

OPINION

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



By Fusi Akinkugbe

Leading in Crisis: The expedition of Ernest Shackleton (1874-1922)

late 1914 the ship arrived on remote South Georgia Island, where local seamen advised Shackleton to postpone the expedition because of ice that could trap the ship. Shackleton refused to heed their advice.

In January 1915, as they neared the Antarctic mainland the ship became trapped in ice. With the ship stuck, Shackleton realised the crew would have to spend the winter on the ship. He tried to keep up their spirits and also manage the fear, anxiety and despondence that could take hold, by ensuring everyone maintained their regular duties and interactions. In October 1915 the ship sank. Shackleton and his crew had to abandon it and camp on nearby floating ice.

At this point, the mission of the expedition formally changed. His goal was now to bring everyone home safely. Shackleton realised the significance of what this meant for him as the leader. Survival was now the purpose, not walking across Antarctica, and he had to give his men confidence that they would pull through. Some expressed doubts, but he countered their opposition and negative attitude by working to win them over.

By April 1916, the ice started to break up, so they took to lifeboats with the intent of reaching land on the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. After a week of

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very rough seas, they arrived at deserted Elephant Island. This was not their destination, but they were glad to arrive there because they had not stepped on land since December 5, 1914. With five men and one lifeboat, Shackleton went in search of help leaving the rest of the crew here. They got to South Georgia Island, from where a smaller group went to a whaling station for help.

For the next few months Shackleton sailed unsuccessfully in three different ships to rescue the remaining crew but none of the ships could cut through the ice surrounding Elephant Island. Eventually on August 30, 1916 Shackleton was able to rescue the remaining twenty-two men.

Perhaps if he had listened to the local seamen

at South Georgia Island the crisis might have been avoided. Leaders need to listen to counsel especially from those qualified to know. A crisis occurred, but

Shackleton took responsibility for it and was able to keep every single man safe.

Here are four lessons to learn from Shackleton's example about dealing with crisis:

First, in crisis leaders must be able to identify and set the right priorities. After spending almost a year on board a stationary ship and then having to abandon it, Shackleton adjusted to the reality of the situation – that this was now a survival mission. The goal had changed, and the priority now was to save the whole team. In times of crisis when it becomes crystal clear that it is impossible to pursue the original purpose, leaders must be able to identify and set the right priorities. We must deal with the reality before us.

Secondly, leaders must show strength in crisis. A time of crisis is not a time for the leader to fall apart. Shackleton had to give his men hope that they would pull through. A leader must model strength in crisis. It does not mean that he or she doesn't have private fears, but he must still communicate hope and strength to those he leads. We cannot give up in crisis because our people look up to us, and they must find us able to lead.

Thirdly, Shackleton was resilient in crisis. He kept going. For two whole years (August 1914 to August 1916) in the most dif-

right there leading from the front. A leader must be resilient, able to adapt to and overcome the situation at hand.

Lastly, in crisis the people you lead must be able to rely on your leadership. Followers must be able to trust that in crisis you can and will come through. Followers must have confidence that their leader will do all that needs to be done to save the situation.

Shackleton's example proves that circumstances don't determine the outcome, rather who is in leadership is a strong factor in determining the outcome. His story has even greater impact considering it occurred at a time when there was no sophisticated technology to track where he was or for him to send a message by satellite: yet he survived and found a way out with ALL his men. His story has been written about extensively, and has been a case study at Harvard Business School. While it was a failure of the original purpose, it was a huge success of survival, resilience, and leadership in uncertain and life-threatening circumstances.

Thank you and until next week, let me challenge you to begin to lead from where you are.

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