



## Lessons on Leadership and Teamwork -- from 700 Meters Below the Earth's Surface

"We are well, the 33 of us, in the shelter." These words, written on a small piece of paper, created euphoria in Chile in early August and restored hope to the families of the 33 miners trapped in the San José copper mine in the heart of the Atacama Desert. The note emerged from a duct that is now used for communication with rescuers and for sending food and medicine to the miners, who are trapped 700 meters (nearly 2,300 feet) below the earth's surface in a small emergency shelter.

When the good news came to the outside that the miners were alive, a team led by engineer Andrés Sougarret labored to find the best alternative for reaching the tunnel of barely 30 square meters. The team was helped by experts in psychology, sociology, engineering and nutrition and by officials from NASA, who deal with similar situations of isolation encountered by astronauts. At first, it was estimated that the team would need four months for the rescue. Now, however, the Chilean government believes that it could extract the first miners in October, thanks to a tunneling machine able to drill through the surface of the earth.

Images recorded by the miners themselves have made clear the extreme conditions they are living under, and which they will have to bear until the rescue materializes: temperatures of up to 35 degrees Centigrade (95 degrees Fahrenheit); environmental humidity of 90% and rationing of food. Above all, it has become obvious that the miners are well organized. From the moment of the accident, they divided the shelter into zones devoted to an infirmary, recreational activity, food and dormitories. Some have assumed leadership positions that make survival possible. For example, Luis Urzúa Iribarren, who headed the shift of workers, assigned various roles to the other miners. One miner, Mario Sepulveda, received and handled cases of food and medication that arrived from outside the mine. From the outset, Victor Segovia wrote down everything that happened during and after August 5, the day of the disaster.

The skills and leadership exhibited by the miners will be crucial to their survival, experts say. In an interview with Universia Knowledge@Wharton, Francisco Javier Garrido, a professor of strategy in various MBA programs in Europe and the Americas and author of such management books as *The Soul of Strategy*, discusses the lessons that can be learned from their experience. Garrido is a partner and director of EBS Consulting Group (Spain-Chile), and managing director of the Business School at Universidad Mayor in Chile.

**Universia-Knowledge @ Wharton:** In your view, what have been the keys to the miners' survival, even when they didn't know if the outside world presumed them to be dead?

**Francisco Javier Garrido:** The keys to survival in an extreme experience such as this one ... can be summarized by three concepts [that] can be applied to the business world. First, there is the [background and expertise] of those who compose

the group of people. [Those skills] have been vital for correctly understanding the context [the miners] find themselves in, as well as for grasping the real possibilities of being rescued. This has also been fundamental for keeping the group of people together and remaining hopeful about their chances to survive. **Second, [the miners] figured out that it was vital to have [a leader]** ... with the longest seniority in the ranks of the workers. This was critical for keeping the people on the team together [and] for creating trust in the possibility of emerging alive ... as well as [creating a system for] assigning tasks and the rationing of food.

It must be stressed that **the components of experience and leadership are clear in this case.** We need to point out the definition made by the head of the group, who acted as its spiritual guide. [He said] there was an upswing in what the [ancient] Greeks used to call "general wisdom." This happens whenever the people whom we recognize as capable of [best understanding] the working environment reach the best possible decisions for the group. Those are the people who carry the mandate for the best possible future ... on the battlefield or in the business world, **where experienced managers play the same role.**

**UK@W:** Do you believe that the importance of leadership – and the role of the leader – becomes clearer in crisis situations?

**Garrido:** **These 33 men have given us a lesson not only in integrity, but in order and coordination.** A spiritual leader has flourished: Luis Urzúa has taken charge of maintaining the cohesion of the group and keeping their spirits high. Meanwhile, the rest of the miners have contributed their own fair measure of effort ... in exchanging information with the rescue group; boosting their chances of survival by rationing food, and by paying special attention to those miners who are ... in the most precarious health, and [those] who are depressed. Without doubt, it is during a crisis when leadership [is most] tested ... whether they have been formally chosen to execute leadership roles, as is normally the case in organizations, or whether [their role] is the result of the natural effects of chance and circumstance.

**UK@W:** What characteristics and skills do leaders need to have in crisis situations?

**Garrido:** In adverse conditions and in a context of a crisis such as this one, the leader of a team must, above everything else, validate his [or her] skills, experience and training for the entire team by providing evidence of his skill for assuming leadership beyond his formal authority. **After his voice has been validated by his equals, this leader has to demonstrate true "strategic wisdom" by putting it to use for the survival of the group through such skills and abilities as:**

**Analytical skill:** The leader needs to analyze ... the scenarios that the team members confront, selecting viable routes for the survival of the entire team of people; and using his or her skills to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of every member of the team.

**Overcome elementary responses:** He or she needs to demonstrate to the team ... a deep understanding of the reality they are confronted with, so he or she can bring confidence to the team by providing [solutions to problems] ... [such as] rationing or overcoming the natural anguish and uncertainties that emerge within the group.

**View efforts as a function of goals:** The leader searches for collective benefits without drowning ... in perfectionism that could undermine the various contributions of the

team. He or she knows that he or she has to devote time [for people] to express themselves in both leisure and work. He or she must provide multidisciplinary tasks that keep the team busy and focused on achievements ....

**Know how to work as a team:** Even during moments when the team must merely observe his or her decisions ... the leader ... must develop a collaborative team that enables opinions and experience to emerge, along with a stronger sense of intuition. This adds to the leader's flexibility and openness, since expressions of rigidity are not effective during stressful circumstances.

**Ethical coherence and integrity:** The leader of the team must be capable of showing integrity in his or her decision making, in such a way that he or she preserves the moral coherence of comrades and acts as a behavioral model for them.

**Skill at communications:** Usually, I tell my MBA students that communicating ... motivation and goals to each member of the team is among the most important strategic and leadership skills. That's because developing a working plan and searching for goals of collective interest requires clarity as well as attention to feedback ....

**UK@W:** Are the skills that are important in handling a crisis similar to those required of a leader in the business world?

**Garrido:** Clearly. These qualities have been reiterated throughout more than 2,000 years of human history, from the great generals on the battlefield to various teams of people who act under adverse conditions, and to businesses and other modern organizations, where we will certainly be able to apply much of what has been documented [about the miners' experience] in order to motivate people to improve, to overcome obstacles and to work together as a team.

**UK@W:** What, in your opinion, must be the message that the leader needs to communicate inside the mine?

**Garrido:** We know that **the initial message has been cohesion**. In this situation, personal ties and relationships play a fundamental role, along with motivation and **keeping the group focused** on the goal of the rescue. The leader needs to be able to **bring together the collective forces to show a "possible future."** He has to be able to explain that the possibility of a potentially successful rescue is close to becoming reality. He needs to convince the group of the need to remain united and act together as a function of that goal. More specifically, this is the essence of that approach: **Starting with an idea, explain, communicate and motivate the team to act toward a goal that provides a greater benefit for the entire group.** It is vital for the voice of the leader to flow, just as it should be so in today's business world.

In November 2007, participants in a conference of managers at IESE in Barcelona commented that "a strategy that is not communicated is like a beautiful musical score that is not performed." It is worth saying that ideas about a "possible future" have no value if they are not communicated efficiently. In the words of management guru David Norton, "The strategy must be the task of everyone, and the way to achieve it is to let people know what it is and what contribution [they] can provide." This is essential for understanding the tremendous pressures that a leader faces in these circumstances, where 33 people are below ground. The message must be permanent, motivational and sustainable for relationships of mutual survival. In his

capacity as a motivator of the team, the leader [in the mine] must balance the following elements of the message that I have described in my book, *The Soul of Strategy*:

**Information:** [Convey] what has happened [in the past], what is happening to us now and what will happen to us in the future.

**Evaluation:** Being able to accept and discard ideas without reducing participation and motivation.

**Linkages:** In this type of relationship with people, the leader maintains the message of staying together in a group. Collective survival requires clear leadership that enables everyone to express themselves without encouraging new leaders whose presence would make it easier for people to express views that lead to a breakdown in their goals.

**Order:** The appropriate communication of roles and status, and of specific hierarchies and functions that each of the miners fulfills in his daily tasks.

**Key posts:** The messages [that people listen to] must be specifically targeted at each of the key talents of the organization. In the case of these mining professionals, there has been a clearly hierarchical decision when choosing those who have communicated with the authorities on the surface.

**UK@W:** Outside the mine, what has to be the message from rescuers and government officials? What is the best way to communicate it? Through a single spokesman? With the participation of the family?

**Garrido:** The communication [by] technical spokespeople from the government has been consistently appropriate, avoiding [too much] eagerness for a successful rescue [on the one hand] or demoralization and despair [on the other hand], which would send the wrong messages to the 33 people still below the earth. The experience of communicating with the families has been mediated by mining and health authorities who, in the company of a team of national and international experts, have been able to learn the condition of the miners as each message arrived on the surface. This permits people [on the outside] to make the right moves at the right time for [the miners'] mental and physical health. Although the group of people who are buried below the earth have some experience when it comes to the hard mining work that they carry out on a daily basis, they must spend two months under adverse conditions until the promised rescue.

**UK@W:** Do you believe that there is a parallel between the current case of the 33 Chilean miners and the airplane accident in the Cordillera mountain chain in the Andes in 1972? On that occasion, a Uruguayan airplane bound for Chile blew up with 45 passengers on board. After 72 days in the mountains, only 16 people survived.

**Garrido:** The similarities can be seen in the extremely difficult conditions that the survivors in that case were forced to face.... I think that in [the miners'] case the possibilities of connecting with the surface that have emerged over the past two weeks have made a great deal of difference. The levels of uncertainty and isolation have [been lessened], not to mention the fact that the [current] group [of miners] has not been forced to suffer the death of any of its members, as was the case with the accident of the Uruguayan airplane.

**UK@W:** The rescue of the miners could take a very long time. What lessons about survival can we learn from extreme situations such as the 1972 plane crash?

**Garrido:** The first lesson for the business world is that you need to act with flexibility when it comes to achieving your goals. The sorts of management teams that are most likely to succeed are those composed in a heterogeneous way. Heterogeneity, or the idea of cognitive diversity, increases the probability of creative and diverse impulses. The adaptive flexibility of the team is a necessary condition for achieving the goals of survival -- an essential condition of the strategist and the strategy.

**UK@W:** What will be the main challenges for organizing the group of miners from within and from the outside?

**Garrido:** We have already mentioned that the motivation of the group, just as in the business world, is essential for maintaining hope for a [rescue.]

The challenge will be to maintain an ordered mind, with a sense of orientation to achievement; the spirit of the body and coherence for fulfilling the goal. [That] effort that must be reiterated and experienced, case by case, by focusing on possible instances of depression that have been detected by reading the behavior of some miners. At any moment, the team on the surface must be able to evaluate potential health conditions among the miners, both mental and physical, as well as foresee and improve [the group's] behavior despite its isolated condition, while also focusing on the complex task of rescuing [the miners]. The team in charge of the rescue must also be concerned with emotionally restraining the families; preparing conditions for the miners to get out [of the mine] and foreseeing conditions that people will face after they leave [the mine], when they will surely go from being in a condition of forced isolation to one of extreme exposure to the public.

**UK@W:** The experiences of people who survive extreme situations often serve as case studies for students in business schools around the world. What lessons can be learned in the business world from the experience of the 33 trapped miners?

**Garrido:** The main lesson in this case can be summed up without doubt by the way they have overcome the crisis. There are lessons here that transcend the world of business instruction when it comes to [defining] such expressions as "decision making," "leadership" and "teamwork." Clearly, the implementation of a plan requires someone who assumes risks. We know that both the plans we make and the risks that we assume ultimately lead us to make the necessary decisions.

This is precisely where I believe there emerges a ... lesson for those who deal with teams of human beings on a daily basis. For example, in the business world, you often have to battle against adverse conditions. Strategy without decision-making is the equivalent of decision-making without action; ultimately, it is useless. A leader can choose the route of not taking action toward an achievement or ... he can act in search of the goal. The decision-making of a leader or strategist depends on his capacity for thinking about and sensing a central goal on a regular basis.... It is not very different from what we know in the world of business strategy and management about decision-making.... Without any doubt, [the miners] have given us some major lessons about management from 700 meters below the earth.

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