

Leadership in Crisis: Ernest Shackleton and the Epic Voyage of the *Endurance*

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Abstract

A ship called the *Endurance*, carrying a British polar expedition was frozen into icy waters off the coast of Antarctica. The ship's leader of the *Endurance*, Sir Ernest Shackleton, had planned to sail his boat to the coast through the Weddell Sea, and then march a crew of men, supported by dogs and sledges, to the Ross Sea on the opposite side of Antarctica. The ice was extraordinarily thick for the ship, and an unexpected southern wind froze around the ship. The *Endurance* was wedged in a sea of ice. The ice held the ship for more than eight months, but it began to move with the ocean currents and carried the *Endurance* over 670 miles north. The wooden timbers of the *Endurance* would not be able to withstand the pressure from the ice. The hull of the *Endurance* eventually snapped, and Shackleton ordered his men to the ice. It was from that point on that Sir Ernest Schackleton would be a leader who demonstrated principle-centered leadership.

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According to Stephen R. Covey, leadership can be broken into two parts; one having to do with vision and direction, values and purposes, and the other with inspiring and motivating people to work together with a common vision and purpose (Covey, 1991, p. 246). The South Pole expedition led by Shackleton required extensive funding. This would be a daunting task because the British were preparing for World War I. However, Sir Ernest Shackleton used his creativity and had the verve of a determined entrepreneur. He hired a photographer and sold shares of whatever photos might be taken of the Antarctic journey and of any publications that might result. He cultivated friendships with members of the press, who promoted his journey as a chance to “reestablish the prestige of Great Britain in...Polar explorations” and described the leader as “one more proof of the dogged nature of British courage.” With Shackleton’s persistence money came in for his exploration (Koehn, 2003, p. 6). The next step for Shackleton was to find two ships, assemble a crew and the proper supplies for the expedition. Shackleton had specifics in mind for a ship. He wanted a darkroom for a photographer and berths for sled dogs. Eventually, Shackleton found two ships that matched his criteria (Koehn, 2003, p. 7). A public announcement for the voyage elicited a response of over 5,000 applicants. Shackleton divided the candidates into categories of “mad”, “hopeless” and “possible.” He met with those in the “possible” category and relied largely on instinct for judging the character of each man (Koehn, 2003, p. 8). Shackleton wanted men with qualities such as optimism, cheerfulness and a sense of humor. He gave preference to those who had experience on fishing trawlers because those men were accustomed to working long hours on frozen, windswept decks and believed they would be able to handle the harsh conditions of the Antarctic. Soon Shackleton had his crew, ships and supplies and was ready to set sail.

In the book *Principle-Centered Leadership* by author Stephen R. Covey (1991), it is stated that principle-centered leadership is practiced from the inside out on four levels: 1) personal (my relationship with myself); 2) interpersonal (my relationships and interactions with others); 3) managerial (my responsibility to get a job done with others; and 4) organizational (my need to organize people-to recruit them, train them, compensate them, build teams, solve problems, and create aligned structure, strategy, and systems) (Covey, 1991, p. 31). Sir Ernest Shackleton, the leader of the *Endurance*, was truly a principle-centered leader. He was a man with a mission and vision to reach the South Pole. Through his heroic leadership he led his men to safety when the *Endurance* became entrenched in the ice floes of the Antarctic and began to drift with the ocean current. Shackleton made the decision that the men should take to the ice, which was a wise decision because the *Endurance* was eventually swallowed into the frigid arctic waters.

When the *Endurance* became entrapped within the ice floes, Shackleton immediately displayed “principle-centered power” (Covey, 1990, p. 104). He insisted that every man maintain his ordinary duties as closely as possible. He appointed individuals to hunt for seal and penguin whenever supplies of fresh meat ran low. He ordered the ship’s carpenter to make furniture for his cabin and a hut to be located at a future base camp. Meals and entertainment were to be continued on a strict schedule (Koehn, p. 10). Principle-centered power is the mark of quality, distinction and excellence in all relationships. It is based on honor, with the leader honoring the follower and the follower choosing to contribute because the leader is also honored (Covey, 1991, p. 104). “The hallmark of principle-centered power is sustained, proactive influence” (Covey, 1991, p. 104). Principle-centered power occurs when the cause or purpose or goal is believed in as deeply by the followers as by the leaders (Covey, 1991, p. 104). Even

though it was not easy for the men to be confined in close quarters with one another; difference in personalities and quirks contributed to irritation, they had great respect, and admiration for Shackleton and followed his orders.

Power is created when individuals perceive that their leader is honorable, so they trust him, are inspired by him, believe deeply in the goals communicated by him, and desire to be led. Because of their sense of purpose and vision, their character, their essential nature, and what they represent, a leader can build principle-centered power in his relationships with his followers (Covey, 1991, p. 104-105). When it became clear to Shackleton that the *Endurance* would succumb to the arctic waters, he made the decision for his men to abandon the ship and to take refuge on the ice. The men salvaged what they could from the ship and started to march across the ice even though the majority of them were inexperienced at trekking polar conditions (Koehn, p. 12). The men eventually made camp and Shackleton divided them into five tents, choosing one strong head for each. With energetic leadership in each small group, Shackleton hoped to keep morale high and discipline intact. As always, Shackleton insisted that the men kept busy (Koehn, p. 13). Shackleton knew they had to keep moving so he ordered a second march. The reaction was mixed, but nevertheless, the men followed their leader. Shackleton had to deal with various confrontations, such as one of the men refusing to continue on the march. This person challenged Shackleton's authority and claimed "his duty to follow the leader's orders officially ended with the sinking of the *Endurance*" (Koehn, p. 15). Shackleton gathered the group together and reviewed the ship's articles, making one significant change. He revised the articles of the expedition stating that each man would be paid in full for each day until they reached safety (Koehn, p. 15). Shackleton was not obligated to pay the men for their time after the *Endurance* was lost, but he did anyway, which quieted the situation (Koehn, p. 15). Then

Shackleton made the decision to launch the three lifeboats, which they salvaged, into the frigid waters. He divided his men into three groups and they set sail. Their destination was to be Deception Island but since they got off course they headed for Elephant Island (Koehn, p. 16-17). The men settled on Elephant Island and it was here that Shackleton realized he had to go for help. His men could not survive much longer. With great care he assembled his six person rescue crew and headed to South Georgia where there was a whaling station. Through trial and tribulation the men accomplished the nearly impossible task of traveling through 800 miles of turbulent waters (Koehn, p. 20). They trekked across South Georgia and after traveling 36 hours without sleep or shelter they reached the edges of the whaling station. Soon Shackleton was making preparations to rescue the 22 men on Elephant Island and that is exactly what he did.

Covey has ten suggestions for processes and principles that will increase a leader's honor and power with others (Covey, 1991, p. 107). For example, Shackleton used "persuasion" which includes sharing reasons and rationale, making a strong case for your position or desire while maintaining genuine respect for followers' ideas and perspective (Covey, 1991, p. 107). Shackleton showed "patience" with his men and maintained a long-term perspective and stayed committed to his goal in the face of short-term obstacles and resistance. He showed "kindness" by being caring and thoughtful towards his men by having conversations with them and taking an interest in their lives. These are only a few of the ten suggestions that Covey provides as a guide and that Shackleton actually displayed in his leadership of his South Pole expedition.

References

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