

An Interview with Dennis Perkins about *Leading at The Edge*



How did the concept of "Leading at the Edge" come about? How did you originally come to the Shackleton story?

A major part of my life has been spent trying to understand what it really means to be a leader—particularly under conditions of adversity, uncertainty, and change. My passion to understand the art of leadership began as a midshipman at the United States Naval Academy, and it continued after graduation when I was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps.

My "postgraduate education" continued in Vietnam with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. As part of the Special Landing Force, I participated in amphibious operations launched to relieve units in trouble near the demilitarized zone. Later, I went "in country" and experienced the war in other roles. As a civil affairs officer, I saw the war from the perspective of the Vietnamese. Later, as the commanding officer of a rifle company, I saw Vietnam through a different set of lenses.

As a result of all these experiences, I began to develop an understanding of the nature of exceptional leadership. I saw how some leaders were able to inspire exhausted, wet, tired, and discouraged Marines under the most grueling conditions. And I learned some vital lessons about leadership and teamwork from the things that went wrong—through mistakes and failures.

After Vietnam, my passion to understand leadership continued in graduate school—first, at the Harvard Business School, and later in my doctoral studies at The University of Michigan. After graduation, I joined the faculty of the Yale School of Management, and I began teaching courses on leadership. At Yale, I began to view the academic research on leadership through the lenses of my personal experience as a leader. With this perspective, I came to believe that something was missing. It wasn't that the academic theories were wrong. It was just that they seemed far removed from the challenges that I had faced in Vietnam.

So, a series of life experiences and the immediate challenge of teaching and consulting about leadership led me to blaze a new path. I decided to look for leadership lessons in stories of groups that have been to the outer limits of human endurance—the place I call The Edge.

This path has led me to the conclusion that the essence of leadership can be found in stories of survival, the ultimate crucible of human endeavor. I am convinced that—by understanding the things that work when survival is at stake—we can understand how to lead under other demanding conditions. By studying The Edge, we can learn the things needed to lead organizations to their full potential, and we can remember these principles when we ourselves are stretched, stressed, and challenged.

In my research on groups at the edge of survival, the saga of Shackleton's Trans-Antarctic Expedition stood out. While there were many other accounts of triumph at The

Edge, the story of the Endurance was unique. Better than any other, the Shackleton saga encapsulated the strategies that I had found to be absolutely essential for success. Consequently, I used the story in my book as the primary vehicle for exploring leadership at The Edge, and for illustrating key ideas about extraordinary leadership and teamwork.

What is the most important message that the Endurance story has for the business world of today? And for our "Survivor"-obsessed culture?

In our contemporary culture, survival has come to hold some rather bizarre associations. Many people link the word survivor with so-called "reality based" television shows in which volunteers conspire to defeat their teammates at any cost. In fact, this television world is far-removed from reality. The winners can succeed, but only because they are in an artificial situation that bears little resemblance to the real world. In a real survival situation, there would be no winners and no survivors—only dead losers who failed to work together.

Others have come to equate survival with the reckless pursuit of extreme adventure. This often translates into untrained, out-of-shape, weekend warriors who pursue dangerous sports with expensive equipment. Unfortunately, these extreme adventures frequently end in costly rescue efforts mounted to save the lives of the unprepared, novice explorers.

Both of these scenarios are distracting. They trivialize the meaning of survival, and they obscure the important learnings that can be extracted from stories of those who have experienced the limits of human endurance. So, to return to the question, what is the real message that business leaders can take from the story of the Endurance?

I believe that the key critical message to take from the Shackleton saga is that leaders do make a difference—a critical difference. Exceptional leaders inspire a level of teamwork that can mean the difference between success and failure in the most demanding environments. Under conditions of physical danger, this means the difference between life and death. In a harsh business environment, individuals may not die, but a lack of leadership can spell death for an organization.

Although there are those who minimize the importance of leadership, the impact of capable leaders was repeatedly underscored by the accounts I studied while writing *Leading at The Edge*. For example, I contrasted the Endurance story with the account of the *Karluk*, an expedition that set out to explore the Arctic in 1913. Both ships, the *Karluk* in the north and the *Endurance* in the south, soon found themselves beset in solid pack ice. Trapped by the ice, each crew was soon engaged in a fight for survival. But the outcomes of these two adventures—and the ways in which the two leaders dealt with the obstacles they faced—were as far apart as the poles each leader set out to explore.

In the north, they crew of the *Karluk* found themselves transformed into a band of self-interested, disparate individuals. Lying, cheating, and stealing became commonplace behaviors. And the disintegration of the team had tragic consequences for the 11 members who died in the Arctic wasteland.

Shackleton's expedition faced the same problems of ice, cold, and shortages of food and supplies. But the response of his crew to these hellish conditions was, in almost every

respect, the obverse of the Karluk's. Teamwork, self-sacrifice, and astonishing good cheer replaced lying, cheating, and rapacious self-interest. It was as if the Endurance existed not just in a different polar region, but in a different, parallel universe.

There were many forces at play in these two stories, but I believe that the outcomes reflect much more than a simple twist of fate. They underscore the hard fact that the behavior of a leader ultimately translates into concrete, observable outcomes. If leadership is exceptional, as in the case of the Endurance saga, it is possible to reach extraordinary goals. Leadership matters in business, and it matters at the survival edge. That's the message I take from Shackleton's experience, and from all the survival accounts I have studied.

You offer 10 strategies for businesses, taking the lead from the Shackleton story. While your approach in the book is an integrated one, does any strategy stand out as most important or most unique?

Let me answer that question in two ways. First, it is true that the 10 strategies are closely interwoven. Since I play the saxophone, a music metaphor comes to mind. In a blues scale, the "blue" note gives the scale its distinctive character. But the "color"—the distinctive character of this blue note—has meaning only when combined with the other notes of the scale. By itself, a blue note is just an isolated tone.

Leadership is much the same, and leaders can fixate on doing just one thing while ignoring the complexity of their role. For example, I recently interviewed a woman whose boss had made a great show of giving up his private underground parking space. This gesture was similar to the kinds of behaviors that were characteristic of Ernest Shackleton. Shackleton always made sure that he received exactly the same treatment as others. On a freezing boat journey, he gave his mittens to a suffering comrade.

Giving up the special parking was a memorable act that symbolized the leader's desire to minimize status differences among his team. The problem was this: after sacrificing his parking space, the boss disappeared. He was seldom seen by his employees, and spent most of his time behind a closed door or traveling. He apparently believed that, having made this grand gesture, his job as a leader was done. But exceptional leadership involves more than a single act. It means being visible, inspiring others, maintaining morale, managing conflict, and promoting teamwork and creativity. In my framework, the leader who gave up his parking space practiced one strategy but forgot the other nine outlined in *Leading at The Edge*.

With that said, I believe that there are three of the 10 strategies that, taken together, constitute the backbone of effective leadership. To return to my music metaphor, these three behaviors are similar to the three notes that define a chord. All the notes in a scale are important, but these special notes give a scale its a fundamental color.

Similarly, there are three fundamental leadership strategies that must be practiced. First, a leader must instill a relentless sense of optimism. He or she must communicate an unswerving belief that the mission can be accomplished while, at the same time, staying grounded in the reality of the situation. Second, an exceptional leader must constantly reinforce the team message. Individual performance is important, of course, but real power comes from an integrated, cohesive team. Third, those who lead at *The Edge* must create a culture of tenacious creativity. They must foster an environment in which

people believe that there is a way to overcome every obstacle, and in which people work tirelessly to find innovative solutions. When faced with a daunting challenge, they must be able to say: "Never give up: there's always another move."