

Ernest Shackleton: Model for Leadership

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Sir Ernest Shackleton has been called “the greatest leader that ever came on God’s earth bar non”, after saving the lives of the 27 men stranded with him on an ice floe in the Antarctic for almost two years.

I spent 18 years in the British army leading men on operations, with ten of those years spent in the Special Air Services (SAS). So when my wife and I took a trip to Antarctica last December, my interest in the man sparked even more.

I was interested to know what exactly these amazing leadership skills were that classed Shackleton as a true master of men. Were they the kind of skills that were only relevant during the time of the Empire, with all the rigid class structures that entailed? Would his leadership style be as effective in today’s world?

Standing on the bridge of the Russian icebreaker, I watched the first icebergs appear on the horizon and realized Shackleton and I had two things in common: we were both 40 when we made this Antarctic trip and we were both mostly famous for a failed expedition. His to be the first to cross Antarctica, mine to destroy Scud missiles during the 1991 Gulf War. Shackleton’s mission failed, but he managed to get all his crew out alive. My mission failed, and three of the eight man patrol I was leading died, one of gunshot wounds, two of hypothermia. Four, including myself, were captured on the Iraqi/Syrian border and only one escaped.

Antarctica is an extraordinary place. Beautiful and bleak, at the same time. There’s complete silence, so you’re filled with a sense of total isolation. I was there in the summer and had the added comfort of being able to return to my ship. How Shackleton survived two winters there and kept everyone going is absolutely incredible.

In August 1914, Shackleton and his team set sail aboard the *Endurance*, bound for Antarctica. But in the treacherous waters of the Weddell Sea, their ship became trapped in the ice pack. For the next ten months they waited for the ice to break. It didn’t. Instead, it crushed the ship in its floes, leaving the men shipwrecked 1,200 miles from civilization.

Stranded on the ice, the men endured the worse conditions. Temperatures so cold, they could hear the water freeze. The cold was so severe it froze their clothes and their sleeping bags solid. Their tents were so frail, they weren’t even waterproof. They suffered frostbite, even having to perform an operation to cut off one crew member’s toes. The winters were perpetually dark, while the summer months the men awoke every morning in pools of cold water as the ice melted around them. They existed on a daily diet of penguin – so long as they were able to catch them – which left them weak and malnourished.

Eventually, when the ice began to break up beneath them, they were forced to take to their three small lifeboats and survive on the sea – which they did for four months. They ran into a frightening storm and had to fight for their lives for almost a week, close to death with 50ft waves crashing onto the boats. They finally reached the promised land of Elephant Island only to find it completely inhospitable. The crew spent the next few months living under two upturned lifeboats.

Finally, Shackleton and five of his men set off in one of the patched-up lifeboats and sailed 800 miles over impossibly stormy seas in an attempt to reach a whaling station in South Georgia. By some miracle they made it, only to find they still had to cross a mountain range

before arriving at the station. Incredibly, they managed that, too. Shackleton then returned to Elephant Island and rescued the rest of the crew. Amazingly, every one of them survived.

Having seen the terrain, witnessed the storms, and read the interviews and extracts from the crew members' diaries, it soon became clear to me that the survival of the entire crew was due to Shackleton's outstanding leadership skills.

In order to lead a group of men in a crisis situation, Shackleton realized that the best way to get them to follow you is by personal example. In doing so, you build a strong team of equals who are happy to put their trust in you. During the long months stranded on the ice, Shackton mixed easily with the crew and officers alike. This was highly unusual for the times. He took little notice of hierarchy, so every man was able to feel he was equally important. In fact, if any distinction had to be made, it was the officers who came last. When there weren't enough good sleeping bags to go around, it was Shackleton and the officers who took the inferior bags. When the men arrived half dead after their treacherous sea journey to Elephant Island, the crew collapsed at 3am totally exhausted. It was Shackleton who took it upon himself to take the first watch to ensure the boats remained safe.

Shackleton's new management style is still being used today. We use it in the SAS where we also believe in treating our men as equals. If you're out in the field, the troopers are always fed first, while the officers come last in all aspects of welfare.

Shackleton further instilled a feeling of equality by consulting his men and listening to their views on a proposed plan of action. In the SAS we call this a Chinese Parliament and operate the same procedure. Each man in the patrol is asked for his input when a major, often life-threatening, decision needs to be made. Each view is valuable; it means everyone shares in the responsibility for the mission's success and this is also good for morale. However, once their contribution has been made, the patrol commander makes the final decision on which course of action to follow.

The second skill that Shackleton possessed in bucketloads was flexibility. He had an outstanding ability to define goals, then redefine them when the situation called for it. For example, when the Endurance first set off, Shackleton's mission was to be the first to cross the Antarctic. When the ship was destroyed in the ice – and he could only watch her sink into the sea – Shackleton didn't weep and wail over the loss of his life's ambition. He immediately sets to work on his new mission – getting his men home safely. One mission fails, so he simply moves on to the next.

At the end of Shackleton's survival story, he and his crew of five had to climb a mountain range before reaching the whaling station on South Georgia. Frozen and exhausted after battling against the storm, they spent hours climbing the first mountain. When they reached the top, they could see that it was impossible to get down the other side. Immediately they set a new goal. They simply retraced their steps and started up the next mountain. At the top of that one, they find this to be impassable, too. Again, they retraced their steps and started on the next one. They did this twice more before they found a safe way down. It is this flexibility, this refocusing of goals, without wasting time wallowing in self-pity, that I find so inspiring.

During my mission in the Gulf War, when I commanded the Bravo Two Zero patrol, our planned escape route was to be picked up by military helicopter. However, once we landed to the north west of Baghdad we realized this was going to be impossible as there was far too much enemy activity in the area. We had to be flexible and reassess. We decided, instead, to make the long march to Syria on foot.

The third outstanding talent Shackleton had was great sense of optimism. Not only did this enable him to keep going in the toughest conditions but it inspired others to do the same. Throughout all his experiences, for almost two years, Shackleton never once lost faith in his ability to survive. He once said that: “Optimism is true moral courage” – and I think he is right. This optimism was often expressed in small ways which made a world of difference. When morale was running low and food becoming scarce, Shackleton would order extra rations to offer comfort to the crew just when it was needed. This simple act would reinforce his conviction that they needn’t worry too much about food supplies, as they were sure to be getting out of that situation soon. Shackleton’s optimism also translates into his energy and enthusiasm – always coming up with plans, encouraging the men to have a laugh and finding the slightest excuse for celebration.

At the end of the journey every man survived – not only in good health but also in good spirits – all due to Shackleton’s leadership. ‘The Boss’, as he was known by his team, always appeared calm, confident and positive and it was these attributes that inspired each man to look for the same in himself.

I can’t say we’re all born optimists in the SAS but one thing’s for sure – you need a degree of optimism just to try for selection. Only six percent of would-be candidates get through the rigorous six-month process. Optimism certainly features in our leadership styles as it’s seen to be vitally important for morale. In the field, the three most important things to get through to the men are ammunition, food and the post. Ammunition definitely comes first, but food and letters come a very close second as news from loved ones makes a huge difference to morale.

Returning from my Antarctic trip, I have no doubt that Shackleton’s most successful leadership skills are timeless.

One of the most important questions asked of SAS commanders is: “Would you follow this man?” Meaning, would you be happy to follow this man if he were in command of your patrol? If Shackleton was the man in question, my answer would certainly be “yes”.