

## Leadership Lessons in Endurance from Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1914 Antarctic Expedition (by Ian Sutherland).

On the eve of the First World War (August 1914), an expedition under the command of Ernest Shackleton set sail from Southampton in the *Endurance* with a crew of 27 men, aiming to be the first to cross the Antarctic continent from sea to sea via the South Pole.

Before reaching base, the ship stuck fast in heavy ice off the Weddell Sea and floated for 10 months and 570 miles at the mercy of sea currents until, crushed by the titanic pressures of the ice, it sank. The men then hauled 3 boats, equipment and supplies over shifting ice floes for 5 months. Upon reaching open water, they set sail and managed to get to the barren shores of Elephant Island. With no prospect of rescue, Shackleton and 5 hand-picked crew members, took a small sailing vessel and successfully navigated across 800 miles of the most treacherous ocean in the world to South Georgia Island. Two of them then hiked across uncharted glaciers and mountains to reach a whaling station and safety. After three attempts were foiled by pack ice, Shackleton finally managed to rescue the men stranded on Elephant Island - incredibly without loss of life.

Unfortunately, their back-up, the 'Ross Sea Party' of ten men led by Aeneas Mackintosh, sustained three casualties after they too were trapped while laying supply depots for Shackleton's return leg.

Nevertheless, Shackleton's feat, against impossible odds, is widely recognized as one of the most outstanding examples of leadership in all of history.

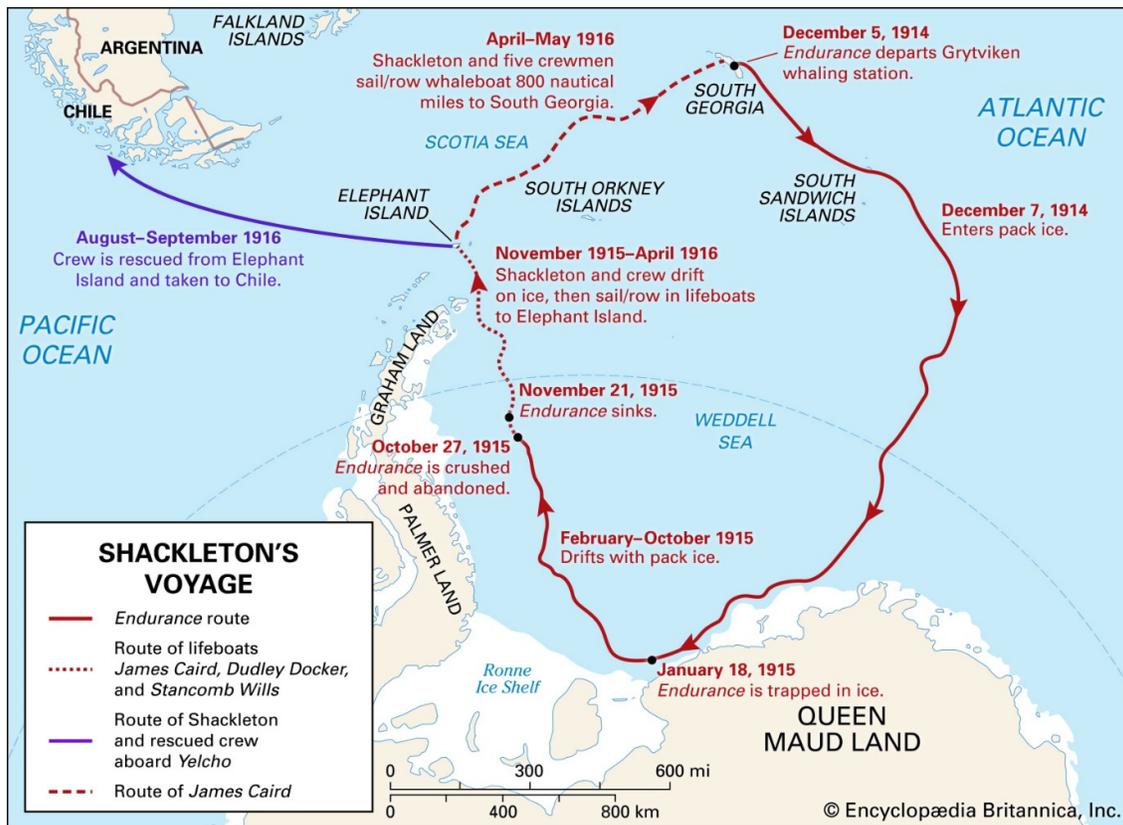
Here are twelve lessons on leadership gleaned from Sir Ernest's own account *South*.

1. **Plan and rehearse every contingency.** Long before the *Endurance* had to be abandoned (October 27, 1914), Shackleton had made plans for the sledging journey he knew would have to be undertaken across the ice. *"We were ready, as far as forethought could make us, for every contingency. Stores, dog sledges and equipment, were ready to be moved from the ship at a moment's notice,"* he records. *"The disaster had been looming ahead for many months, and I had studied my plans for all contingencies a hundred times."* Shackleton was just as thorough in his planning for both the Elephant Island and Ross Sea rescue missions.
2. **Have one clear, encompassing and overriding, objective.** The night after abandoning ship and being stranded on the ice, Shackleton wrote, *"The task now was to secure the safety of the party, and to that I must bend my energies and mental power and apply every bit of knowledge that experience of the Antarctic had given me."* He never wavered from this objective. It guided every significant decision (e.g. who to take along on a sortie, who to leave behind, what gear to take and what to jettison).
3. **Don't look back, unless to learn lessons.** *"The task was likely to be long and strenuous, and an ordered mind and a clear program were essential if we were to come through without loss of life,"* Shackleton wrote after leaving the comfort and security of the ship to face the daunting, almost impossible, journey ahead. *"A man must shape himself to a new mark directly the old one goes to ground."*
4. **Keep busy with purposeful work.** When the party encountered soft, unstable ice and were forced to set up 'Ocean Camp' and wait for the winter hardening, they hauled boats, equipment, and supplies for weeks after leaving the *Endurance*. Having only advanced a few miles, the men were despondent. Shackleton promptly organized them into 3 teams and started a relay of hunting expeditions for seal meat to supplement their stocks. Later, at an advanced stage of their ordeal, their trusty and much-loved cook collapsed with heart failure. Shackleton took the one man who was suffering a severe bout of despondency and despair—which threatened to be contagious—and made him responsible for cooking. In this demanding, yet important role, the man quickly forgot his worries and recovered some cheer. To quote Shackleton, *"Pain and aches, boat journey, marches, hunger and fatigue seemed to belong to the limbo of forgotten things, and there remained only the perfect contentment that comes from work accomplished."*
5. **Trust your gut.** While trekking north from 'Ocean camp', the ice became unstable, forcing the party to camp again on the largest, most stable-looking floe. After pitching tents, cooking, and eating, the exhausted men turned in for the night. Shackleton however, had 'an uneasy feeling' and decided to take a walk outside 'to think'. There, he noticed a fresh crack in the ice, which ran right through their tents. Next thing a crevasse opened and a crew member still in his sleeping bag, plunged into the icy sea below. Being right there, Shackleton could haul the man out, saving him from certain death by exposure. Luck?
6. **Create the right routines and keep to them religiously.** Whether trekking across ice floes or being battered by hurricane-force winds at sea, shivering in minus twenty-degree temperatures, or hiking over uncharted mountains, Shackleton kept to breakfast at 8am sharp, lunch at 1pm, 'tea' at 5pm and a hot drink at night. His chief lieutenant, Frank Wild, later responsible for the 22 men left behind on Elephant Island had similar discipline. Every morning he'd pack his sleeping bag and kit and instruct his men to do likewise, so that when 'the boss' (as they affectionately referred to Shackleton) returned, they'd be ready to leave in a hurry. He set off every day to sit on a rocky outcrop looking for the rescue ship, which is where Shackleton found him four months later (30 August 1915) on the fourth rescue attempt. Wild's routine was largely symbolic, to keep the spirits and hopes of his people alive as in the words of the Bible, *"Without a vision, the people perish"*.

7. **Food is important.** Shackleton spent an inordinate amount of time and energy attending to every detail of their diet, preparing meals, and rationing food supplies to last the distance. He used food strategically. When they first left the *Endurance*, he gave the men unsustainably high portions to allow them to adjust both physically and mentally to the deprivations that he knew would follow. For a period before reaching open sea, he reduced rations, keeping food in reserve for an energy boost for the exertion of rowing once the boats launched. He also arranged small feasts on important days like Christmas and Easter to keep the men's spirits up. Upon finally reaching Elephant Island, he sent the cook ahead to start up the blubber stove and prepare a hot meal for his famished men. As Napoleon Bonaparte once said, *"To be effective, an army relies on good and plentiful food."*
8. **Be a servant leader.** Shackleton constantly attended to his men's wellbeing. He never asked anyone to do more than he was prepared to do himself. He put their needs and comforts ahead of his own. After establishing 'Patience Camp', he realized that they would have to wait some time there until it grew colder, and the ice hardened so that they could continue their trek. He sent two of his strongest team members on a treacherous seven-mile journey to 'Ocean Camp' to retrieve food and fuel supplies. On their return, Shackleton walked back two miles to meet them with warm drinks the cook had specially prepared and wrapped and a snack (he'd also cut a path to ease their last two miles). Later, after reaching the whaling station on South Georgia Island in a state of absolute exhaustion, he spent but one night in comfort before setting off the next day on the rescue mission. Despite twice failing in his mission to rescue the men remaining on Elephant Island due to pack ice, he refused to give up or rest before his men were safe. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ demonstrated this same principle by washing his disciples' feet.
9. **Be prepared to stay awake while those you lead sleep.** Whilst there is no doubt a good night's sleep and sufficient rest is essential for optimal functioning and long-term physical and mental health, a leader must often be prepared to literally (and metaphorically) stay awake while others sleep. Shackleton was the first to rise and the last to turn in. The night before every significant leg of the journey he reviewed plans and contingencies. Halfway through the final 36-hour overland crossing of the Allardyce Range from the one side of South Georgia Island to the Husvik Whaling Station, his two companions fell asleep after they'd paused to heat up milk and eat meagre rations. Shackleton forced himself to stay awake, afterwards reflecting, *"Sleep under such circumstances merges into death."*
10. **Keep humble and have faith.** If there ever was a man committed to rigorous action and self-efficacy, it was Shackleton. But, though the account of his journey *South*, is mostly a detailed chronical of action and the practical, in the end he clearly acknowledges the hand of Providence. *"When I look back on those days, I have no doubt that Providence guided us, not only across those snow fields but across the storm-white sea that separated Elephant Island from our landing place on South Georgia Island. I know that during that long and racking march of 36 hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers of South Georgia it seemed to me often that we were four, not three. I said nothing to my companions on the point, but afterwards Worsley said to me, 'Boss, I had a curious feeling on the march that there was another person with us.' Crean confessed to the same idea. One feels the dearth of human words, the roughness of mortal speech in trying to describe things intangible, but a record of our journey would be incomplete without a reference to a subject very near to our hearts."*
11. **Avoid sentimentality.** Shackleton was continuously evaluating his men, their performance, and physical and mental states. At two key points he had to select a smaller team and leave others behind. The first was the 22 men to stay on Elephant Island (under the command of Frank Wild, one of his strongest and most capable leaders) whilst Shackleton took his next most trusted lieutenant, Worsley, his navigator, and three of the other strongest men, on the 800-mile voyage on an open boat (the *James Caird*) to South Georgia. The doctors pressed Shackleton to take along two men with severely frostbitten feet, saying they'd otherwise have to amputate their toes without anaesthetics. Shackleton, not willing or able to yield to sentiment, replied that they could not afford to take people who weren't able to pull their weight. The lives of the rest of the party far outweighed these considerations. Again, on South Georgia, he had to select the strongest two (Worsley and Crean) for the final overland trek, leaving the other three to be rescued later.
12. **Know when and how to strip things down to the essentials.** At many stages along the way, Shackleton insisted that more equipment be jettisoned to lighten the load, writing, *"Many things regarded by us as essential at the time were to be discarded a little later as the pressure of the primitive became more severe. Man can sustain life with very scanty means. The trappings of civilization are soon cast aside in the face of stern realities and, given the barest opportunity of winning food and shelter, man can live and even find his laughter ringing true."* Before Shackleton, Worsley and Crean dropped down the final ice cliff into the South Georgian Whaling Station after their 36-hour ordeal across uncharted glaciers and mountains, they had to throw their adze, cooker and logbook ahead. *"That was all, except our wet clothes that we brought out of the Antarctic,"* Shackleton wrote, *"which we had entered a year and a half before with a well-found ship of full equipment and high hopes. That was all of tangible things; but in memories we were rich. We had pierced the veneer of outside things. We had 'suffered, starved, and triumphed, grovelled down yet grasped at glory, grown bigger in the bigness of the whole'. We had seen God in His splendours, heard the text that Nature renders. We had reached the naked soul of man."*

Finally, it is worth noting that Shackleton had named the ship *Endurance*, from the family motto 'By endurance we conquer.'

(See map on next page)



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