

## Leadership

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# Enduring Qualities: Lessons from History

The notion we can learn from history is not novel. While the world around us is constantly changing, certain human qualities—which were important to our ancestors in enabling them to organize and develop society—are no less significant in the ordering of today’s world.

In this context the characteristics found in the personal qualities of history’s successful leaders can teach us a lot about the value and meaning of inspirational leadership today. A historical figure whose exemplary leadership skills provide a compelling example of this is the early 20th century Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton.

In August 1914, Shackleton and his crew of 27 departed on a polar mission to cross the Antarctic, a journey of some 1800 miles, by foot. When the expedition’s ship *Endurance* became trapped, frozen in ice, the crew waited 10 months (four of which were the merciless months of the Antarctic winter), hoping to set sail once again in Spring. Their hopes were dashed when the *Endurance* was crushed by ice, leaving abandonment of the ship as their only option. A further five months were spent living on the Antarctic ice before setting sail for Elephant Island. Their elation upon touching dry land, for the first time in over a year, was short lived, however, when they realized that the Island offered no chance of rescue.

From there, Shackleton and five others made their way toward South

Georgia, in what has been described as one of the greatest open-boat journeys in history. In a journey that had never before been accomplished, Shackleton and two other men then trekked 17 miles across South Georgia toward Stromness whaling station. A few days following their arrival, they headed straight back to Elephant Island to rescue the remaining stranded men. Shackleton succeeded in transforming a failed mission into a feat of survival against all odds.

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Shackleton secured the survival of every single member of the crew, having guided them through nearly two years of unimaginable hardship. The skills that shaped his ability as a leader are, however, not particular to the extreme situation in which he found himself. The fundamental qualities he demonstrated would mold excellent leaders in any field of life, from sports to politics.

His approach can be roughly dissected into key skills that create basic and general guidelines for success in any leadership role.

Perhaps the first important step that Shackleton took, as a successful leader,

was to set himself clear objectives, then focus all his efforts on achieving those objectives. His goal at the outset, though a formidable task, was simply defined: to traverse the Antarctic by foot.

Despite careful planning, Shackleton’s exploration faced apparently unsurpassable problems. With failure looming, Shackleton demonstrated another fundamental skill for effective leadership, namely the ability to adapt. When it was clear that his mission to cross the Antarctic was not going to succeed, Shackleton responded and reshaped his goal: “the task is to reach land with all the members of the expedition...A man must shape himself to a new mark directly the old one goes to ground.”

He devoted himself fully to this task and found new solutions as each attempt to save his team failed. Upon his arrival in South Georgia, he made no less than three failed attempts to salvage the rest of the stranded crew, succeeding only on his fourth effort.

Shackleton was willing to take the risks requisite of a leader to progress forward. Just as a business leader needs an entrepreneurial spirit for his company to succeed in a competitive market, so Shackleton needed an ability to take risks to face unpredictable incidents. His decision to embark upon the perilous journey to South Georgia is just one example of the gambles that he took.

Risk-taking, however, should not be equated with recklessness. His risk-taking

was done in the absence of effective alternatives. Shackleton created an ambience of optimism but he never ignored reality and was open and honest to his men about the situation they faced. This not only made Shackleton an effective decision-maker, it generated the crew's faith in him.

The survival of every member of the expedition was largely attributable to the team-based environment under which the crew and Shackleton operated. Shackleton helped install this atmosphere through his understanding of the men with whom he was working. Unremitting compassion toward every member of the team gained Shackleton the respect and the trust central to an ability to lead without any serious dissidence.

As his daughter has remarked, "leadership was a two-way thing for him. It wasn't a case of men following him just because he was the leader. He was devoted to them. It was a reciprocal, very close relationship."

Shackleton promoted equality among his men and no man was favoured above another; scientists and seamen alike would scrub the floors of the ship. He focused on uniting the team, building morale, and inspiring the crew through football, nightly singalongs, and highly organized and competitive dog sleigh races. As Captain Frank Worsley commented in his diary, "No matter how bad things were, he somehow inspired us with the feeling that he could make things better."

As a general rule, the respect Shackleton gained as a result of his comradeship with the men rendered obsolete the need for any formal discipline. He did, however, possess a calm yet assertive side that resolved problems of conflict swiftly and without public humiliation or show. When John Vincent was reported to be bullying others, Shackleton took him aside to his cabin for a short discussion following which Vincent reportedly left "humbled." This approach ensured that Shackleton's position as a leader was

respected and not encroached upon, without the effect of isolating Shackleton's second role as an equal member of the team.

One of Shackleton's most effective methods in creating a supportive team was by leading through example; he helped breed an environment where everyone co-operated and looked out for one another. For instance, when the *Endurance* was abandoned, Shackleton dropped some of his own gold coins and his Bible in the snow as an illustration of the need to abandon the most precious belongings; the other men followed suit.

The skills that Shackleton demonstrated as a leader during nearly two years in the most severe circumstances can be roughly summarized as a healthy combination of focus, optimism, grounding in reality, adaptability, assertiveness, compassion, understanding of human nature, and ability to lead by example. If these skills helped secure the survival of 28 men through unimaginable hardship, they must be of value in more modest modern-day situations.

They are not qualities confined to the Arctic explorer with his adventurous spirit; they are rather fundamental human qualities relevant to any leadership position. ▲

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