘Bob Evans was a handsome guy, a tall guy, so he tended to see Michael as someone more like himself. He was suggesting Ryan O’Neal and Bob Redford and I was suggesting Pacino. I wanted someone more like me’ (Coppola, in Sragow, 1997). While in retrospect Coppola’s intuition was remarkably spot on, Evans’s judgment was far from unreasonable: Al Pacino was a young theatrical actor who had never made a movie before, and Brando was overweight, had a terrible reputation as a troublemaker, and his last films were disasters. When a deadlock ensued, Coppola was summoned to a meeting where, in front of executives and lawyers, Stanley Jaffe told him: ‘As president of Paramount Pictures, I assure you that Marlon Brando will never appear in this motion picture and, furthermore, as president of the company, I will no longer allow you to discuss it’ (quoted in Murray, 1975)

Coppola's reaction was to quickly collapse on the floor in a heap, pretending an epileptic fit. He got up only after Jaffe told him that he could have Brando under the condition that he would agree to a screen test. Coppola did not dare to ask Brando to do a screen test, but he signed him anyway (Lewis, 2000). According to Bart, although Coppola got the actors that he wanted – Brando, Pacino, Duvall and Keaton – he had wasted so much energy in fighting with Evans that he did not have the time to think about locations and other aspects of the movie.

Coppola began shooting on 29 March 1971. A week later he was already falling behind schedule and losing control of the tough New York crew, who were used to working with strong and decisive directors like Kazan, Lumet and Penn (Biskind, 1998). In an industry where status and symbolic capital are key (Jones, 1996), Coppola was a 30-year-old recent film graduate whose credibility had been undermined in the pre-production period by his clashes with Evans and the studio. Steven Kesten, first assistant director, recalled (in Biskind, 1998, p. 155): 'Francis's credentials at that point, as a director, were zip. He was at the bottom of the abyss. Running a set means you gotta be the guy that makes it go forward. And it just wasn't happening. Francis was always having to be nudged along.'

Coppola has always felt that, if a film finishes exactly as it was initially planned, it is unlikely to be a good film. But his tendency to improvise and delegate, in conjunction with his belief that film-making is a fluid and unfolding creative process, brought chaos to the *Godfather* set. Coppola kept on rewriting the script at night and spending half of the morning rehearsing rather than shooting scenes, while the crew was sitting around waiting. Actors whose roles had been eliminated would appear on the set, and crew members were faced with new or continually shifting demands. One day Al Pacino walked by mistake into an unlit room in the Corleone house. Coppola loudly assured the crew that his actors have the freedom to walk wherever they want to. Cinematographer Gordon Willis asked for a few minutes in order to relight, but Coppola insisted that he wanted to shoot right away. Willis stormed out of the set, Coppola ordered Willis's cameraman to shoot, and when the latter refused, Coppola retreated into his office screaming 'why won't they let me make my movie?' (Biskind, 1998). Willis recalls:

It was hard for Francis because everybody was trying to pull his pants off. He was not well schooled in that kind of moviemaking. He had only done some kind of on-the-road running-around kind of stuff. I was like Hitler. If anybody was doing the right thing to get this movie made from day to day, it was me. I like to lay out a thing and make it work, with discipline. Francis's

*Reflections on Francis Ford Coppola in The Godfather* 193

attitude is more like, 'I'll set my clothes on fire – if I can make it to the other side of the room it'll be spectacular.' You can't shoot a whole movie hoping for happy accidents. What you get is one big accident. (Quoted in Sragow, 1997)

There were daily rumours that the film was a disaster and Coppola was going to get fired. One day Coppola disappeared from the set and was later found wandering in a toy store. Martin Scorsese recalls visiting Coppola on the set of the film's funeral scene: 'Francis just sat down on one of the tombstones and started crying' (in Rensin, 1991). Things got worse when the New York Mob started shutting access to key filming locations. Dean Tavoularis, production designer, notes that 'We looked high and low; somebody would follow us; we'd strike a deal for a location and suddenly it would unravel.' Evans (1994) recalls receiving such messages as, 'To kill the snake you cut off its head', and, 'If you want your son to live longer than two weeks, get out of town.'

The studio was disappointed with everything about the movie, but Coppola (in Shanken, 2003, p. 86) kept on frustrating them; for example, for the needs of a scene he flew from Chicago some tomatoes 'at a cost of \$3000 or so much a tomato'. Peter Bart recalls trying to keep Coppola on the job when other studio executives wanted to replace him with Elia Kazan:

At a pivotal meeting in Bob Evans' office, I brought in a prominent Hollywood figure; he asserted that he had talked to Kazan and found him to be senile, and was sufficiently persuasive that the idea of hiring him was thrown out. I'm not proud of this – I knew that Gadge was not senile – but at every studio there comes a crunch time when you have to be devious. (Quoted in Sragow, 1997)

At some point a group of crew members, led by the film's first editor Aram Avakian, tried to get Coppola replaced, but Coppola (in Shanken, 2003, p. 84) reacted quickly:

Now I had a group in my own movie that was conspiring to get rid of me. My own friends! They figured I was lost. But I've been told that film studios never fire a director on a weekday, because if a director gets fired on a weekday, then the studio loses two days in the transition. They'll always wait till the weekend. They'll fire him after Friday, then the new director comes in and he'll be ready for Monday. So I took a real chance. I went in – and I knew who all the conspirators were; there were about 16 of them – I fired them all on Wednesday. They were like, 'What do you mean we're fired?' I said, 'I'm the director. Fired. You're out.'

While Coppola's quirky and delegative style was a major source of conflicts, it allowed him to elicit superb creative contributions from his crew. When he first met with Brando to discuss his role, Brando put shoe polish on his hair and Kleenex tissues in his mouth, improvising on the spot the Don Corleone character. Later, when Coppola told Brando that he did not know how to shoot the scene where Don Corleone plays with a kid and dies, Brando said 'This is how I play with kids' and put some orange peels in his mouth, only to hear Coppola saying that he would not like to shoot the scene in any other way. Gordon Willis, whose novel, dark and devilish-looking images influenced movies for decades, has stated that 'I just did what I felt like doing' (in Biskind, 1998, p. 155). Veteran editor William Reynolds considered the opening scene (which intercuts Connie Corleone's wedding party with the Don granting favors in his office) one of the sublime challenges of his career: 'Francis knew he had to stage a real Italian wedding and he did it superbly, but there wasn't any plan as far as the script was concerned about going back and forth. We did it; I did it' (in Sragow, 1997). Several other aspects of the film that later received high critical acclaim were Coppola's personal choices: from Nino Rotta's music to young actors Pacino and De Niro.

Back in 1971, however, no one, including Coppola, was confident about the film:

*The Godfather* was a very underappreciated movie when we were making it. They didn't like the cast. They didn't like the way I was shooting it. I was always on the verge of getting fired. So it was an extremely nightmarish experience. I had two little kids and the third one was born during [the making of the film]. We lived in a little apartment, and I was basically frightened they didn't like it. They had as much as said that, so when it was all over I wasn't at all confident that it was going to be successful, and that I'd ever get another job. (Coppola, 1994)

### **The Aftermath**

Coppola finished shooting in September 1971. For Paramount it was imperative that the movie opened for the Christmas season but, due to another fierce and prolonged clash between Coppola and Evans during the editing of the film, it was finally released in April 1972 (Sragow, 1997). *The Godfather* grossed more money more quickly than any other film in history up to that point: \$135 million on a budget of \$6.2 million. It received dozens of nominations, won three Oscars (Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Screenplay), and Coppola won the Directors Guild Best Director Award.

When Paramount asked Coppola to direct the sequel, he initially refused by saying that he hated Paramount. He later accepted on four conditions: Paramount would finance his film *The Conversation* knowing that it was not a commercial film; given that he did not trust Paramount, he would first shoot *The Conversation* and only then shoot the sequel; he would be paid \$1 million for the sequel (up from \$175 000 in *The Godfather*, Part I); and Evans and other executives whom he named would not be involved in the film. Paramount agreed and Coppola (in Shanken, 2003) later said that he directed *The Godfather Part II* as he wanted to, without any interference from the studio. As a result, the making of the sequel was not marked by the tensions experienced in the first *Godfather* movie. In 1974 *The Godfather Part II* won six Oscars, including Best Director (Philips, 2004; Philips and Hill, 2004). In 1990 Coppola completed the trilogy by directing *The Godfather Part III*. Today the American Film Institute ranks *The Godfather* (Part I) as the second-greatest film of all time, second only to Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*.

## THE EXTREME LEADERSHIP OF FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

To analyze the events of the case study we draw on three theoretical perspectives. In order to understand Coppola's individual behavior as an extreme leader, we utilize the charismatic leadership approach as he exhibits several behaviors linked to attributions of charisma (Conger and Kanungo, 1997; Epitropaki and Martin, 2004; Murphy and Ensher, 2008). He is a leader with clear artistic vision, who is not afraid to take risks, both personal (such as being on the verge of getting fired throughout the movie) and work-related (such as his casting Brando and Pacino for the leading roles). He engages in unconventional behaviors (such as faking an epileptic fit or firing the 16 people conspiring against him) and constantly challenges the status quo and the authority of studio executives in order to make his artistic vision a reality. He scans the environment for threats and opportunities, deliberately creates trouble and destabilizes the (temporary) organization of his film-set to bring the change he has envisioned.

Furthermore, in order to explain the radical creativity and outstanding performance that were the outcomes of his extreme leadership we utilize the complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) and the theory of creative deviance (Mainemelis, 2010). Complexity leadership theory 'recognizes that leadership is too complex to be described as only the act of an individual or individuals; rather it is a complex interplay of many

interactive forces' (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 314). It views leadership as 'emergent, interactive, dynamic' (p. 299) and clearly embedded in the context of the interactions among interdependent agents. *The Godfather's* film-set is a good example of a complex adaptive system (CAS) where multiple individuals (Coppola, the studio executives, the scriptwriters, the crew-members and the actors) dynamically interact to produce creativity and learning. Complexity leadership theory further proposes an interconnected relationship among three types of leadership: (1) administrative leadership, that represents the actions of those in formal managerial positions who provide structure and coordinate organizational processes; (2) enabling leadership, that fosters the conditions for innovation and change and (3) adaptive leadership, that emerges as a collaborative change movement from the interactions among the actors in the network. In the *Godfather* case, the studio executives clearly exercise strong administrative leadership in the particular network, whereas Coppola acts as an enabler for adaptive leadership to emerge throughout the network. He plays a critical role in destabilizing the complex adaptive system of the film-set by disrupting existing patterns of behaviors, thereby pushing the system towards chaos.

Creative deviance theory (Mainemelis, 2010) is also an important theory in this context as it posits that the social structure of an organization plays a pivotal role in creativity-related non-conformist behaviors, such as those that violate supervisors' orders and other organizational norms. Organizations that place a high value on creativity are more likely to induce and later tolerate creative deviance behaviors, especially when the latter appear to hold some promise for resulting in a breakthrough outcome. Both complexity leadership theory and creative deviance theory, therefore, acknowledge internal organizational tension as an important parameter for creativity and learning. Drawing on the case study, we argue that an artist-turned-leader induces extreme collaborative tensions with complex systems agents (such as the studio executives, the scriptwriter, the crew members, the actors and so on; see Figure 14.1 for a complete mapping of the collaborative tensions) which in a context of a traditional organization might lead the system to collapse. However, in the particular context (temporary organization, focused on innovation and creativity) and with the artist-leader who fully embodies all the tensions associated with the creative pursuit (charismatic, true to his 'calling', authentic) such an extreme and tenuous form of leadership has led to radical creativity and superior performance. We argue that when the artist-leader 'survives' the extreme situation, the success of the final product increases his idiosyncrasy credits (Hollander,

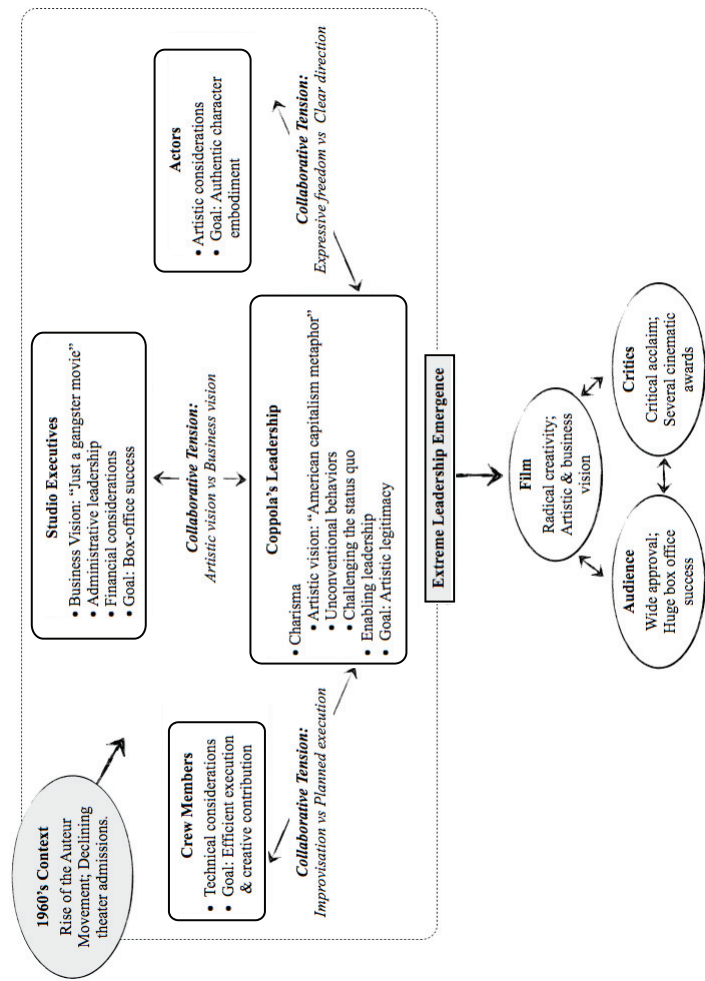


Figure 14.1 Extreme Leadership Emergence in a network of collaborative tensions induced by the leader



1958); allows him or her to build on the success and claim greater creative freedom (as evidenced in the two *Godfather* sequels); and even shapes the professional field's perception that the magnitude of creativity is directly linked to the degree to which artist-leaders (from film directors to top chefs) drive themselves and their teams to the extremes.

## EXTREME LEADERSHIP LESSONS

There are several lessons about extreme leadership that we can draw from the *Godfather* case study. Besides its unique and idiosyncratic elements, the making of *The Godfather* exemplifies extreme leadership within a context where: (1) the leader is a creative artist pursuing a cherished artistic vision that is deeply personal but cannot be realized without the collaboration of a creative team; (2) the team is composed of creative professionals who want to leave their own creative stamp on the final product; (3) the success of the final product depends on its creativity, a fact that infuses the collaborative process with uncertainty, ambiguity and unpredictability; and (4) the temporary collaborative process unfolds within a larger and permanent organizational structure that has to balance creativity with other organizational goals and imperatives (Lampel et al., 2000).

Our analysis has showed that in such an extreme leadership context, the leader acting as the troublemaker who induces crises and creates chaos does not necessarily cause the organization to collapse. On the contrary, the leader's unconventional, challenging behaviors can set in motion a process of deep organizational transformation characterized by double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978) and radical creativity. Our analysis also highlighted the process of extreme leadership emergence from the collaborative tensions between multiple actors in a complex adaptive system and the enabling role of the leader-artist in the particular context. The extreme leader Coppola not only fostered internal tensions, but he also judiciously injected tension in the system and allowed for adaptive outcomes to emerge (such as learning, innovation and high performance).

## CONCLUSION

We have presented a case study of the film *The Godfather*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola and produced by Paramount Studios. By utilizing two existing theoretical frameworks on leadership, that is, the charismatic



leadership theory (Conger and Kanungo, 1998) and the complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), as well the creative deviance theory (Mainemelis, 2010), we attempted to cast light on how Coppola as an artist-leader working in a complex but temporary organizational system (a film-making project) enabled learning and unique creation emergence through his extreme leadership. Our analysis suggests that: (1) when artists-turned-leaders are given the license to pursue a personal vision in complex creative projects, extreme collaborative tensions are likely to emerge; (2) although rarely pleasant, such socially tenuous leadership can lead to positive organizational outcomes; and thereafter (3) it can gain cultural legitimacy as an acceptable leadership style in creative 'temporary organizations' (Bechky, 2006).

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