

Follow the Leader

Modern managers should take a leaf out of a legendary Antarctic explorer's book to move ahead in these challenging times. *By Richard Coles*

In 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton led 27 men, for almost two years, through a harrowing fight for survival after their Antarctic vessel, *Endurance*, got trapped in ice and then sank to the bottom, having them stranded on an ice floe twelve hundred miles from civilisation.

All the men survived and each ascribed the heroic journey back to Shackleton's superb leadership.

His efforts to keep alive, maintain spirits and, ultimately, save his men against all odds earned him the accolade "the greatest leader ever – bar none".

Shackleton's story is about a leader who triumphed by putting people first and striving for the seemingly impossible. It is an inspirational tale about unleashing strengths in individuals they are unconscious of to achieve goals.

Ultimately, it is a captivating story about how leaders today can triumph by looking to Shackleton for inspiration.

The Evolving Leader

In his book, "World Class Leaders", James Autry writes that leadership is "about creating an environment that fosters a sense of community that helps people to love their work instead of doing their job, which when done honestly creates trust and enhances creativity".

Today, the "enemies" of business leaders take on many guises, such as the technological adversary who, like a chimera, changes shape and direction, rapidly forcing constant change; and the never-ending stream of competitors who all claim to do things faster, better and cheaper.

There is also the manpower supply enemy who fiercely competes for the best and ablest brains; the customer who constantly demands better products and services; and time, which competes for the energy and resources of every successful firm.

While the adversaries may have changed their forms, the ways to overcome the many challenges to businesses today have become more sophisticated with the adoption of modern management techniques.

Business leaders today need to be visionary, charismatic, pragmatic



and realistic in order to deal with changing times and circumstances. Their skills have had to be honed to envision, energise, and empower their staff to achieve more in shorter time spans, embrace total quality management, and love what they are doing.

Thus, the major tasks of today's business leaders are centred on creating and maintaining high levels of motivation and job satisfaction amongst their employees. The challenge is to make work meaningful to employees at all levels.

Being a leader means developing yourself. You need to be strong and resourceful to undertake the journey as the destination is never actually reached.

As you become a leader, you will find resources in yourself that you did not know you had. You work your way to the forefront of a new field. You become more yourself because a leader's influence comes from who you are, what you do, and the examples you set.

A leader must inspire others, many diverse groups, to lead effectively during good times and bad; building esprit de corps and lead by example to get the most out of each individual and develop them at the same time.

Communication and Optimism

Leadership also means developing yourself in the areas of communication, understanding others, appreciating differences and gaining from them, developing rapport with your people and influencing others.

Shackleton led by example and used informal one-to-one talks to build a bond with his men. He inspired optimism and at the same

"The success of managers as leaders depends primarily on their ability to communicate to all the people for whom they are responsible."

time worked to keep spirits high in the team, especially during a crisis. He balanced talent and expertise in each team.

Shackleton was visible and vigilant. He kept sight of the big picture. He got the teams to help each other and built up the weakest links.

Leaders need to look towards the destination and pay attention to where they have been and are going to in order to ensure that the entire group is keeping pace. They must understand the system they are part of, see beyond the obvious, the immediate situations and then have a sense of how events connect to deeper patterns.

Ultimately, your leadership should have a lifelong impact on the people you work with.

Some further lessons we can learn from Shackleton are meaningful communication, the power of optimism, leading by example and keeping up morale.


One thing is for sure – leadership is a complex issue when exercised by an individual. It is a combination of organising and motivating, setting goals, and controlling through effective communication while also giving people confidence in what they are doing.

That confidence can be instilled in your team by encouraging employees to see value in their jobs, in themselves as an individual, and as part of the team. The success of managers as leaders

depends primarily on their ability to communicate to all the people for whom they are responsible.

Managers must convey what they need and the importance of doing the job. It involves the acceptance of change, commitment to customer service (internally and externally), achievement of more with less, as well as the harnessing of experience, personal skills and training to boost further development.

Truly listening, taking in and acting on the information received are imperative to get people to listen to you. The value of one-to-one conversations in understanding and communicating with people is as relevant in the workplace as it is at home.

Being optimistic in adverse circumstances is the best way to deal with life's problems. Look at the glass half full. These are all lessons from Shackleton that can be applied to our daily interactions to make us more effective, efficient and, ultimately, better human beings. 

Richard G Coles is Managing Director and owner of Coles International Training & Consulting.

Coles International Training and Corporate Consultancy is based in the Gulf, Australia and now in Kuala Lumpur as well. It researches, develops and delivers learning and organisational solutions to clients' needs and problems worldwide. For more information, please visit www.colestraining.com, or email colestraining@gmail.com.

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