

Authenticity is always a good thing, but it is an especially important characteristic for leaders who are facing situations ripe with adversity, uncertainty and change. When operating in such extreme conditions, it is essential that leaders be viewed as credible and trustworthy – in essence, be seen as distinctively real, not as an actor or performer on stage. Yet at the same time, leaders need to be able to adjust and adapt their behavior in various ways to address the unique demands of people and situations. Authentic leaders are those who are able to achieve both of these ends – they are experienced as trusted and real, while demonstrating a range of leadership behaviors and styles.

No leader may be a better example of authentic leadership than Sir Ernest Shackleton, leader of the British 1914 Trans-Antarctic Expedition seeking to cross the Antarctic continent for the first time. Shackleton was able to consistently express his true self while earning the trust of his men. He viewed as highly credible, even though he was frequently adapting his behavior and style to best fit the circumstances. He was a master at reading the emotional tone of his team, and reacting appropriately.

In this paper, we review the leadership strategies that Shackleton put to such great use throughout the ordeal. But we start first with a brief overview of the incredible story itself.

### ***An Expedition Gone Awry***

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As soon as they left South Georgia Island on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914 to achieve their mission of traversing the Antarctic continent in 1914, Shackleton and his crew of 27 scientists and seamen were unexpectedly beset by a wall of solid pack ice. As one crew member wrote, "We were stuck like an almond in a chocolate bar." Repeated heroic attempts over many months failed to free the ship. Finally, the pressure of the shifting, roiling ice exacted its toll, and the ship slipped beneath the ice. With no ship and no means of contact with anyone else on earth, Shackleton charted their unlikely escape.

With a fierce winter fast approaching, the members of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of Great Britain had failed to achieve their original goal--the first overland crossing of the Antarctic continent. The mission had now shifted to survival in one of the planet's harshest locations. In pursuing this objective Shackleton mobilized his crew to sustain a level of high-performance time and time again. This included two attempts to reach open water by man-hauling the ship's three life boats over the ice on crude sledges, and a perilous six-day journey to the temporary safety of a wind-buffeted, barren island known as Elephant Island.

Realizing that rescue from Elephant Island was unlikely, Shackleton and a small, select crew set out on an 800-mile journey through the Southern Ocean, considered by some the most treacherous stretch of water in the world. Miraculously, after 16 grueling days in their

little 22' boat, they reached South Georgia Island. After a daring trek across the interior of the South Georgia, Shackleton reached a whaling station – the first encounter with civilization in 603 days. From there, he led the effort to rescue his shipmates who had remained on Elephant Island. All 27 of the men who started out with the expedition survived the ordeal.

## ***Leadership and Teamwork: Ten Strategies for Success***

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What was it that enabled Shackleton and his men to succeed where others could have easily perished? At Syncretics, we have studied numerous accounts of individuals and teams who have been to “*The Edge*” – from polar expeditions, to mountain-climbing adventures, space travel, and shipwrecks – and have uncovered Ten Strategies that made a huge difference between success and failure – and in some cases life and death. Through our work with organizations, we have seen how these strategies can be applied to leaders seeking to guide their own teams through times of adversity, uncertainty and change.

Below, we review the Ten Strategies, and illustrate some of the ways that Shackleton and his team demonstrated the Strategies during their adventure.

### **Strategy #1**

**Never lose sight of the ultimate goal, and focus energy on short-term objectives.**

Much has been written about the importance of having a vision and conveying that vision to the team. But for a vision to remain viable, people need to see that progress is being made. Shackleton was a master at focusing the team’s energy on activities that supported their overall goal, including physical conditioning through dog sled racing, hunting to build the food supply, and moving the expedition forward over the ice. When the crew was forced to wait patiently on the ice, Shackleton’s ability to simultaneously focus on the goal of survival but find outlets for anxiety was central to their ultimate success.

### **Strategy #2**

**Set a personal example with visible, memorable symbols and behaviors.**

Shackleton understood the power of communicating through story and symbolism. To emphasize the importance of traveling light, he threw a handful of gold sovereigns into the snow, along with a gold cigarette lighter. He then tore a single page from the Bible given to him by the Queen, and placed the rest of the book on the snow next to the gold. These gestures inspired members of the expedition and dramatized what needed to be done to survive. Shackleton’s behavior stands in sharp contrast to leaders who underestimate the extent to which they are watched by their employees, or those who send inconsistent messages--such as insisting on maintaining extravagant personal office space while demanding that others cuts costs.

**Strategy #3**

**Instill optimism and self-confidence, but stay grounded in reality.**

One of Shackleton's greatest strengths was his ability to build an indomitable sense of self-confidence in his men--they came to believe that they could overcome any obstacle. Accounts of the expedition also reveal the flip-side of this coin: that optimism not tethered to a realistic assessment of the situation can lead to negative consequences. Although the food supply was dwindling, Shackleton opposed hunting more seals for fear it would symbolize a delay in their escape. He saw those who argued for the hunt as disloyal, and ignored their counsel. This produced a precarious situation for the crew, and they left Elephant Island just as their food supply had dwindled to dangerous levels. Finding the right balance between optimism and reality is a key for successful leadership under adversity.

**Strategy #4**

**Take care of yourself: maintain your stamina and let go of guilt.**

Physical and emotional challenges can make significant demands on people, especially those in positions of leadership. Conscious attention must be given to sustaining energy. Shackleton was amazingly successful in maintaining his energy and spirit. At points, however, he brooded over his responsibility for having gotten the expedition into what appeared to be an impossible situation, and for the failed attempts to march over the ice to open water. This brooding drained his energy and diminished his effectiveness. Leaders need to recognize that tough situations call for tough decisions often made under uncertainty. Mistakes will be made. Effective leaders must learn from mistakes and move on, conserving energy for the next challenge.

**Strategy #5**

**Reinforce the team message constantly: "We are one--we live or die together."**

Shackleton understood the power of a cohesive team, and he was convinced that their greatest chance of survival rested on sustaining the crew as a tight-knit group. Shackleton was superb at finding ways for every person to contribute and feel a valued member of the team, whether their contribution was physical strength or navigation expertise. On the open boat journey to Elephant Island, Shackleton endeavored to maintain contact between the three boats, and was eventually able to assemble the party at a single point. Even during the most difficult circumstances, when it was clear that some were doing more than others to aid progress of the expedition, Shackleton worked hard to maintain unity and cohesion.

**Strategy #6**  
**Minimize status differences and insist on courtesy and mutual respect.**

Shackleton went out of his way to ensure that he was given the same treatment as others, even to the point of performing menial chores. In one case, he went so far as to berate the cook for preparing him a special meal. Shackleton was called "the Boss" by team members, a term that communicated both their affection and respect. But he was never physically aloof, and never used his position to avoid sharing the hardships of the journey. In a sense, the expedition became a "classless society," and an unusual degree of mutual respect and caring emerged as a result. At one point, on the verge of starvation, one of the men spilled his meager ration of milk into the snow. Tears in his eyes, he watched the milk disappear into the icy whiteness. Without a word, each of his tent mates poured a part of their own rations into their comrade's mug. This scene could never have taken place if a foundation of courtesy and mutual respect had not been built from the start.

**Strategy #7**  
**Master conflict -- deal with anger in small doses, engage dissidents, and avoid needless power struggles.**

Although there were many minor frictions in the group, these arguments were never destructive. In fact, this "productive bickering" helped ensure that tensions never built to the point that serious disagreements ensued. Shackleton was a master at identifying any emotional tension in the group, and taking action to make sure that it did not affect team unity. For instance, he deliberately assigned one potential "troublemaker" to his own tent so that he might listen to his complaints and boost his ego. Although it is natural to keep those who may "annoy" us at a distance, it is a much better strategy to embrace them and keep them productive members of the team. .

**Strategy #8**  
**Find something to celebrate and something to laugh about.**

It is easy to celebrate and offer recognition when things are going well. But the reality is that it is much more effective to find something to celebrate even when things are not going as planned. Shackleton understood this. He encouraged a wide range of humorous and lighthearted activities. On the one year anniversary of their departure from South Georgia Island, knowing that this would be a day of depression since they were still stranded on the ice, he ordered a day long celebration. On mid-winter's day, halfway through the two-month period of constant darkness, Shackleton threw a party for the crew. He was acutely aware of how important it was for his team to have opportunities to lighten up and experience humor.

**Strategy #9**  
**Be willing to take the Big Risk.**

As they sought to traverse the island's interior, Shackleton and two others found themselves stranded on a South Georgia glacier, 4,500 feet above sea level. Night was falling, fog was rolling in, and--at their current rate of descent--they were certain to freeze to death. The three men created a makeshift toboggan from their 50 feet of rope, held tight onto each other, and slid some 2,000 feet into the darkness. This risky move paid off. After a harrowing slide, they arrived safely at the bottom. Adversity and change present leaders with key moments when they must decide to either stand pat, or take a risk. These judgments are never easy, but a willingness to take a big risk is a hallmark of successful leaders.

**Strategy #10**  
**Never give up – there's always another move.**

At each point in the journey the team could have lost hope. The obstacles they faced--solid pack ice, grueling sledge journeys, seal leopard attacks, the open boat journeys, and, finally, the glaciers of South Georgia Island--could have been insurmountable. But with each new ordeal, Shackleton and his team mobilized their creativity and courage in the belief that a solution could be found. Such tenacious creativity is an essential ingredient in any team's ability to overcome adversity. Courage provides the energy to search for solutions, and creativity makes it possible to see answers where none seem to exist.

## ***Shackleton and Authentic Leadership***

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As noted above, authentic leaders gain trust because they are consistent and credible, even while they vary their behavior and style to meet the demands of the situation. This variation in behavior is not undertaken with any "false" purpose in mind, such as to deceive or manipulate others. Instead, it is a valid expression of the leader's diverse characteristics and styles.

Shackleton's crew described him in very consistent terms, seeing him as goal-oriented, optimistic, courageous, and team-focused. He was optimistic before the expedition and at every point during their amazing journey. He was focused on building and sustaining a strong team at all points in time. Yet, he responded distinctively to people and situations. He handled certain potential "troublemakers" with great care. He worried about the health of certain crew members, but never made them feel they were being singled out for any weakness. Shackleton was a truly authentic leader.