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Executive Search & Board Advisory

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM SIR DOUGLAS MAWSON



" In no department can a leader spend time more than in the selection of the men who are to accomplish the work " Sir Douglas Mawson

Sir Douglas Mawson was one of the most courageous and adventurous men Australia has produced. Through his determination and efforts he added to the Commonwealth an area in Antarctica almost as large as Australia itself.

He was born in Yorkshire, England May 1882 and at the age of four his parents migrated to Sydney. He was educated at the University of Sydney and played a leading role in founding the Science Society. His great interest was geology and in 1902 he joined expeditions to survey the land around Mittagong and later the New Hebrides Islands. In 1905 he was appointed Lecturer in Mineralogy and Petrology at the University of Adelaide which he served in various capacities until his death.

In 1907 a tour of the Snowy Mountains became his first experience of a glacial environment with an ascent of Mount Kosciusko and the beginning of his interest in Antarctica.

At this time Britain, Germany and Sweden were involved in Antarctica, Ernest Shackleton was determined to reach the South Pole and in 1907 lead a party with Mawson joining as physicist and surveyor of the expedition.

They reached the continent in February 1908 and Shackleton decided that Mawson, Professor Edgeworth David and Dr Forbes MacKay should travel 1800km to the Magnetic Pole. During the expedition they met very bad surfaces and some blizzards and they had underestimated the distance to the Magnetic Pole. While they reached their destination all were in poor condition with only seal

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meat to eat. They struggled back over hundreds of kilometres of ice caps and at last saw their ship, the Nimrod, less than a kilometre away when suddenly Mawson fell six metres down a crevasse. David and MacKay were too weak to pull him out and they had to get a ship party to rescue Mawson.

However Mawson was now enchanted with Antarctica and in 1911 led an expedition sailing in the Aurora from Hobart to Macquarie Island where he established a radio station. His intention was to survey the ice plateau to the west of the Magnetic Pole which he had mapped a few years earlier. They established two huts and in November when the weather conditions permitted distant journeys to be undertaken, Mawson chose Lieutenant Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz as his companions. He also decided to use dogs as it was anticipated that the trek would be arduous. On 29 November crossing the Ninnis Glacier, Mawson was leading the dogs and two sledges when he saw the back sledge vanish and the other being dragged back into a crevasse. Eventually after great effort they managed to haul it to the surface, but it was an ominous start to what was to become one of the most terrible journeys from which anyone has returned alive.

On December 13 again Ninnis and his dog team disappeared. Mawson wrote, "I hastened back...and I came to a gaping hole in the surface about 11ft wide. The lid of the crevasse had broken in...I leaned over and shouted into the dark depths below. No sound came back but the moaning of a dog caught on a ledge just visible 150 feet below." Ninnis had perished and most of the food went with him.

Mawson and Mertz found that they had only ten days' supply of provisions left and nothing at all for the dogs. The outlook was grim as the following day they turned back 500km from their base. Their only adequate supply was of kerosene so they killed the dogs one by one and boiled the meat until the gristle and paws were soft enough to eat. On Christmas Day they still had 250km to go and three days later they ate their last dog.

Mertz became ill and despite Mawson's insistence that he take the larger share of meat his condition worsened and he died January 7. Mawson was alone, on foot, 160km from safety, without food and beset by blizzards. He pushed slowly on, but then stumbled into a crevasse and found himself swinging on a rope from his sledge which was jammed above him. Unbelievably with tremendous effort he somehow managed to climb to the surface.

He had no crampons for the slippery slopes, the soles of his feet became detached; he struggled within 8km of the hut but a fierce gale below, forcing him to take shelter in a cave for more than a week. On 8 February 1912 it became a little calmer and he made a last dash and finally reached safety. The five men in the hut gave him a great welcome, however the ship had left only that morning and they were forced to remain in Antarctica for another year.

In 1929 he undertook a further expedition and made important discoveries in oceanography and explored the area which today forms the base Mawson, named in his honour. Largely as a result of Mawson's work, Britain made over to Australia her claims in Antarctica and in 1936 the present Australian sector was annexed. He was knighted in 1914 and died at age seventy-six honoured with a state funeral.

Gregory Robinson, Managing Partner, "Mawson was known to be fair-minded, courteous and encouraging to everyone he dealt with, Against horrific odds his spirit and character remains as an inspiration and example to all adventurers, entrepreneurs and businesspeople who are up against it. In the face of a frozen wilderness and death as his companion he endured and came through, a great lesson for us all."

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