

Shackleton's Leadership of the *Endurance* Expedition

By Charles Chappell

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On December 5, 1914, Sir Ernest H. Shackleton and 27 men under his command sailed from South Georgia Island in the South Atlantic aboard the barque *Endurance*. Their goal was to land on the Antarctic continent and become the first to cross it. The North Pole had been reached in 1909; the South Pole, in 1911. Shackleton, a veteran of Antarctic exploration who had been knighted for his earlier expeditions, felt that crossing Antarctica was "the last great Polar journey that can be made." He named his endeavor the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition.

Shackleton and his men failed utterly at the expedition's stated goal; they never even set foot on Antarctica. Yet the courage and determination they displayed have become legendary.

In January 1915, before they could reach the Antarctic coast, their ship became trapped in the pack ice of the Weddell Sea. For nine months, they and their ship drifted helplessly with the ice. Then, in October 1915, currents and wind drove massive plates of ice in on the *Endurance*, crushing it. Members of the expedition were forced onto the ice floes surrounding the ship. They salvaged three lifeboats and whatever equipment and provisions they could extract from the tangled wreckage of the ship before it sank.

The ice became their home for the next six months. Attempts to move their provisions and gear dozens of miles over the ice to land were frustrated by gaps between floes and impassible ridges of ice blocks pushed up against each other by currents and winds. As their food supplies dwindled, they were forced to hunt whatever penguins and other sea life they could find. Although the men initially hoped that the drifting of the ice would carry them toward land, in time it became clear that they were drifting northward toward the open ocean. In late March, 1916, cracks began splitting the floe into ever-smaller pieces. On April 9, they were forced to take to their boats in an attempt to reach one of a few small islands off the Antarctic coast. For seven sleepless days and nights, they battled the sea ice and the ferocious weather of the Southern Ocean, finally landing on remote, uninhabited Elephant Island.

Shackleton and five others left that island eight days later in the most seaworthy of the boats, the *James Caird*, to get help at South Georgia Island, a staggering 650 miles away. Battling towering waves and weather that made navigational sightings almost impossible, they reached South Georgia 16 days later, only to come ashore on the uninhabited side of the island, opposite from the whaling stations they sought, and with the *Caird's* rudder gone.

With no choice but to travel on foot, Shackleton and two of the other men set out to cross the mountainous, glaciated, and uncharted interior of the island. On May 20, 1916, they walked into the whaling station at Stromness Bay. Although the three men on the other side of the island were rescued the next day with help from the whalers, it would be four months and three attempts before a Shackleton-led rescue party succeeded in making its way through the sea ice to

reach the remainder of the men at Elephant Island on August 30, 1916. Amazingly, after almost two years of danger and privation, not one of the expedition's 28 members had been lost.

Lessons in Leadership

Over and over during their voyage, the *Endurance* party faced what seemed to be fatal situations; yet each time, they beat the odds and survived. While some of their success was likely due to luck or providence, Shackleton's leadership is widely credited with making the essential difference. What lessons can be drawn from such a display of leadership?

Put your people first. In 1907, Shackleton led an attempt to be the first to the South Pole. He and his men trekked across hundreds of miles of the Antarctic continent to within 97 miles of the Pole. He knew that being the first to reach the Pole would have brought him everlasting fame and glory. But Shackleton and his men were weakening, and he knew that a final push to the Pole would put their lives in grave danger. He turned back. As strong as his desire to lead expeditions was, his sense of responsibility for his men was stronger.

In addition to being a principled choice, this decision gave those who served under him on the *Endurance* confidence that their lives would not be cavalierly sacrificed to meet the expedition's goal. Bowen McCoy uses his "Parable of the Sadhu," an account of a climbing trip he took in the Himalayas, to demonstrate the importance of clarifying objectives. Shackleton's action powerfully clarified the objectives of the *Endurance* expedition: crossing Antarctica was its nominal goal, but its fundamental goal was to ensure that the men survived.

This clarification, along with the knowledge of Shackleton's general experience in polar exploration, helped ensure confidence in, and the credibility of, Shackleton's leadership. It helped give Shackleton what John Gardner calls "the capacity to win and hold trust." The importance of these qualities was illustrated by the tragedy of the 1949 Mann Gulch fire in Montana, which was due in part to a lack of credibility in firefighting crew chief Wagner Dodge's leadership.

Be flexible in tactics. Although the fundamental goal of survival remained paramount, Shackleton wisely remained flexible in the tactics he chose to achieve that goal. In effect, Shackleton was an early practitioner of Kathleen Eisenhardt's "strategy as strategic decision-making." Although the vagaries of Antarctic weather bear no outward similarity to Eisenhardt's "high-velocity markets," both are unforgiving environments in which unpredictable change is the rule rather than the exception. Such environments demand a high degree of flexibility to adapt to changes beyond one's control. Once Shackleton realized that the *Endurance* was trapped in the ice, he resolved – and, despite his bitter disappointment, communicated matter-of-factly to his men – that their goal had changed from crossing Antarctica to wintering over on the ice. Later, as the ice broke up and left the men at the mercy of wildly unpredictable winds and currents, he announced as their landfall objective, in sequence, over the course of just three days: Clarence Island or Elephant Island; King George Island; Hope Bay (on the Antarctic mainland); and finally, Elephant Island.

Choose your people carefully — for character, not just competence. Shackleton knew how well the rigors of Antarctic exploration would test the spirit of his men. In selecting the expedition's members, he looked for technical qualifications, but he placed even greater emphasis on a positive attitude and a lighthearted, even whimsical nature. When he interviewed Reginald James, who became the expedition's physicist, he asked whether James could sing. Alexander Macklin, a surgeon, won a place on the expedition when, in response to Shackleton's inquiry about why Macklin wore glasses, Macklin replied, "many a wise face would look foolish without spectacles."

In addition, with over two dozen men to command, Shackleton recognized the value of having loyal, strong leaders and other men on which he knew he could rely. He chose as his second-in-command Frank Wild, a veteran of Antarctic exploration who had proven his mettle – and his compatibility with Shackleton – on Shackleton's 1907 expedition. Thomas Crean, Shackleton's second officer, had proven his strength and discipline in his service with Shackleton on a 1901 expedition. Shackleton knew the importance, illustrated by Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air," of building leadership and teamwork before it is needed. He also appreciated the need, as advocated by John Gardner and Jeffery Pfeffer, of not just leading by one's self, but ensuring leadership by others within the organization.

Sustain optimism in the face of adversity. Although everyone understands the importance of optimism, Shackleton recognized that being optimistic was most important when it was most difficult. When setbacks occurred, he had to remain outwardly optimistic, despite his own feelings, to prevent a growing despair among his men. He knew that such despair could, in the face of adversity, lead to dissension, mutiny, or simply giving up. Day after day, to counter the morale-sapping effect of the miserable cold, wetness, fatigue, hunger, and boredom of their life on the ice, he summoned the strength to remain optimistic – despite suffering the same conditions himself. Warren Bennis has noted that "all exemplary leaders are purveyors of hope and optimism." Shackleton himself stated that "optimism is true moral courage."

Shackleton knew that this same optimism was important in his men; as a result, he constantly sought to neutralize threats to morale. He noted that the moodiness of Frank Hurley, the expedition's photographer, was improved by flattery and by being included in consultations about the expedition's course, so he was sure to include Hurley in high-level meetings and often asked Hurley's opinion (he used well two techniques of interpersonal influence described by Pfeffer: ingratiation, and engaging others to enhance their commitment) . Similarly, he feared that the worrying of George Marston, the expedition's artist, would spread like an infection to the other men. Shackleton's insight was that the disposition of these men was distinct from, and sometimes more important than, their technical abilities.

In their tents on the ice, Shackleton ensured that the ability of such "bad actors" to erode morale was checked by having them reside in Shackleton's own tent or Wild's tent. Later, when Shackleton made plans to leave Elephant Island to seek help at South Georgia Island, he was careful to leave Wild in command of the group that remained ashore, and to bring along Harry McNeish, the expedition's carpenter, who had proven to be a particularly serious troublemaker.

Shackleton recognized that much of the task of remaining optimistic could be accomplished by keeping the men so busy that they would have little opportunity to brood over their predicament. To that end, he encouraged and took part in a variety of pastimes, such as card games and sing-alongs. Seeking to keep his men fit as well, he encouraged soccer matches and dogsled races on the ice. When he sensed that the mood of the men was darkening, he would use a holiday observance or some other pretense to justify extra rations of food to boost morale. Shackleton appreciated the importance of what John Gardner calls understanding the needs of followers – not just their physical needs, but their psychological needs as well.

Lead by example. Shackleton knew that actions persuaded more strongly than words. When he and his men were forced onto the ice by the destruction of their ship and faced the prospect of making their way over hundreds of miles of rough ice to land, Shackleton knew that they would need to travel as lightly as possible to survive. After calling the men together and explaining the situation, he pulled his gold coins out of his pockets and tossed them into the snow. He then took a Bible given him by the Queen of England, tore out two pages to keep, laid the Bible in the snow, and walked away.

Strive for equal treatment. Shackleton realized that, while it was essential that his authority and leadership not be questioned, he should not receive favorable treatment. He dutifully took his turn performing the most menial of chores. When the men took to the ice and drew for sleeping bags, Shackleton somehow ensured that he and the other senior officers drew wool bags, while the more junior men got the warmer fur bags.

The theme that runs through the above lessons is that *people matter*. Shackleton knew that equipment and supplies also mattered, and he paid careful attention to these aspects of the expedition (for example, he had domed tents specially designed and tested for the expedition). But at least equipment and supplies were somewhat predictable: tents provide shelter; wool warms; fresh meat prevents scurvy. Even the weather, though impossible to know precisely, followed discernable patterns and cycles.

Shackleton knew that his men were the most dangerously unpredictable element of the expedition. Although he was their commander, he knew that, once they were underway, he would not have the physical ability to enforce compliance with his commands. He knew that the morale and outlook of his men could mean the difference between life and death. As a result, he assembled and managed his expedition's members to instill and sustain a sense of optimism and determination no matter what adversities they faced.

Shackleton's shortcomings as a leader pale in comparison to his leadership strengths. Nevertheless, additional lessons may be drawn from things Shackleton might have done better.

Exercise caution in pursuit of the goal. Shackleton's desire to explore was driven partly by an aversion to the petty concerns of civilization. This attitude may have made him too eager to get the expedition underway. He departed South Georgia Island for Antarctica even though the whalers at South Georgia had informed him that the waters he was sailing into were more ice-choked than at any time in their memory. He knew the dangers of such waters; earlier adventurers had become trapped in the ice. Moreover, although the *Endurance* was outfitted

with a radio receiver, Shackleton did not obtain funds sufficient to purchase a transmitter with which they might have radioed for help (although, once they were entrapped in the ice, there was probably little that could have been done to aid them). Similarly, the gear they carried was designed mainly for trekking over dry land; knowing the potential for becoming ice-bound, Shackleton might have procured waterproof boots and other clothing.

Balance optimism with realism. Shackleton was not aloof, and he did not hesitate to ask for advice. Yet he so dreaded the prospect of losing control of his men and their morale that he mistook constructively offered help as pessimism and disloyalty. With the expedition camped on the ice and running dangerously short of food, Thomas Orde-Lees, the storekeeper, hunted and killed three penguins. Shackleton forbade bringing the penguin meat into camp because he felt that doing so would have been tantamount to admitting that their prospects for finding food in the near future were dim.

Other Observations on Leadership

The story of the *Endurance* expedition suggests other observations on leadership.

Leadership can be situation-specific. Although Shackleton excelled at leading men through arduous and perilous expeditions, he fared poorly when back in “civilization.” He was prone to indulge in ill-fated financial schemes and extramarital affairs. He longed to escape from the complexities and inanities of everyday life to the hard but clean and simple tasks of exploration, and admitted in a letter to his wife: “Sometimes I think I am no good at anything but being away in the wilds just with men.”

Leadership can be gained by experience. It is often said that leaders are born, not made. While some of Shackleton’s leadership qualities may well have been innate, the mistakes that he made – and the way Shackleton learned from those mistakes – shows that, as John Gardner has said, leadership can be learned. In addition, Shackleton was a student of other explorers’ experience. In particular, he admired and sought to emulate the skill, preparation, and attention to detail displayed by the Norwegian Roald Amundsen, most notably in Amundsen’s successful 1911 race to be the first to the South Pole.

Many of the lessons applied on the *Endurance* expedition were learned on earlier explorations of which Shackleton was a member. Some of these lessons – such as the danger of relying solely on the chain of command to lead, and the importance of treating men fairly – were general in nature. Others, such as the need to counter the psychological strain of the Antarctic silence and bleakness, were specific to polar exploration but no less important. Had Shackleton ventured forth on the *Endurance* expedition without learning these lessons, it is unlikely that the *Endurance* story would have had its happy ending.

Sources

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