1. Extreme leadership: lessons from Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance expedition

Cristina M. Giannantonio and Amy E. Hurley-Hanson

In 1914 Sir Ernest Shackleton set sail from London for Antarctica aboard the HMS Endurance. Having lost the race to the South Pole, Shackleton planned a polar expedition which would be the first to cross the Antarctic continent. Well aware of the dangers of polar expeditions, even Shackleton could not have predicted the extreme events that befell the Endurance Expedition. He earned his place in history not because he was the first to discover the South Pole, nor the first to cross Antarctica. Instead, Shackleton is remembered as a courageous leader who faced unfathomable challenges with optimism and conviction. Equally important, he is remembered as a compassionate leader who cared for his crew and rescued all 27 men who embarked on a remarkable journey into the unknown.

THE RACE TO THE SOUTH POLE

The Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration encompasses a 25-year time span beginning in 1897 with Adrien de Gerlache’s Belgian Antarctic Expedition and ending with Ernest Shackleton’s Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, of 1914–1917. During this time, 17 expeditions were commissioned from ten different countries. Nineteen explorers died on these expeditions, most from scurvy and malnutrition, but some froze to death, while others were swept overboard and lost at sea.

The most notable expeditions of this time were led by Roald Amundsen, Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton. They were three very different men, and although they earned their spot in history for three
very different reasons, they shared a common goal: to be the first to reach the South Pole.

The race was won by Amundsen. Amundsen and his men reached the South Pole on 14 December 1911: ‘We proceeded to the greatest and most solemn act of the whole journey – the planting of our flag’ (Amundsen, 1912, p. 445). Amundsen was an experienced polar explorer. He sailed aboard the *Belgica* under the leadership of Adrien de Gerlache. He is credited with being the first to traverse the Northwest Passage. Amundsen was planning an expedition to the North Pole when he learned that Frederick Cook and Robert Peary had preceded him. He changed his plans and launched the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition to the South Pole, sailing aboard the *Fram*, the Norwegian word for ‘forward’. Amundsen’s success in reaching the South Pole is credited to his excellent preparation skills (McCutcheon, 2008; Amundsen, 1927 [2008]). He understood the advantages of sled dogs and skis for traversing the ice (Amundsen, 1927 [2008]; Huntford, 2010); he used animal furs and skins for clothing instead of wool cloth; and he had no problem using the dogs to feed his crew (Amundsen, 1927 [2008]), having seen the dangers of malnutrition and scurvy on previous expeditions. Critics claim that unlike other polar expeditions, Amundsen devoted no time or efforts to scientific exploration or geographic surveying and mapping (Larson, 2011). These criticisms cannot detract from his accomplishments and he is the undisputed winner of the race to the South Pole (Huntford, 2010).

A little over a month behind Amundsen was Scott and the crew of the *Terra Nova*. The British Antarctic Expedition was Scott’s second attempt to reach the South Pole. He first attempted to reach the South Pole in 1901 as leader of the British National Antarctic Expedition sailing aboard the *Discovery*. Scott, Shackleton and Edward Wilson came within 530 miles of the South Pole before they were forced to turn back. Each of the men suffered from cold, exhaustion, malnutrition and scurvy. Shackleton’s health was severely compromised on the return journey and Scott ordered him sent back to England before the end of the expedition. His experiences on the *Discovery* expedition would later shape Shackleton’s planning, leading and organizing of his own expeditions to Antarctica.

Scott’s second attempt to reach the South Pole was the *Terra Nova* expedition of 1910–1913. Scott and his crew were well aware of Amundsen’s efforts to reach the South Pole at the same time. They were disappointed to arrive at the South Pole on 17 January 1912 and find the flag of Norway planted in the snow along with a letter left by Amundsen documenting his achievement. Scott and the other four men faced a roughly 800-mile return march to the ship. In contrast to Amundsen,
Scott believed that man-hauling was the most efficient way to travel in the Antarctic (Landis, 2001; MacPhee, 2010). Man-hauling involved harnessing a heavily laden sled to a person who then walks or trudges through the snow and ice pulling the sled unassisted by sled dogs. Man-hauling burned thousands of calories a day. Scott had underestimated the necessary food rations and his team was weakened by hunger and malnutrition on the return journey. Scott’s return journey was beset by a series of blizzards which forced the men to stop marching and shelter in a tent. Each delay further depleted their food rations and slowed their progress in reaching the supply depots that had been laid in preparation for the march to and from the South Pole. Edgar Evans was the first to perish on the return journey. He died about one month after reaching the South Pole. After taking shelter, the other four men became too weak to resume their march. Lawrence Oates sacrificed himself by leaving the tent and telling the men, ‘I’m just going outside and may be some time’ (from ‘Scott’s last expedition: the journals’, in Willis, 1999, p. 115). The frozen bodies of Scott, Edward Wilson and Henry Bowers were discovered months later.

One hundred years after his death, Scott’s legacy is still controversial. Considered a romantic tragic hero for decades, recent analyses suggest that Scott made several poor strategic decisions that led to his death and the deaths of his crew (Huntford, 2010). Despite having reached the South Pole, his insistence on man-hauling, using ponies instead of sled dogs and underestimating the caloric needs of the men contributed to their inability to face the extreme conditions they encountered in Antarctica.

Shackleton was the third polar explorer who wanted to be the first to reach the South Pole. His first expedition to Antarctica was under the direction of Scott on the *Discovery* expedition. Shackleton’s experiences under Scott taught him important lessons about the physical and psychological demands of polar exploration. His experience with Scott’s leadership style strongly influenced his views about leadership, morale, motivation and trust. Having been forced to turn back before reaching the South Pole on the *Discovery* expedition, Shackleton was eager to undertake his own expedition to Antarctica. The British Antarctic Expedition of 1907–1909, the *Nimrod* expedition, came within 100 miles of the South Pole. Aware that there were ample provisions for the journey to the pole, Shackleton recognized that the supplies were not enough to sustain the men on the return trip. Disappointed, but putting the lives of his crew first, Shackleton returned to the ship and began planning his next expedition.
With Amundsen’s victory in 1911, Shackleton set a new goal for himself. If he could not be the first to arrive at the South Pole, he would be the first explorer to cross the Antarctic continent. In 1914 Shackleton led 27 men aboard the *Endurance* to undertake the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Shackleton and his men would eventually spend three years in the Antarctic enduring extreme conditions and unimagined setbacks before he was able to rescue all 27 of his men in 1917.

**THE ENDURANCE EXPEDITION**

Shackleton’s plan for the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition was to send two ships to opposite sides of the Antarctic continent. The *Endurance* would land on the one side of the continent and the *Aurora* would land on the other side. Working toward the middle of Antarctica, the crew of the *Aurora* would lay the supply depots that would sustain Shackleton and his expedition team on the second half of their 1800-mile journey across the continent.

Shackleton carefully planned each element of the expedition. A skilled fund raiser, Shackleton raised private money to fund the expedition. The three lifeboats, the *James Caird*, the *Dudley Docker* and the *Stancomb-Wills*, were named after three of his largest donors. Shackleton carefully selected the crew. Over 5000 people applied for 56 positions as sailors and scientists, as well as a photographer, an artist, a cook, a carpenter and a doctor. Recognizing the importance of previous experience in polar exploration, Shackleton hired several men who had been with him on the *Nimrod* expedition. Others were hired because Shackleton felt their personality and temperament would contribute to the morale of the crew and sustain the men during the long, cold nights and many months without sunlight.

The *Endurance* departed London on 1 August 1914. Four months later, the *Endurance* departed the whaling station on South Georgia Island on 5 December 1914. She entered the pack ice a few days later on 7 December. By 18 January 1915, the *Endurance* had become trapped in the pack ice and Shackleton informed the men that they would remain on the ship and wait for the ice to crack and open so they could set out for land in the three salvaged lifeboats. The men carried out their scientific studies, attended to daily ship’s duties, trained the sled dogs, and kept up their spirits with games on the ice and aboard ship.

During this time, the pack ice continued to move and solidify, exerting pressure on the wooden ship. The ice broke through the hull of the ship and the ship began to list dangerously. On 27 October 1915, Shackleton
ordered the men to abandon ship and the crew prepared to live in tents on Antarctic ice floes in what became known as Ocean Camp. On 21 November 1915, the *Endurance* was crushed by the ice and sank into the sea. Shackleton turned to his men and said: ‘Now we’ll go home.’ After unsuccessfully attempting to drag the three lifeboats across the ice, Shackleton established Patience Camp on 29 December 1915. The men were patiently waiting for the ice to break so that they could set sail for nearby islands where Shackleton had previously laid food supplies.

The decision of when to set sail involved accurate timing and an element of guesswork. Shackleton knew that he needed to get the men off the rapidly melting and breaking up pack ice, but he had to be sure that the ice would not refreeze and crush the three tiny wooden lifeboats. The crew took to the sea on 9 April 1916. ‘They made a pitiable sight – three little boats, packed with the odd remnants of what had once been a proud expedition, bearing twenty-eight suffering men in one final, almost ludicrous bid for survival’ (Lansing, 1959, p. 160). They landed on Elephant Island two weeks later on 16 April.

Elephant Island was a desolate, harsh place with a small beach, violent winds, a massive glacier and a limited supply of food. Shackleton knew that the island could not sustain the men through another harsh winter. Weighing heavily on the minds of Shackleton and his crew was the realization that no one in the world knew where they were. Shackleton quickly decided that their only hope of rescue was to sail 800 miles across some of the world’s most dangerous waters and head for the whaling village on South Georgia Island. On 24 April 1916, Shackleton and a crew of five men set sail for South Georgia. He appointed Frank Wild, his second in command, as leader of the remaining crew who would await rescue on Elephant Island. Wild employed the same strategies that Shackleton had used earlier, assigning the men daily chores (Alexander, 1998), conducting scientific studies and practicing readiness drills. Wild maintained the men’s spirits and their unwavering faith in Shackleton by having the men practice breaking camp each day with the rallying cry: ‘Make haste! The boss may come today.’

The *James Caird* reached South Georgia on 10 May 1916. It was a harrowing and death-defying sea crossing that taxed the limits of Shackleton, his men and the lifeboat. Having landed on the opposite side of South Georgia from where the whaling village was located, Ernest Shackleton, Frank Worsley and Tom Crean climbed the glacier peaks and traversed the island to the opposite side. They arrived at Stromness whaling station on 20 May 1916. It would take three months and four attempts before Shackleton could break through the frozen pack ice and return to Elephant Island to rescue the other members of his crew. As his
lifeboat approached the shore, he called, ‘Are you all well?’ and received an answering shout of ‘We are all well, boss’ (Shackleton, 1919, p. 241). Not one man was lost.

LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Biographies of Ernest Shackleton consistently describe him as a charismatic person. ‘Shackleton, an Anglo-Irishman from the ranks of the merchant marine, was charismatic, mixing easily with both crew and officers’ (Alexander, 1998, p. 6). As this analysis will show, there is little doubt that Shackleton exhibited the characteristics of a charismatic leader. Charismatic leaders were first defined by Max Weber as ‘resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him’ (Weber, 1947, pp. 358–359).

While there are many leaders who have charismatic personalities (Judge et al., 2006) this does not mean that they engage in charismatic leadership. House’s (1977) theory of charismatic leadership included the attributions of the followers. House theorized that when leaders displayed certain behaviors their followers attributed extraordinary abilities to these leaders and were motivated to follow them. They are able to articulate their vision to their followers and set high expectations for their followers (Bullock, 2007).

In examining the Endurance expedition, it makes sense that Shackleton would emerge as a charismatic leader because many researchers theorize that crisis situations are when charismatic leadership tends to emerge (Rogelberg, 2007; Bass and Bass, 2008). The extreme situations Shackleton and his crew found themselves in were the right venue for charismatic leadership to emerge. Researchers have thoroughly explored the characteristics that charismatic leaders display. In this chapter the analysis is based on the framework provided by Conger and Kanungo (1998). Their research identified four distinct characteristics: articulating and possessing a vision; being willing to take risks to achieve their vision; exhibiting sensitivity to followers’ needs; and demonstrating novel behavior.

Shackleton repeatedly displayed all four of these characteristics throughout the Endurance expedition. He had a very clear vision of what he wanted to accomplish. Prior to launching the Endurance expedition, Shackleton’s goal was to be the first explorer to reach the South Pole. Once that race was lost, Shackleton turned his attention to being the first to cross the Antarctic continent. His previous experiences on Antarctic
expeditions crystallized his focus and allowed him to articulate his vision in a clear manner that would allow for success instead of failure. Shackleton was never vague about the importance of the *Endurance* expedition, and he set clear goals for what the expedition would accomplish and how those goals would be accomplished. Shackleton’s ability to articulate his vision and generate interest in the *Endurance* expedition is evidenced by his success in generating funds for the expedition and the astounding number of applicants who applied for the 56 positions aboard the two ships.

Shackleton took risks to achieve his mission since polar exploration, by its very nature, is a risky undertaking with much uncertainty. Expeditions to Antarctica were particularly risky and extreme. ‘The coldest, stormiest and most remote area on the planet, the Antarctic can be an almost unimaginably hostile environment’ (Mulvaney, 2003, p. 305). Shackleton was able to persuade his crew to take risks when their options were limited and their chances of survival were slim. His decision to sail to South Georgia in a wooden lifeboat to find help is one example of the risky behaviors he took to rescue his crew.

Shackleton exhibited sensitivity to his followers’ needs throughout the *Endurance* expedition. Before the *Endurance* set sail for Antarctica, Shackleton planned for months to make sure that every need of his men would be taken care of. He carefully calculated caloric needs and provided ample food stores to prevent the men from becoming malnourished and developing scurvy. He outfitted the crew with the best equipment available at the time, one example being sleeping bags lined with reindeer fur (Landis, 2001). He also planned activities that would meet the crew’s needs for relaxation and maintain their morale under physically demanding conditions. He scanned the environment constantly in his preparations. He tried to anticipate every contingency that could occur on the expedition and planned for his men’s needs under those circumstances. Shackleton met his men’s needs in thoughtful, selfless ways as well. Worsley (1931, p. 27) recounts an example: ‘At dawn the next morning, Shackleton and Wild, like good Samaritans, made hot tea for all hands. This they took along to the inmates of the various tents.’ He was known to provide his mittens to Frank Hurley when Hurley’s were lost; he met the advance team who had been sent to survey the terrain with cups of hot milk; and he spent hours talking with the men, telling stories and at one point engaging the men in discussions about their next trip to Antarctica.

Shackleton was well known for exhibiting novel behaviors during the *Endurance* expedition. During Shackleton, Worsley and Crean’s traverse of South Georgia Island to reach the whaling station the men found
themselves at the top of a glacier with nightfall rapidly approaching. Shackleton knew the men could not survive a night on the glacier so he proposed that the three of them form a human sled and slide to the bottom of the glacier. ‘Worsley and Crean were stunned – especially for such an insane solution to be coming from Shackleton’ (Lansing, 1959, p. 266). Worsley (1931) estimated that they had traveled 3000 feet in under three minutes. This unexpected and novel behavior had saved the men from freezing to death on the glacier.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Several authors have written about the leadership lessons that can be learned from Shackleton and the Endurance expedition. ‘He is a model of great leadership and, in particular, a master of guidance in crisis’, Margot Morrell and Stephanie Capparell state in their book Shackleton’s Way: Leadership Lessons from the Great Antarctic Explorer (2001, p. 1). Morrell and Capparell suggest that modern leaders should turn to Shackleton’s example for guidance in creating a spirit of camaraderie, getting the best from each individual, and leading effectively in a crisis.

In Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton’s Antarctic Expedition Dennis Perkins and his co-authors (2000 [2012]) offer readers ten strategies for overcoming adversity. Perkins looks to leadership success among those groups that ‘have been to the outer limits of human endurance’ (Perkins et al. 2000 [2012], p. xxi). He calls this place The Edge and argues that ‘by understanding the things that work when survival is at stake’ (ibid.), one can learn to lead under other conditions. Perkins considers Shackleton’s Endurance expedition an example of leading at The Edge and offers ten strategies that are necessary to successfully lead at The Edge. These strategies include instilling optimism and self-confidence, mastering conflict and never giving up.

In drawing our own conclusions about the leadership lessons that can be learned from Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance expedition we have chosen to focus on five lessons that may be of use to leaders who are confronted with today’s versions of extreme situations. They are offered in the form of a packing list. We believe that these are the essential items that leaders should include when venturing into extreme situations.
Leadership Lesson 1: Pack Courage

The polar explorers were a courageous group. They faced extreme conditions that were far worse than those they had encountered in previous expeditions. This does not mean that they were not afraid. There were several times when Shackleton feared they would not survive another day. Yet they never lost their courage to forge ahead and meet the challenges that lay before them. Today’s leaders are reminded to face the economic and environmental challenges confronting their organizations with courage and the confident belief that these conditions are surmountable.

Leadership Lesson 2: Pack Curiosity

Virtually every polar expedition was launched in part because of the curiosity of the expedition leader. The men who applied for positions on the Endurance expedition ventured into an unknown environment to find what had not yet been discovered. Virtually all of the polar expeditions that were launched during the Heroic Age of polar expeditions were scientific expeditions. Today’s leaders are encouraged to tap into their own curiosity and lead their teams into unknown environments to explore new product lines, technologies and markets.

Leadership Lesson 3: Pack Nourishment

History illustrates that the need for proper food and nourishment could be the difference between life and death on a polar expedition. Shackleton turned back less than 97 miles from the South Pole because he knew there were not enough provisions to ensure the team’s survival on the return journey. Additionally, Shackleton understood the importance of keeping his crew’s minds and spirits nourished throughout the Endurance expedition. Not only was the Endurance well stocked with pemmican, wine and special treats to keep the men well nourished for the physical demands of their tasks, Shackleton also brought music and books on the expedition to maintain the men’s spirits during the long, cold winter they spent on the ice. Frank Hurley, the official expedition photographer, took numerous photos of the men performing skits aboard ship, playing football on the ice, and competing in the dog sled races that Shackleton organized. Today’s leaders are cautioned not to neglect the physical, psychological and spiritual needs of their employees. While the perquisites and lifestyle benefits offered by Google, Yahoo and other high-tech
companies appear to consider the needs of their employees, organizations need to remember that nourishment means more than free cafeteria food.

**Leadership Lesson 4: Pack Optimism**

Years before psychologists began to study the effects of positivity (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000); Shackleton knew the importance of remaining optimistic and fostering optimism in his crew. After the loss of the ship Shackleton made one of his most famous speeches, assuring the men ‘that by hard effort, clean work, and loyal cooperation, they could make their way to land’ (Worsley, 1931, p. 22). While Shackleton and a crew of six sailed to South Georgia to find help, Wild, second in command of the *Endurance* expedition, helped the men to remain optimistic with his daily reminder that the boss may return today. In an uncertain economy the importance of optimism cannot be stated enough. Leaders need to provide their followers with a realistic assessment of their current difficulties, as well as encourage them to remain optimistic and avoid falling victim to pessimism and doubt.

**Leadership Lesson 5: Pack Your Compass**

In the early 1900s Shackleton and the crew of the *Endurance* navigated using the stars, the horizon and a sextant. As they sailed across some of the world’s most dangerous oceans and seas, they encountered storm conditions and ocean currents that pulled them off course and forced them to change direction several times. They were not always sure what their current location was, but Shackleton always knew where they wanted to end up. Today’s leaders are encouraged to pack their own metaphorical compass and to have a clear vision of where they want to lead their companies. In today’s fast-moving world leaders must recognize that the path to success might take longer than originally planned, may sometimes veer off course and is likely to involve extreme conditions. As Shackleton and the *Endurance* expedition illustrate, even if you do not always know where you are, never lose sight of where you want to end up.

**CONCLUSION**

The story of Sir Ernest Shackleton and the *Endurance* expedition has provided chief executive officers (CEOs), business students and management scholars with leadership lessons that are relevant a century after his
expedition was mounted. The tale of the *Endurance* is an amazing story of courage, endurance and the human spirit. The extreme conditions experienced by Shackleton and his men during their three-year journey laid the foundation for Shackleton to demonstrate his charismatic leadership skills.

First-person accounts of the expedition can be found in *South*, Shackleton’s (1919) personal description of the fate of his ship and its 27 crew members and *Endurance*, Sir Alfred Lansing’s (1959) romantic retelling of the expedition based on interviews with surviving crew members and a content analysis of their personal diaries and expedition logs. The lessons to be learned from the *Endurance* expedition are not limited to leaders. The fortitude, optimism and trust exhibited by the crew of the *Endurance* also offer lessons for effective follower and team behavior. Shackleton’s *Endurance* expedition provides management practitioners, scholars and educators with important lessons drawn from a most exciting time in history.

REFERENCES


14

Extreme leadership


