

Leadership in Cinema



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

K-19: THE WIDOWMAKER

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Studio: Paramount Pictures Released: 2002
Genre: Drama Audience Rating: PG 13
Runtime: 137 minutes

Materials

VCR or DVD, television or projection system, Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles handouts (single-sided), Leading in the Wildland Fire Service, Incident Response Pocket Guide (IRPG), notepad, writing utensil

Objective

Students will identify Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles illustrated within K-19: The Widowmaker and discuss leadership lessons learned with group members or mentors.

Basic Plot

Inspired by a true story that was kept secret until the fall of communism, K-19: The Widowmaker is a tale of ordinary men who sacrifice everything for their shipmates and their country. In 1961, at the height of the Cold War, an ill-prepared Russian nuclear missile submarine embarks on its maiden voyage with near-disastrous consequences.

When the sub's nuclear reactor malfunctions, Captain Alexei Vostrikov (Harrison Ford) makes some decisions that are unpopular with the crew. Tensions mount as radiation levels rise throughout the submarine and there is no respite in sight. If the sub explodes, it may cause an international incident as it may be mistaken as an attack on a nearby NATO base and an American Navy destroyer that is in the area. If the sub dives deep below the surface, perhaps the malfunction can be fixed, but the loss of some lives is then inevitable. The Executive Officer, Mikhail Polenin (Liam Neeson), who formerly commanded the sub, can placate the crew, but must decide where his own loyalties lie. ([Taken from Rotten Tomatoes](#))

Cast of Main Characters

| | |
|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Captain Alexi Vostikov | Harrison Ford |
| Mikhail Polenin | Liam Neeson |
| Konstantin Poliansky | George Anton |
| Oleg Falichev | Steve Cumyn |
| Yuri Demichev | Steve Nicholson |
| Vadim Radtchenko | Peter Sarsgaard |
| Pavel Loktev | Christian Camargo |
| Marshal Zeletsov | Joss Ackland |

Facilitation Options

The framework for the Leadership in Cinema program allows facilitators to tailor the program to fit local leadership development needs and time frames. Facilitators are in no way bound to ask every question or utilize every part of the lesson plan.

Creation of this lesson plan focuses students on [Leading in the Wildland Fire Service](#). Facilitators are encouraged to provide each student with a copy of this document.

Participants and facilitators of the program are encouraged to submit suggestions regarding the program of specific lesson plans to the Leadership in Cinema coordinator at leadership_feedback@nifc.blm.gov. Local units are also encouraged to add to the Leadership in Cinema library as well.

The film can be viewed in its entirety or by clip selection, depending on facilitator intent and time schedules. Another method is to have the employee(s) view the film on his/her own and then hold the discussion session.

Full-film Facilitation Suggestion

When opting for the full-film method, the facilitator should determine a good breaking point near the middle of the film.

1. Review the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles with students.
2. Advise students to document instances within the film that illustrate/violate the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles on the handout provided.
3. Break students into small discussion groups.
4. Show students K-19: The Widowmaker.
5. Break. (Suggestion: After the scene where Vostrikov is listening to music in his quarters and immediately prior to the nuclear accident; approximately 0:58:15)

6. Begin the guided discussion.
7. Provide a short synopsis with some “ticklers” to pay attention before beginning the rest of the film.
8. Resume the film.
9. Have students discuss their findings and how they will apply leadership lessons learned to their role in wildland fire suppression. Facilitate discussion in groups that have difficulty.
10. Wrap up the session and encourage students to apply leadership lessons learned in their personal and work lives.

Clip Facilitation Suggestion

1. Review the leadership value or principle targeted for discussion. (May be given or ask students to identify the value or principle being illustrated after viewing the clip.)
2. Show the clip.
3. Facilitate discussion regarding the selected clip and corresponding value and/or principle.
4. Break students into small discussion groups.
5. Have students discuss their findings and how they will apply leadership lessons learned to their role in wildland fire suppression. Facilitate discussion in groups that may have difficulty.
6. Wrap up the session and encourage students to apply leadership lessons learned in their personal and work lives.

Clip times listed are approximate!

Mentor Suggestion

The mentor should be available to the student to discuss lessons learned from the film as well as incorporating them to the student’s leadership self-development plan.

Encouraging individuals to keep a leadership journal is an excellent way to document leadership values and principles that are practiced.

Incorporate the use of [Leading in the Wildland Fire Service](#) (PMS 494-2, NFES 2889) into your mentoring program.

Suggest other wildland fire leadership toolbox items that will contribute to the overall leadership development of the student.

Other References:

Facilitators may wish to incorporate the book *K-19: The Widowmaker – The Secret Story of the Soviet Nuclear Submarine* by Peter Huchthausen which features the memoirs of real-life K-19 captain Nikolai Zateyev. The book provides a deeper understanding of the political pressures that contributed to leadership failures within the Soviet Navy.

The *National Geographic* maintains an [interactive website referencing the K-19](#) submarine.

Hyperlinks have been included to facilitate the use of the [Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program website](#). Encourage students of leadership to visit the [website](#).

K-19: The Widowmaker

The following clips illustrate/violate the Wildland Leadership Values and Principles. These are only guidelines and may be interpreted differently by other views; they are presented as a guide for facilitation.

Duty

- (+): Vostrikov is given command of K-19. Polenin isn't expecting him until the next day. Vostrikov takes control at this moment. (0:10:07)
- (+): Vostrikov cancels all leave. (0:15:26)
- (+): Vostrikov and Polenin work together to save the boat and crew after Polenin transfers command back to Vostrikov. (1:43:41)
- (-): Dr. Savin is not qualified in the area of radiation exposure and only thought he was responding to an emergency. (0:20:40)
- (-): Radtchenko has never operated a reactor at sea. (0:15:26)
- (-): Polenin steps in to assist the crew when two sailors are injured (0:42:29)
- (-): Viewers get the sense that Vostrikov has no plan or at least has not expressed his plan to his subordinates after the accident when Polenin makes the following statement, "May I ask then, what is your plan?" (1:26:14)

Respect

- (+): Vostrikov releases Lieutenant Yashin when he is found sleeping and drunk in the reactor room. (0:11:29)
- (+): Polenin respectfully suggests to Vostrikov that diving to 250 meters is an unnecessary risk. (0:37:47)
- (-): Vostrikov says, "Half degree we can handle. We'll compensate with seawater ballast 'til we get back to port. If we get back to port." (0:18:46)
- (-) The base physician who has no real nuclear experience replaces the doctor who is killed prior to deployment. (0:20:40)
- (-) Vostrikov asks doctor how his men are doing after the accident. Doctor has no idea since he has no training in radiation contamination. (1:33:59)
- (+): Vostrikov briefs the crew after the test missile is fired. (0:47:16)

- (-): Polenin and Poliansky discuss the absence of radiation suits. (01:10:34)
- (+): Vostrikov gives the reason that the boat and crew should dive and attempt to repair the reactor—horrifying retaliatory attacks on the motherland. Polenin tells Vostrikov to ask, not order, the crew to dive. (1:43:41)

Integrity

- (-): When Polenin respectfully suggests to Vostrikov that diving to 250 meters is an unnecessary risk when preparing to fire the test missile, Vostrikov replies, “I did not ask for your advice.” (0:37:47)
- (+): Polenin steps in to assist the crew when two sailors are injured (0:42:29)
- (-): Polenin and Vostrikov have a verbal exchange in front of the crew after the reactor accident. (1:00:07)
- (-): Suslov and Yuri plot between themselves to relieve Vostrikov of his duties; they don’t include Polenin. (1:35:09)
- (+): Polenin stands up to Vostrikov about extinguishing the fire and not turning on the fire suppression system. (1:38:10)
- (+): Vostrikov addresses the men who risked their lives to repair the reactor. (1:51:55)
- (+): Vostrikov countermands Moscow by wanting his men off the boat. (1:55:58)

K-19: The Widowmaker

Guided Discussion – Possible Answers

1. What is the difference between the authority to lead and the decision to lead? Discuss instances of these leadership frameworks (both positively and negatively) that are found in the movie.
 - Refer to “The Authority to Lead versus the Decision to Lead” in Leading in the Wildland Fire Service.
 - ❖ “The authority to lead is established by law.”
 - ❖ “The ability to lead is a different matter; it is something that cannot be legislated.”
 - Examples of authority to lead and decision of lead may include:
 - ❖ Suslov has the authority to lead via the political branch. (1:35:09 and 1:38:10)
 - ❖ To be effective, leaders must earn the trust and respect of others.
 - Polenin is trusted by the crew—“You are still our captain, Misha, and the only one we trust.” (0:53:39)
 - Admiral Bratyeev trusts Vostrikov. “I’ve known Captain Vostrikov personally for half his life. There isn’t a submariner in the navy whose loyalty I trust more.”
 - ❖ Leaders choose to sacrifice their own needs for those of their teams and organizations.
 - ❖ Vostrikov has the ability to lead but is seen by Polenin as leading with a focus on self—“You’re defending nothing but your own ambition.” (1:32:15)
 - Leaders bring order to chaos.
 - ❖ Polenin reinstates Vostrikov as captain after Suslov uses his authority to transfer command to Polenin. (1:43:41)
2. Review “Art of Leadership” in Leading in the Wildland Fire Service. Discuss in your group(s) the art of leadership principles depicted in the movie.
 - Leaders deeply affect people and organizations, both positively and negatively.
 - Committed leaders can inspire others and make an enormous difference in people’s lives, on the results of the team, and in the progress of the organization.
 - The art of leadership requires
 - ❖ A constant interchange of theory and application.
 - Being able to view the larger picture—discerning how to turn a weakness into a strength
 - Gauging what is and is not within our control

- ❖ Successfully balancing many factors in the real world, based on the situation at hand, to achieve a successful outcome.
 - ❖ Leaders may be required to provide authoritative, autocratic, tightly controlled direction that requires immediate obedience.
 - ❖ Leaders balance the risks against the potential gains of any decision and action.
3. “In 1961 the Soviet Union has enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world two times over. The United States has enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world ten times over. Each nation continues to build more. In 1961 Americans forward deploy nuclear submarines within range of Leningrad and Moscow. Powerful men on both sides believe war is inevitable. It is only a question of when. And who will strike first.”

Discuss in your groups the pressures that existed for the Soviet military and/or K-19 crew. How does this mirror the high-risk environment of wildland fire?

- The K-19 crew is asked to make tough decisions under compressed time frames, given limited/biased information, in a complex and high-risk environment.
 - ❖ The Soviet military was under pressure to “catch up” and build a nuclear submarine program that rivaled the U.S.
 - ❖ Marshal Zeletsov has promised Comrade Khrushchev to tell the world they are a nuclear power to reckon with by firing a test missile from K-19 by the end of the month.
 - ❖ Propaganda was widely disseminated.
 - This operational environment brought together people, machinery, and the destructive energy of nuclear supremacy.
 - ❖ Crews were unskilled.
 - ❖ Equipment was untested and many times faulty.
 - ❖ The U.S. and Soviet Union were entrenched in the Cold War.
4. Refer to “Leadership Environment” in *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service*. Identify the elements that make up K-19’s leadership environment.
- The leader (who is ultimately responsible for all actions and results)
 - ❖ Most assuredly Vostrikov is the leader; however, some may identify the political party, or Polenin.
 - ❖ Your people (those that you are responsible for)
 - K-19’s crew and 200 million Soviet Union citizens.
 - ❖ The situation (unique variables that influence a leader’s decisions such as objectives, conditions, resources available, organizational influences, and others affected by the action)

- Pressures of the Cold War
 - Pressures from Soviet political party
 - Presence of two commanders on the same boat
 - Dissenters sent to Soviet penal labor camps (gulags)
 - ❖ The consequences—the short- and long-term effects of your actions.
 - A wrong decision could result in a full-scale war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union
 - Radiation exposure to crew members
 - Treason
 - American's taking possession of K-19
5. Refer to “Command Philosophy” in *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service*. Compare and contrast Vostrikov’s command philosophy with that of wildland fire.
- Command Based on Intent:
 - ❖ An explosion of K-19 could result in an explosion of the warheads which could destroy the American ship and cause retaliatory attacks on the motherland. (1:43:41)
 - Unity of Effort:
 - ❖ Vostrikov countermands Moscow by wanting his men off the boat. (1:55:58)
 - Is it “right” to put the sailors on the rescue vessels at risk?
 - Doesn’t this present a mixed message to his subordinates?
 - ❖ Polenin has the opportunity to assume command of the boat after Suslov uses his leadership authority to transfer command from Vostrikov to Polenin but does not. (1:43:41)
 - ❖ Polenin defends Vostrikov’s leadership to Soviet officials. “No captain in the Soviet Navy has ever been faced with such decisions—the fate of the boat, the crew, the fate of the world—all in the balance. The navy is my life. And one thing I know, there can be only one captain of a ship. The burden of command is on his shoulders and his alone. None of you...None of you has the right to judge Captain Vostrikov. You weren’t there. I was. He was our captain. He was my captain. And it would be an honor to sail under his command again.” (2:01:23)
6. Marshal Zeletsov believes that “Captain Polenin put his boat and his men before the party” during the failed dry dock missile launch exercise. Therefore, Captain Vostrikov is given command of the ship yet Captain Polenin remains as executive officer. What problems does this pose for the crew? How do Vostrikov and Polenin handle the situation? Give an example from wildland firefighting where leadership roles are unclear.
- Problems for the crew:

- ❖ Blurred and overlapping jurisdictional lines/command
 - ❖ Crew loyalty to Polenin
 - ❖ Lack of faith in Vostrikov
 - Vostrikov and Polenin handling of the situation:
 - ❖ Vostrikov expresses his need for Polenin
 - ❖ Polenin gives up control
 - ❖ Power struggles exist between the two
 - Examples from wildland firefighting:
 - ❖ Who is in control? (Agency Administrator, IC, politician, landowner, etc.)
 - ❖ IMT transitions
 - ❖ Lack of clear commander's intent
 - ❖ Poor communication
 - ❖ Overall poor leadership
7. After two men are injured during a drill, Polenin addresses the crew. "At ease. I was told there was some complaining. But I said, 'Not my men. They're the best crew in the fleet. They will pull to the last.' So, any complaints?" Pavel states, "There's no complaints here, Captain." A disgruntled sailor looks at Pavel who puts his finger to his lips and says, "Shush." How do you feel after watching this scene? What "red flags" do you see that could affect your role as leader? How might this affect crew cohesion? How does fear of retaliation play into our decision making? Is there any hint in the movie that Vostrikov is trusted by his commanders? Have you been in a situation where you were told to remain quiet? If yes, how did you feel and how did you handle the situation?
- Leadership is a tough choice; however, leaders lead to make a difference. Silence may not be a good strategy. Often leaders must choose the difficult right over the easy wrong and be heard. In this scenario, there were complaints but few stood up to voice their concerns throughout all phases of the K-19 project—from construction through deployment.
 - Vostrikov comment to Suslov, "The crew needs you to show courage, not fear. Fear is contagious."
 - Fear of retaliation undoubtedly caused K-19's crew and commanders to act/react more cautiously. The book version insinuates that Captain Vateyev stood up for his beliefs.
 - Admiral Bratyeev trusts Vostrikov. "I've known Captain Vostrikov personally for half his life. There isn't a submariner in the navy whose loyalty I trust more."
 - Ensure that students speak only as they feel comfortable regarding previous experiences.

8. After the Americans offer K-19 assistance, Polenin, Suslov, and Vostrikov have an exchange where Vostrikov fully vocalizes his commander's intent. (1:32:15) What is that intent? How does Polenin respond? How does Vostrikov handle Polenin's response and what does he say to Suslov about responsibility as commissar, representative of the party? Considering the complexity of the situation and all that has happened, discuss and defend in your groups which leadership position best fits with your understanding of the situation.
- Vostrikov states, "My duty is to defend the state, and I will do that to my last dying breath."
 - Polenin responds, "You're defending nothing but your own ambition. Tell that to the men who are dying down there. Go on; tell them."
 - Vostrikov replies, "There will be no more talk of surrendering to the Americans. It is treason. (Vostrikov addresses Polenin.) You mention it one more time, I will have you confined to your quarters. (Vostrikov turns to Suslov.) And you, you are the commissar, representative of the party, responsible for crew morale."

DUTY

Be proficient in your job, both technically & as a leader.

- Take charge when in charge.
- Adhere to professional standard operating procedures.
- Develop a plan to accomplish given objectives.

Make sound & timely decisions.

- Maintain situation awareness in order to anticipate needed actions.
- Develop contingencies & consider consequences.
- Improvise within the commander's intent to handle a rapidly changing environment.

Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised, accomplished.

- Issue clear instructions.
- Observe & assess actions in progress without micro-managing.
- Use positive feedback to modify duties, tasks & assignments when appropriate.

Develop your subordinates for the future.

- Clearly state expectations.
- Delegate tasks that you are not required to do personally.
- Consider individual skill levels & developmental needs when assigning tasks.

Know your subordinates and look out for their well-being.

- Put the safety of your subordinates above all other objectives.
- Take care of your subordinate's needs.
- Resolve conflicts between individuals on the team.

Keep your subordinates informed.

- Provide accurate & timely briefings.
- Give the reason (intent) for assignments & tasks.
- Make yourself available to answer questions at appropriate times.

Build the team.

- Conduct frequent debriefings with the team to identify lessons learned.
- Recognize accomplishments & reward them appropriately.
- Apply disciplinary measures equally.

Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.

- Observe human behavior as well as fire behavior.
- Provide early warning to subordinates of tasks they will be responsible for.
- Consider team experience, fatigue & physical limitations when accepting assignments.

Know yourself and seek improvement.

- Know the strengths/weaknesses in your character & skill level.
- Ask questions of peers & supervisors.
- Actively listen to feedback from subordinates.

Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.

- Accept full responsibility for & correct poor team performance.
- Credit subordinates for good performance.
- Keep your superiors informed of your actions.

Set the example.

- Share the hazards & hardships with your subordinates.
- Don't show discouragement when facing setbacks.
- Choose the difficult right over the easy wrong.

RESPECT

INTEGRITY

K-19: The Widowmaker

1. Document film clips illustrating the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles.
2. Discuss leadership lessons learned from the film with group members or mentor.

Duty

- Be proficient in your job, both technically and as a leader.
- Make sound and timely decisions.
- Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised and accomplished.
- Develop your subordinates for the future.
- What scenes from the movie relate to “Duty”?

Respect

- Know your subordinates and look out for their well-being.
- Keep your subordinates informed.
- Build the team.
- Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.
- What scenes from the movie relate to “Respect”?

Integrity

- Know yourself and seek improvement.
- Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.
- Set the example.
- What scenes from the movie relate to “Integrity”?

K-19: The Widowmaker

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