

Leadership Under Extreme Conditions: A Human Resource Analysis of Ernest Shackleton's Expedition

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Sir Ernest Shackleton's leadership during the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition through a human resource management lens, using the Investors in People framework. Despite the expedition's failure to achieve its original goals, Shackleton's people management turned a potential tragedy into a historic example of leadership under extreme adversity. The analysis reveals a high degree of maturity in inspiring and motivating people, fostering trust, and maintaining morale through transparency and empathy. However, the assessment also highlights critical gaps in delegation, leadership development, and participative decision-making. Shackleton's approach is ultimately characterized by emotional intelligence, adaptability, and resilience, yet constrained by overcontrol and insufficient foresight. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations to strengthen empowerment, feedback culture, and transparency—insights that remain relevant for contemporary leaders navigating crisis and uncertainty in complex organizations.

Introduction

In 1911, the Norwegian explorer Amundsen won the race to the South Pole, beating the British Scott, who died in the attempt. It was a massive setback for the British who dominated the exploration world until then. In an attempt to restore their reputation, Sir Ernest Shackleton embarked, alongside 27 other crew members, on the so-called “Imperial Trans-Antarctica Expedition” (ITAE) in 1915, hoping to cross Antarctica from sea to sea. At the dawn of World War I, this ill-fated expedition put an end to the great era of polar exploration.

Today, Shackleton’s leadership is studied all around the world as a classic example of leadership in crisis. Indeed, he managed to bring back his entire crew alive, showing an outstanding capacity to adapt to extreme conditions. Despite happening more than a hundred years ago, this case study is still more than relevant in the actual uncertain and fast-moving world.

The objective of this report is to evaluate the people management strategies and practices of Sir Ernest Shackleton during this expedition. The “Investors In People” framework will serve as a diagnostic tool to identify the maturity level of the organisation in several indicators. The report will analyse and discuss the findings and then formulate recommendations to help the organisation fill the gap between the actual level of maturity (“as is”) and the next one to reach (“to be”).

Background: Timeline of the expedition

1914 – Departure

Sir Ernest Shackleton set sail aboard the *Endurance* with 27 men, aiming to cross Antarctica from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea. The expedition departed London in August 1914, shortly after the outbreak of World War I.

January 1915 – Trapped in Ice

While navigating the Weddell Sea, *Endurance* became trapped in pack ice before ever reaching the continent. For months, Shackleton maintained morale through routine, optimism, and personal engagement with the crew.

October–November 1915 – Leaving the Ship

After being crushed by the ice, *Endurance* sank on 21 November 1915. Shackleton ordered the men to establish Ocean Camp on the ice and redefined the mission: survival and return home. He led by example, sharing rations and hardships equally.

April 1916 – The Open-Boat Journey

As the ice broke apart, the crew launched three lifeboats and reached Elephant Island. Knowing rescue was unlikely, Shackleton selected five men to accompany him on an 800-mile journey across the stormy Southern Ocean in the 22-foot *James Caird* to reach the whaling stations of South Georgia.

May 1916 – Crossing South Georgia

After two weeks at sea, Shackleton's team landed on South Georgia's uninhabited coast. Shackleton, Worsley, and Crean then trekked 36 hours across the island's glaciers to reach help at Stromness Station.

August 1916 – Rescue of the Crew

Following several failed attempts blocked by sea ice, Shackleton finally rescued all 22 men stranded on Elephant Island on 30 August 1916. Every crew member survived after nearly two years of isolation.

1917 – Return to England

The crew returned to England amid World War I. Though the expedition never achieved its geographic objective, Shackleton's leadership became a timeless model of resilience, morale management, and crisis navigation.

Method

This paper applies the Investors in People (IiP) framework as a diagnostic tool to evaluate the human resource practices demonstrated by Sir Ernest Shackleton during the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition (1914–1917). The IiP framework provides a structured approach to assessing how effectively an organization leads, supports, and develops its people to achieve its objectives.

The framework is organized around three main pillars:

- Leading – how leaders inspire, motivate, and provide direction.
- Supporting – how people are empowered, involved, and trusted to perform.
- Improving – how the organization builds capability and continuously develops its people.

Each pillar contains a set of indicators assessed across five maturity levels: Developed, Established, Advanced, High-Performing, and World-Class.

In this paper, Shackleton’s leadership behaviours and decisions are analyzed qualitatively against these indicators. Evidence is drawn from documented accounts by expedition members and biographical sources to determine the maturity level of Shackleton’s “organization” (the Endurance crew) within each area. This method allows translating historical leadership actions into measurable people management outcomes and identifying both strengths and development gaps.

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

All the facts exposed in this report are extracted from a series of books written by or based upon writings of members of the expedition: (Alexander, 1998), (Fisher & Fisher, 1957), (Huntford, 1975), (Hurley, 1948), (Hussey, 1949), (Lansing, 1959), (Mill, 1923), (Orde-Lees, 1916), (Shackleton, 1919), (Smith, 2015), (Worsley, 1924) and (Worsley, 1931)

Leading and Inspiring People

Creating Transparency and Trust

The main goals of the ITAE were clear and outcomes-oriented: crossing Antarctica from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea through the pole (Daily Mail (London), 11 March 1911 and The Times, 29 December 1913), documenting the entire journey (The Standard, 31 December 1913) and re-establishing the prestige of Great Britain in polar expeditions (The Times, 29 December 1913).

Shackleton also continuously provided a clear and accurate vision to the crew. The legend states that he published an advertisement that read: “Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success” (Watkins, 1949). Although this whole story is probably false, Shackleton did receive many applications from people aware of the mission’s challenges. He built a culture consistent with his vision and discarded the “mad” and the “hopeless” applicants to select only people that would fit into this culture. Moreover, when the expedition became a survival mission, Shackleton informed the crew that they would have to abandon the ship eventually and made it explicit that the sole remaining purpose of the mission was to return to civilisation alive.

Ernest Shackleton was communicating considerably with every crew member, mainly through personal interviews. He was genuinely interested in the people and what part of the work they enjoyed the most. He was also recognised to put his men always above himself, and his mere presence was enough to reassure some of them.

Because of his personality and behaviour, the team trusted Shackleton with their lives. On South Georgia Island, two of his men slid down the slope of the mountain, following his example, to outrun the night and the cold. Afterwards, when Shackleton decided to go to Antarctica again, eight of his men returned from different parts of the world to embark with him. A man who sailed with him wrote: “we would have gone anywhere with him without question just on his order” (Worsley, 1931). Only a high performing leader can generate this kind of trust and loyalty; it is not a happy accident. Consequently, the maturity level for this theme is “High-Performing”.

Motivating People to Deliver the Organisation’s Objectives

Shackleton recruited most of his men only a few minutes after he met them. It is consequently doubtful that the crew had an in-depth understanding of the mission's objectives.

Nevertheless, once on the boat, the goals were clear, and the men knew what to do to achieve them. For instance, when a crack appeared in the ice, they immediately jumped overboard with picks and shovels to increase the size of the opening and lead the ship to open waters. Also, they realised the lifeboats were their "ultimate salvation", and they had to protect them. To engage his team and generate understanding, Shackleton often backed decisions with evidence. For example, he measured the distance travelled during a day's walk, extrapolated an overall duration to reach their destination and decided to stop because they would lack food. Also, he was applying the PDCA (*Plan, Do, Check, Adjust*) method literally: he planned to do something (e.g. crossing South Georgia Island), started to do it, checked their progress (e.g. measuring their position) and adjusted their course.

Shackleton endeavoured to motivate his people by continually ensuring that all their basic needs (physiological, safety, love and self-esteem, in the hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1943)) were met. Given the extreme situation, he did not require his men to reach self-actualisation. A perfect illustration of his attention to his crew is his brilliant idea to serve hot meals to everyone whenever someone showed signs of weakness, without pointing out the person who needed it. Moreover, when they abandoned the ship, he helped them through the phases of change described in the Bridges model (McDeavitt, 2012). He raised awareness and eased understanding by speaking to the captain, facilitated acceptance and reduced anxiety by going beyond his function (e.g. preparing breakfast) and reassured the men through his constant presence and optimism. Eventually, they went through to the "new beginnings" phase, where they embraced their new mission of returning home by other means.

Otherwise, Frank Wild, Second in Command, supported the crew to deliver the objectives. He was the go-to person for any problem on the ship and realised that merely acknowledging an issue could help dissipate tensions.

Through his optimism, passion and will power, Shackleton was able to motivate and inspire his people beyond what seems humanly possible. One impressive occurrence is when he managed to lead two exhausted men to walk 36 hours with virtually no rest to cross the uncharted part of South Georgia Island and reach civilisation. After everything they had been through, they never complained and, "following the example of [their] leader, did [their] utmost to avoid any cause of annoyance (Worsley, 1924). The maturity level for this theme is "High Performing".

Developing Leadership Capability

Wild seemed to carry all the work on board, and the crew trusted him. However, when left in charge on Elephant Island, he demonstrated a lack of leadership and management skills. For example, he did not see fit to gather enough food

to prepare for the winter and was relying on the constant presence of seals and penguins nearby. Eventually, animals started to leave, generating tensions and stress among the crew. On the other hand, the captain, Franck Worsley, was wild, erratic and impulsive. Shackleton felt the need always to watch him and reduced the scope of his authority after he was unable to keep discipline on board during the trip to Buenos Aires.

Line managers are crucial enablers to change (Paauwe, Wright, & Guest, 2013). Here, they failed to meet expectations because Shackleton overlooked their lack of leadership abilities during their recruitment, seduced by their interesting stories.

Considering the gathered evidence, it appears that Shackleton's organisation did not do enough to develop leadership capability. The maturity level regarding this theme is, therefore, "Not met".

Overall Performance Review

The overall performance level for this indicator is "Advanced".

In a "High-performing" organisation, managers would know precisely to what extent they are expected to lead, manage and develop their people. Furthermore, Shackleton would have been more thorough in recruiting capable managers and would have explained what he expected from them. These managers would also be predictable and would encourage feedback from their people.

Empowering and involving people

Empowering people

Shackleton provided support and information so that his people could work properly and develop. For instance, a seaman made a mistake while manoeuvring the ship and expected Shackleton to be furious. Instead, he quietly helped him fix his error and never spoke of that incident again. Shackleton understood that his people were learning, and it was useless to rehash the past.

However, the maturity level for this theme is only "Developed". Indeed, Shackleton was omnipresent on the ship and constantly asked for updates, leaving minimal space for his men to be autonomous. In the rare cases where people took initiatives, he reprimanded them. For instance, when Hurley, the photographer, decided to go back to the ship to retrieve negatives, Shackleton gave him a severe scolding, even though films and photographs were Hurley's responsibilities. Furthermore, Shackleton was reluctant to delegate leadership. For example, he refused to let anyone else deal with issues, even stuck in his tent suffering from acute sciatica.

This discomfort towards initiatives may be related to Shackleton's military background and to an era that did not have the same appetite for participative leadership than today.

Participating and collaborating

Wild, Worsley and Hurley were regularly solicited to decide on strategies to adopt (Hurley was involved in this “directive committee” only so that Shackleton could keep an eye on him). Nevertheless, Shackleton always made the final decision, and seldom listened to the others. For instance, he ordered to walk through “grave dangers” to reach Paulet Island, even though Worsley was firmly against it. Later, Shackleton decided to attempt again another march despite mixed feelings from the others.

With the rest of the crew, Shackleton took actions without consulting the people impacted. When whalers advised him to wait because of the risk of ice floes, he still decided to leave for Antarctica without sharing these warnings to anyone. Also, he ordered to kill most of the animals during the journey, including dogs as well as the carpenter’s cat. These events provoked resentment from some and had a profound impact on everyone.

In conclusion, Shackleton did consult the crew’s representatives about most of the decisions but often discarded people’s opinions. Consequently, the maturity level for this theme cannot be higher than “Developed”.

Making decisions

During the expedition, Shackleton repeatedly gave his people responsibilities. On “Ocean Camp”, he divided the crew into five tents. He put people with strong character at their head and trusted them to ensure discipline and maintain morale high. Also, when he had to depart Elephant Island, he left Wild in charge of watching his interests “on [their] return to England”, saying that he had “every confidence in [him] and always have had” (Lansing, 1959). He also asked Hurley to take full responsibility for exploiting the films and negatives. He trusted their ability to make the right decisions, but there is no evidence that he involved them when establishing their level of decision making.

It appears that Shackleton was not open and transparent about sharing information. As discussed above, he did not tell the crew about the warnings from the whalers. Moreover, when his men did not manage to free the ship from the ice, he was worried that the expedition was over but told them it was just a delay. It is an understatement to say that he was not sharing much about his feelings.

Finally, Shackleton was tightly monitoring those trying to challenge the status quo, so that he could prevent them from speaking their mind too loudly. After McNeish confronted him, Shackleton decided to separate him from the rest of the crew as much as possible. This mindset was systemic of the whole organisation as it was also present on Elephant Island, where Orde-Lees was extremely frustrated when Wild systematically discarded his ideas (Order-Lees, 1916).

The organisation showed a “Developed” maturity level here. Indeed, Shackleton trusted and supported people to make some decisions, but he was not transpar-

ent enough about sharing all the relevant information that could have changed the party's course of actions.

Overall Performance Review

The overall performance level for this indicator is "Developed".

In a better performing organisation, people would take the lead without being perceived as rebels. Shackleton would be more transparent, involve everyone on the ship and listen to what they have to say. Also, independent-minded people would be a source of inspiration for others instead of being outcasted.

Building Capability - People's capabilities are actively managed and developed

Understanding people's potential

According to Orde-Lees, Shackleton "[knew] one's limitation better than one [did] oneself" (Order-Lees, 1914). However, there is no evidence he did actively assess and support their learning and development needs to go beyond and achieve their full potential. For example, Orde-Lees, the only reasonable skier among the crew, was surprised that Shackleton did not insist on every man learning how to ski. Even if they had managed to reach the land, it would have been next to impossible to keep up the expected pace because of their poor skiing skills. Thus, the maturity level for this theme is "Not met".

Supporting learning and development

Throughout the journey, Shackleton made sure that each idle period was productive. As a result, the crew started to develop as a learning organisation by experimenting and transforming this experience into knowledge (Senge, 1990). They learnt how to drive dog sledges, which became particularly useful to move the gear and boats on the ice, and developed their hunting skills, crucial for their survival.

Shackleton tried to make the most out of challenging conditions by encouraging the organisation to improve continuously. It was more of an opportunistic tactic than a long thought strategy though: if the journey had gone as planned, the party would probably have arrived on the land with no knowledge about dog sledges, which could have severely damaged their chances of success. Finally, since Shackleton was only focused on the organisation's goals and not on his men's personal development, the maturity level cannot be higher than "Established".

Deploying the right people at the right time

As discussed above, Shackleton's recruitment process was more focused on character than abilities. He especially looked for optimism and cheerfulness, which he thought were essential for such a perilous journey. This process accomplished

its purpose: the crew never gave up, and, despite their differences, they “seem to be a wonderful happy family” (Order-Lees, 1915).

Nevertheless, the interviews were always concise, and some of the questions seemed utterly random. Macklin, the surgeon, had been accepted after he made a joke about his spectacles and Hussey, the meteorologist, was on board because Shackleton was “amused to [receive an] application from the heart of Africa” (Hussey, 1949). On the other hand, Shackleton did not deem necessary to ask for basic skills, such as skiing, even though one of the organisation’s objectives was to travel through Antarctica almost as quickly as Amundsen, who highly relied on skis and sled dogs.

During this journey, Shackleton faced many situations he did not anticipate. As explained in (Markides, 2000), no strategy remains the same forever. When external conditions forced Shackleton to a strategic change of direction, he adopted a dynamic capabilities approach and used his in-depth knowledge of his men to assign them the right tasks, maximising efficiency and likelihood of success. For instance, he chose the carpenter to come on the *James Caird* because of his abilities as a sailor and took advantage of the survivalist skills of the photographer to fix and improvise equipment despite the lack of tools.

The level of maturity for this theme is “Established” because Shackleton did not ensure that critical roles were adequately filled. As an example, he did not put too much effort to try to find a dog driver when he realised it would not be easy to find one. He even discarded a ship’s officer that had travelled with Amundsen and left for Antarctica without dog driver.

Overall Performance Review

The overall performance level for this indicator is “Developed”.

A better performing organisation in this indicator would have identified the learning and development needs of its members and provided them with opportunities to learn and develop in line with the organisation’s objectives. Also, it would have invested purposefully in people’s personal development and assessed the outcomes of this investment. Finally, it would have identified the organisation’s needs in terms of capabilities and found people to fulfill them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Shackleton was a leader who could get people out of trouble in an extraordinary way. Every person that worked with him has praised his leadership, and he is probably the reason why the whole crew made it alive. However, his lack of transparency and his inability to anticipate future needs have had a significant role in the failure of the original mission. In this regard, he acted like an overprotective father who genuinely wants to take care of his children but thinks that he always knows best and does not prepare them for being on their own.

The following graph displays a summary of the organisation's overall performance.



Figure 1: Organisation's overall performance

This section will formulate recommendations to let the organisation move forward and improve.

Leading by example

During this expedition, the organisation had to face extremely changing situations. Shackleton played a crucial role in helping it get through these changes by maintaining “levels of energy and momentum throughout the ... process” (Howlett, 2018). Moreover, studies have shown that leaders who, like Shackleton, “act creatively”, make themselves “available for creative emulation, which in turn produces more creativity in followers” (Jaussi & Dionne, 2003). These behaviours should be continued to keep performing in these areas.

Implementing a No Blame Culture

The crew is like a high-reliability organisation (HRO), which is an organisation where an error “could lead to the destruction of the organisation” (Roberts, 1990) and thus requires “nearly error-free operations all the time” (Weick & Roberts, 1993). In this context, it is recommended to adopt a “no blame” approach where there is an “atmosphere of trust in which people are encouraged, even rewarded, for providing essential safety-related information” (Reasons, 1997). (Provera, Montefuco, & Canato, 2010) demonstrated that HRO can benefit from implementing a no-blame culture to ease communication, share knowledge, and be prepared for variability.

Encouraging Feedback

Shackleton did his best to mute the voice of people that disagreed with him. This behaviour ignored the potential of the team and diminished the effectiveness of the strategies he designed. (Gratton, 2011) indicates that open innovation is crucial for organisations that want to create innovative and effective strategies. Open innovation implies that members at every level of the organisation are solicited to participate in highly strategic debates. Different opinions should be embraced because it allows for finding more innovative ways to deliver the organisation’s objectives. The goal is to create a culture where everyone’s participation is encouraged and valued to generate creativity and innovation (Robinson, 2001) and become a learning organisation, where people are more intelligent together than they are apart (Senge, 1990).

Increasing Transparency

This report highlighted that Shackleton lacked openness and transparency about sharing relevant information and his feelings. A study found that “transparent leadership” boosts employees’ creativity (Han, 2017). The idea is that leaders should share information, reveal the reasons behind their decisions, and express their true feelings and vulnerabilities. Moreover, (Gratton, 2011) showed evidence that employees’ participation creates more value when leaders give them access to rich data, including confidential data about the organisation.

Identifying Future Needs

Shackleton communicated extensively with people on an intimate level. As a result, he knew them well, and that is a behaviour that should be perpetuated. However, he did not assess the organisation’s future needs accurately and thus was not able to proactively develop his people to fit these needs while fulfilling their aspirations. Also, the recruitment process was sometimes random because of this lack of futures thinking.

The ESTEMPLE analysis is an appropriate and efficient tool to identify the organisation’s future needs and design a learning strategy accordingly. It is

then easier to recruit competent people and develop them, so they align with this strategy.

Delegating

Evidence has shown that Shackleton sometimes struggled to delegate, particularly leadership. To move forward and improve, he could have empowered his people and provided them with enough autonomy. For instance, it would be beneficial to transfer the complete implementation of some decisions to other crew members. Indeed, several studies support a positive relationship between delegation and “both idea generation and application behaviour” (de Jong, Hartog, & Deanne, 2007).

Summary

The figure and table below summarise the key recommendations alongside an estimated effort to implement them, the impact they could have on the organisation and the indicator that they will improve. This device allows to prioritise the recommendations’ implementations.



Figure 2: Recommendations ROI

#	Recommendation	Relevant indicator
1	Implementing a “no blame” culture	Empowering and involving people
2	Encouraging and valuing feedback	Empowering and involving people
3	Sharing all relevant information	Empowering and involving people
4	Sharing true feelings	Leading and inspiring people
5	Identifying future needs	Building capability
6	Recruiting competent and relevant people	Building capability
7	Delegating the implementation of decisions	Empowering and involving people

Reflections

The stories about Shackleton always depict him as the hero. By reading them, one could forget that the original mission was a total failure. It creates a bias that clouds judgment when analysing people and culture strategies. In this context, using the “Investors In People” framework allowed to take a more objective approach, free from the emotions provoked by the situation. The diagnostic exposed Shackleton’s flaws while highlighting his strengths.

Shackleton’s leadership abilities that he’s known for remain accurate after the formal diagnostic. Nevertheless, the diagnostic revealed that the organisation has an axis of improvement on the development of leadership capability.

Regarding empowerment, the formal diagnostic showed strong objective evidence to support that Shackleton did not involve his people enough, nor did he encourage feedback and different opinions among the crew. He only delegated when he had no choice, and that did not always go well.

Finally, stories make it easy to overlook Shackleton’s poor planning skills and lack of futures thinking. Indeed, they usually insist on his abilities to rearrange the internal context of the organisation to adapt to the external challenges but forget that he may be one of the reasons why the ship is in such a desperate situation in the first place.

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