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WAS SHACKLETON THE GREATEST LEADER IN THE LAST 200 YEARS?



" Superhuman effort isn't worth a damn unless it achieves results "

Sir Ernest Shackleton

How do we define great leadership?

There has been endless debate as to the defining qualities that encompass great leadership. Trying to whittle it down to a small number of characteristics is difficult, as leadership is an art. Everyone has their own leadership style. Some start off better leaders than others, while others evolve into leaders over time. However, there are a number of key themes of leadership no matter the style or individual.

- 1. Shared Vision:** The leader and the group must be working on a mutually agreed upon goal. This is the opposite of a dictatorship, which forces others to work towards a goal they may or may not support.
- 2. Mobilising and Empowering Others:** Effective Leaders must enable others to do things, as well as get them to do it. However, what is most critical is that followers are both able and willing. Leader's inspire people to want to act, rather than being forced to do so.
- 3. Resilience:** An effective leader can withstand disruptive shocks, manage complexity and recover from tough times.

- 4. Morale:** It is important to remember that an effective leader is not just responsible for a group completing the task, but also responsible for the team's enjoyment and their feelings towards others on the team and the work they are undertaking.

What is important to note is these leadership qualities are not defined by a person's position in the group, Ernest Shackleton appreciated that it was his actions, rather than his title, which were most important in gaining the respect of his men.

Who was Ernest Shackleton?

Ernest Shackleton was born on 15th February 1874 in County Kildare, Ireland, to Anglo-Irish parents. He grew up in London, where his family moved when he was a young boy. Despite the urging of his father to follow in his footsteps and go to medical school, Shackleton joined the merchant navy. In 1901, he joined British Naval Officer and explorer Robert Falcon Scott on a trek to the South Pole that placed them closer to the pole than anyone else had previously achieved. The trip for Shackleton was cut short, as he fell seriously ill and returned home.

In 1908, he returned to the Antarctic as the leader of his own expedition, on the ship 'Nimrod'. During the expedition, his team climbed Mount Erebus, made many scientific discoveries and set a record for coming closer to the South Pole than any expedition had before. In 1914, Shackleton made his third trip to the Antarctic with the ship 'Endurance', named after his family motto, "Fortitudine Vincimus – by endurance we conquer", planning to cross Antarctica via the South Pole. Early in 1915, Endurance became trapped in the ice, ultimately forcing Shackleton and his 27-man crew to vacate the ship and set up camp on the floating ice. After the ship sank later that year, he and his crew crowded into three small boats and made their way to Elephant Island. However, there was little hope of rescue, as the Island was uninhabited. Taking five crew members, Shackleton went to find help. They spent sixteen days crossing 1,300 km of ocean to reach South Georgia. Shackleton and two of the crew then trekked across the island to reach the whaling station. The remaining men from the Endurance were rescued in August 1916. No one from the expedition died.

Shackleton's fourth expedition aimed to circumnavigate the Antarctic continent but, on the 5th January 1922, Shackleton died of a heart attack off South Georgia. He was buried on the island at the request of his wife.

Why does his story still resonate today?

Ernest Shackleton was not the first person to reach the South Pole, that honour belongs to Roald Amundsen, who beat the British explorer Robert Scott in 1911. Shackleton's aim was greater, he wanted to transverse Antarctica, but ultimately, he failed to achieve his aim. However, Shackleton's thrilling story still captivates us, and his legend has endured. It is a story of optimism in the face of death and ingenuity in the face of scarcity. His honest and self-sacrificing leadership and his consideration for the well-being of his crew means his life continues to be of relevance today.

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What makes Shackleton's story stand out compared to other great leaders in history is the intimacy of the various accounts that we now have of the Endurance expedition, from not only Shackleton himself, but various members of his crew. All accounts focus on his people-centred style of leadership. Although his initial legacy was outshone by Robert Scott, Shackleton gradually overtook him in the public's esteem. Away from his expeditions, Shackleton's life was restless and unfulfilled. He launched business ventures that failed to prosper, and he died heavily in debt. However, as an explorer, he became an exemplar for bringing order from chaos and the archetype of a non-anxious leader. He was a man of action, not oratory and is the epitome of leading by example.

Shared Vision

Shackleton understood the importance of a common goal and the importance of having people within his team who had the right attitude. Shackleton was clear in his vision from the start and only wanted those who shared it to join him on his expeditions. To attract the right people for the difficult journey that awaited him on his ship, the Endurance, he posted an advert which read "Men wanted for a hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success." The men he attracted to carry out this mission were all volunteers, who shared a common, nationalistic vision. He was authentic in his proposal as he only wanted like-minded individuals who shared a common purpose; personal fulfilment from extreme hardship. Shackleton was hiring for attitude!

His recruiting techniques were highly subjective, practically intuitive and eccentric. Shackleton could appraise a man by his interpersonal skills. Shackleton intuitively knew that personality was more critical than skill, saying "their science or their seamanship weighs little with me against the kind of chaps they are". He hired biologist Leonard Hussey because he "looked funny" and played the banjo. Shackleton was equally shrewd when it came to choosing his official photographer. His chosen man proved courageous and hard as nails. "Frank Hurley is a warrior with his camera and would go anywhere or do anything to get a picture," said First Officer Lionel Greenstreet.

Mobilising and Empowering Others

Shackleton understood that putting the needs of his team before himself, was not simply for altruistic purposes, as his constant selfless actions had the effect of forging the deepest loyalty. When Shackleton prepared to leave on the voyage to South Georgia, he gathered his men and asked for those who were willing to accompany him to step forward. Frank Worsley, the ship's captain, recalled the scene, "the moment he ceased speaking every man volunteered...On the island was still safety for some weeks. The boat journey promised even worse hardships than those through which we had but recently passed. Yet so strong was the men's affection for Shackleton, so great was their loyalty to him, that they responded as though they had not undergone any of the experiences that so often destroy those sentiments. They were as eager to accompany him as they had been in August 1914, the day upon which we had sailed nearly two years before."

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The crew responded positively to Shackleton's informal leadership style; he treated senior officers and seaman as equals, pitching in on all the menial tasks and prioritizing his men's comfort above his own. When Hurley lost his mittens when the endurance sunk, Shackleton gave him his own and suffered frostbite as a consequence. Shackleton genuinely cared for his men and they responded in kind.

Resilience

Shackleton exemplified resilient leadership. Shackleton would face hardships that would almost defy belief, and it was his iron-clad resilience that allowed him to keep going. The moment the Endeavour sunk, taking its relative safety, shelter and stores with it, the mission of Shackleton's expedition changed. He announced a new goal "Ship and stores have gone ... so now we'll go home." Shackleton and his men spent six months camped on the ice.

When the ice had melted enough they set sail for Elephant Island, 60 miles away. It took them seven days in small rowing boats battling the elements. When the men finally arrived, they danced along the beach and let the pebbles dribble through their hands. They believed they would be able to spend the winter on the island and be picked up by whalers in the spring. However, Shackleton realised there would not be enough food on the island to last that long; instead travelling 1300km to the whaling stations of South Georgia. Shackleton chose five men to accompany him and takes off to their last hope of salvation. It took them sixteen days to make it to South Georgia. However their journey was far from over. The whaling stations were on the other side of the island, and it required an overland journey to reach them.

Wearing threadbare clothing, with wood screws from the lifeboat fastened to their boot soles for traction, Shackleton, Worsley and Second Officer Tom Crean set out to march across South Georgia. For 36 sleepless hours, the men marched in search of whaling stations, stopping only for meals. On the morning of May 20th, 1916, they heard the whistle of the whaling station. Shackleton recalled "Never had any one of us heard sweeter music. It was the first sound created by outside human agency that had come to our ears since we left Stromness Bay in December 1914. That whistle told us that men were living near, that ships were ready, and that within a few hours we should be on our way back to Elephant Island to the rescue of the men."

He made three attempts to sail back to Elephant Island, but each time was forced to turn back because ice blocks the way. It took a fourth ship and four months until Shackleton makes it back to Elephant Island, but he was greeted with the most rewarding sight of all: all 22 of the men he had left behind, alive, waving from the beach. Shackleton never crossed Antarctica, he never even reached the Antarctic continent, but his resilience allowed him to achieve his new aim, to deliver his men safely home.

Morale

While the Endurance was trapped in ice, Frank Worsley said, “Shackleton’s spirits were wonderfully irrepressible considering the heart-breaking reverses he has had to put up with and the frustration....one would think he had never a care on his mind and he is the life and soul of half the sky larking and fooling in the ship.” No matter what befell him, Shackleton always found reasons to laugh. The worse things got, the cooler, and more collected Shackleton became. Worsley remembered that Shackleton could sometimes be irritable when the going was good, and he could afford it, “but never when things were going badly, and we were up against it.” Shackleton was obsessed with the well-being of his men. He understood that idleness would lead to depression, so he kept his crew as active as possible, sending them out for games of football and hockey while the Endurance was trapped in ice. On the way to South Georgia, he assured that the crew got regular meals and drinks of hot milk every four hours; the routine gave the group stability and something to look forward to.

The Greatest Leader?

There are a number of reasons why Shackleton’s story stands out compared to the other great leaders of recent times. The hardships he and his crew faced were so extreme it was essentially a fight against nature. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. Leaders so often make decisions from afar, on the sidelines, whereas Shackleton’s every decision and movement could have cost his team their lives. What Shackleton exemplified, it could be argued, more than other well-known leaders was an understanding of the basic needs of his fellow human beings. Shackleton possessed ample social intelligence, understanding what made his crew members tick as individuals, and how important this was for them to stay alive. Shackleton’s Endurance expedition failed, but his leadership meant his entire crew survived, a feat that appeared impossible. It is what makes him stand out from the rest and why his story continues to resonate today.

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Executive Search & Board Advisory

Contact us

Sydney p +61 2 9253 0950

Melbourne p +61 3 9653 9510

w www.blenheimpartners.com