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Decisions, Decisions

Home > Decisions, Decisions > Decision-making at the edge

Decision-making at the edge

By Dennis Perkins and Paul Kessler

A few years ago, we stood – surrounded by penguins – on Elephant Island, a barren, tiny outcrop of rock in the middle of the Southern Ocean. We went to this desolate place because we wanted to understand how Sir Ernest Shackleton – leader and explorer – must have felt almost 100 years ago.

With his crew of 27 men, he had reached this remote island on April 14, 1916, after overcoming extraordinary obstacles borne out of extreme hardship, cold, hunger, and deprivation. He had a major decision to make, one that would ultimately determine whether they lived or died.

Pursuing the goal

Sixteen months earlier, Shackleton and his crew had set sail on the *Endurance* to launch the most daring expedition to date – crossing the entire continent of Antarctica. Six weeks later, while still 60 miles from the coast, the ship became beset in the pack ice.

Over the next nine months, both the timbers of the *Endurance* and the crew's sense of security began to crack. Exhausted and discouraged, their efforts to pull lifeboats and supplies across hundreds of miles of solid pack ice failed. They realized every decision could make the difference between success and failure, and ultimately life or death.

In April, facing the most difficult conditions imaginable, Shackleton and the crew took to the open water in three life boats. As the winds and currents changed, the crew was forced to change their destination four times over five days before finally landing on Elephant Island.

The big decision

Although they were standing on solid ground for the first time in 497 days, their journey was far from over. Shackleton knew that the odds of being found on this remote island were slim. He also knew that their best chance of survival depended upon their continuing their journey to South Georgia Island through 800 miles of extremely dangerous ocean.

It was at this point that Shackleton and five others decided to sail a 22-foot lifeboat 800 miles through the Scotia Sea to reach South Georgia Island. Ultimately, this decision made the rescue of all 27 castaways possible.

Making difficult decisions

Shackleton was exceptional at knowing when he needed to take a risk to move his expedition forward. He was willing to make difficult decisions, even when success was a long shot.

Using the following principles, Shackleton was able to move effectively towards achieving this goal:

- *First, he was able to maintain an optimistic outlook while being grounded in reality.* Shackleton knew they would eventually run out of food. Denying this reality, however tempting it may have been, would have put the crew in greater peril. Effective leadership in demanding situations means being able to see the optimistic view and, at the same time, deal with stark reality.
- *Second, he displayed infectious tenacity and determination while always looking for another move.* Shackleton carefully put together a plan, identified the right resources, solicited creative ideas and garnered support to accomplish this



Sir Ernest Shackleton

seemingly impossible feat. He then went about convincing the rest of the crew that this was the right decision. In the end, everyone knew his rationale and understood that he was taking what he believed was the best possible course of action.

- *Third, he assembled the right people – a strong team that would increase the likelihood of success.* He carefully selected for aptitude and attitude. He looked for exceptional technical ability, but balanced this with having people who would remain focused, committed and optimistic towards the goal.
- *Finally, he focused on the ultimate goal, – that they would "all reach safety in the end."* In this wrenching moment of personal challenge, however, Shackleton was able to shift quickly his long-term goal from the crossing of the continent to bringing every man back alive. Acutely aware of his responsibilities as the leader, Shackleton let go of his original plan, shifted his focus, and devoted himself completely to this new mission.

Seizing the opportunity for decisive action

Leaders faced with big decisions, especially under conditions of uncertainty, adversity and change, are tempted to play it safe. Leading at The Edge means seizing every opportunity for decisive action, and refusing to be discouraged when some efforts prove unsuccessful. The very act of doing something concrete creates a sense of momentum, and a series of small victories will lay the foundation for eventual success.

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