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Leadership Lessons From the Shackleton Expedition

By NANCY F. KOEHN

A HUNDRED years ago this month, the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen and four teammates [became the first men to reach the South Pole](#), arriving in triumph five weeks ahead of Robert Falcon Scott. The Amundsen crew would return safely to its base, but, heartbreakingly, Scott and his four British companions died on the return journey.

The race to the pole has long attracted leadership experts, who like to contrast the Amundsen focus on efficiency and innovation with Scott's more deliberate dedication to scientific pursuit.

But another polar explorer — [Ernest Shackleton](#) — faced harsh conditions in a way that speaks more directly to our time. The Shackleton expedition, from 1914 to 1916, is a compelling story of leadership when disaster strikes again and again.

Consider just a handful of recent events: the financial crisis of 2008; the gulf [oil spill](#) of 2010; and the Japanese nuclear disaster, the debt-ceiling debacle and euro crisis this year. Constant turbulence seems to be the new normal, and effective leadership is crucial in containing it.

Real leaders, wrote the novelist David Foster Wallace, are people who “help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to do better, harder things than we can get ourselves to do on our own.”

Shackleton exemplified this kind of leadership for almost two years on the ice. What can we learn from his actions?

As a historian at the [Harvard Business School](#), I wrote [a case study](#) about him that has drawn more interest from executives than any other I have taught.

As some talented research assistants and I worked on the study, I was struck by Shackleton's ability to respond to constantly changing circumstances. When his expedition encountered serious trouble, he had to reinvent the team's goals. He had begun the voyage with a mission of exploration, but it quickly became a mission of survival.

This capacity is vital in our own time, when leaders must often change course midstream — jettisoning earlier standards of success and redefining their purposes and plans.

SHACKLETON can serve as a role model even though **his expedition**, judged by its initial objectives, was a colossal failure. His ship, the Endurance, never reached Antarctica. None of its 28 crew members set foot on the continent. The journey strained Shackleton's finances to the breaking point, and at the end of it, in late 1916, its fame-seeking protagonist found his accomplishments eclipsed by the horrors of World War I.

When the Endurance set sail in August 1914, Shackleton had a bold, potentially history-making goal: he and his team would be the first to walk across the continent, starting from the coast of the Weddell Sea, traversing the South Pole and ending up at the Ross Sea.

But from the beginning, the expedition encountered unfamiliar challenges. In late 1914, the ship arrived at a whaling settlement on South Georgia Island, the last southern port of call before the Antarctic Circle. Local seamen urged Shackleton to postpone his venture because of unusually thick pack ice that could trap the ship if the wind and temperatures shifted suddenly.

Impatient to get moving, Shackleton commanded the ship to continue south, navigating through the icy jigsaw puzzle. In January 1915, the vessel came within sight of the Antarctic mainland. But harsh winds and cold temperatures descended quickly, and the pack ice trapped the ship, just as the South Georgia seamen had warned.

The Endurance was immobilized, held hostage to the drifting ice floes. Shackleton realized that his men would have to wait out the coming winter in the ship's cramped quarters until summer's thaw.

Shackleton feared the potential effects of idleness, ennui and dissidence among his men more than he did the ice and cold. He required that each man maintain his ordinary duties as closely as possible. Sailors swabbed decks; scientists collected specimens from the ice; others were assigned to hunt for seals and penguins when fresh meat, a protection against scurvy, ran low.

He also kept a strict routine for meals and insisted that the men socialize after dinner, as a tonic for declining morale. Still, collective disappointment, and tempers, flared.

Through the routines, order and interaction, Shackleton managed the collective fear that threatened to take hold when the trip didn't go as planned. He knew that in this environment, without traditional benchmarks and supports, his greatest enemies were high levels of anxiety and disengagement, as well as a slow-burning pessimism.

Days became weeks, and weeks became months, and still the ice held the ship. By June 1915 — the thick of winter in the Southern Hemisphere — the ship's timbers were weakening under the pressure created by the ice, and in October water started pouring into the Endurance.

Shackleton ordered the crew to abandon the sinking ship and make camp on a nearby ice floe. The next morning, he announced a new goal: "Ship and stores have gone — so now we'll go home."

A day later, in the privacy of his diary, he was more candid about the gauntlet in front of him. “A man must shape himself to a new mark directly the old one goes to ground,” he wrote. “I pray God, I can manage to get the whole party to civilization.”

After the *Endurance* sank, leaving the men stranded on the ice with three small lifeboats, several tents and supplies, Shackleton realized that he himself had to embody the new survival mission — not only in what he said and did, but also in his physical bearing and the energy he exuded.

He knew that each day, his presence had huge impact on the men’s mind-sets. He managed his own emotional intelligence — to use a modern term — to keep his own courage and confidence high; when these flagged, he never let his men know.

Andrew Little, group managing director for the Melbourne unit of DDB, the advertising firm, has been strongly influenced by Shackleton in his own work with his team. Mr. Little read the case several years ago in a company-sponsored executive education course. “What I realized from the case is that as a leader, you have to have an unshakable faith in your mission, yourself and your abilities,” he said. “The hardest part of leadership is not just feeding your team with ideas and motivation, but feeding yourself. In the face of enormous obstacles, Shackleton found a way to do this.”

Just as important, Shackleton kept his men’s focus on the future. The ship was gone; previous plans were irrelevant. Now his goal was to bring the team home safely, and he improvised, adapted and used every resource at hand to achieve it.

When a few men expressed skepticism about his plans, he acted quickly to contain their opposition and negativity by trying to win them over and keeping close watch on them. He assigned several potential troublemakers to his own tent on the ice, proving the value of the saying, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”

By April 1916, the ice began breaking up, and Shackleton ordered the men to the lifeboats, hoping to reach land along the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. After a week of stormy seas, they arrived at the deserted Elephant Island. They were exhausted, seasick and dehydrated. But they took “childish joy,” one scientist wrote in his diary, “in looking at the black rocks and picking up the stones, for we had stepped on no land since Dec. 5, 1914.”

Almost immediately, Shackleton began planning his next move. Along with five other men, he managed to guide a 22-foot lifeboat to South George Island; from there, a smaller party reached a whaling station and help. After a meal, a bath and a change of clothes, Shackleton said, “we had ceased to be savages and had become civilized men again.”

Then he began looking for a vessel capable of rescuing the rest of his crew. During the next several months, he set sail in three different ships, but none could cut through the pack ice surrounding

Elephant Island. Finally, on Aug. 30, 1916, aboard the *Yelcho*, a Chilean steamer, Shackleton sailed within sight of the island and rescued the 22 remaining men. “I have done it,” he wrote his wife, Emily. “Not a life lost, and we have been through hell.”

Certainly, Shackleton was far from perfect, as executives and M.B.A. students often point out to me. He ordered the ship to sail south even in the face of whalers’ warnings about the pack ice. And the expedition might have fared better had he given more than sporadic attention to training his men how to manage and drive the 60-odd sled dogs on board.

Then there is the question of responsibility for [the *Aurora*](#), whose crew had been charged with setting out supply depots for the *Endurance* party as it crossed the continent. After unloading men and supplies in early 1915, the *Aurora* was also trapped by pack ice and carried into open waters, stranding 10 men. Three of them perished before Shackleton and others arrived in January 1917 to rescue them.

Would the outcome have been different had Shackleton devoted more time, energy and money to preparing the *Aurora* and its crew? The historical record offers no definitive answers. Nonetheless, I have taught this case more than 60 times, and most participants give Shackleton low or mixed marks for planning.

SET against these mistakes is Shackleton’s behavior after the *Endurance* was trapped. Once he relinquished his first mission, to walk across Antarctica, and embraced the second, to bring all 28 men home safely, his leadership became much more effective.

Shackleton assumed ultimate responsibility for his team. Perhaps he recognized that he was partly to blame for the crisis that befell the *Endurance*. Perhaps his naval training instilled in him a deep sense of loyalty and obligation to his fellow crew members. The men themselves understood this, and most, in turn, offered him their commitment.

Shackleton devoted himself to a worthy goal. “As soon as I first read about Shackleton, I was struck by how critical a leader’s personal commitment to his or her mission is,” said Lynne Greene, global president of the beauty brands Clinique, Origins and Ojon, part of the Estée Lauder Companies. (Ms. Greene encountered the case when I spoke at a company executive leadership session.)

“Shackleton’s team knew that whatever came before them on the ice, their leader would give his all to bring them home alive,” she said. This knowledge, she added, “was crucial to achieving the mission, and this commitment is key today when so much is changing so fast.”

Shackleton’s sense of responsibility and commitment came with a great suppleness of means. To get his men home safely, he led them across ice, sea and land with all the tools he could muster. This combination — credible commitment to a larger purpose and flexible, imaginative methods to achieve a goal — is increasingly important in our tumultuous times.

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