# 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 highly relevant for contemporary leaders navigating crisis, uncertainty, and complexity in organizational environments.

# Introduction

In 1911, the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen won the race to the South Pole, beating the British explorer Robert Falcon Scott, who died in the attempt. It was a massive setback for the British, who had dominated the exploration world until then. In an effort to restore their reputation, Sir Ernest Shackleton embarked, alongside 27 other crew members, on the so-called "Imperial Trans-Antarctica Expedition" (ITAE) in 1914, 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 having occurred more than a hundred years ago, this case study remains highly relevant in today's 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 organization in several indicators. The report will analyze and discuss the findings, then formulate recommendations to help the organization bridge the gap between the current level of maturity ("as is") and the next level to achieve ("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, the 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 to focus on survival and returning 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.

# Methodology

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 four maturity levels:

- Not met
- Developed – in place and understood
- Established – engaging and activating
- Advanced – creating positive outcomes
- High-Performing – embedded and always improving

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 makes it possible to translate historical leadership actions into measurable people-management outcomes and identify both strengths and development gaps.

> 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).

# Findings and Analysis

## Leading

### Creating Transparency and Trust

The objectives of the ITAE were unambiguous and outcomes-oriented: cross Antarctica from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea, document the journey, and restore Britain's polar prestige (The Times, 29 December 1913).

Shackleton reinforced this clarity by continuously providing a coherent vision to his crew, from recruitment onward. Even if his famous newspaper advertisement is likely apocryphal, its spirit captures his approach: "*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). Shackleton received many applications and deliberately filtered out the "mad" and "hopeless" applicants who did not fit the culture he intended to build. Moreover, his transparency increased as conditions deteriorated. Indeed, when it became clear the expedition had shifted from exploration to survival, Shackleton reframed the mission's purpose with equal clarity: return to civilization alive.

Trust-building came primarily through Shackleton's personal engagement. He spoke individually with crew members, showed genuine interest in their strengths, and consistently placed their welfare above his own. This behaviour generated extraordinary loyalty and trust. As Worsley later wrote in 1931, "*We would have gone anywhere with him without question just on his order.*" Such devotion is not accidental; it is the product of relational leadership executed at the highest level.

As a result, crew members accepted high-risk decisions with remarkable confidence, such as sliding down a South Georgia slope in the cold and dark, because they inferred reassurance, competence and benevolence from their leader's past behaviour. The crew's later willingness to rejoin him on future expeditions indicates a durable form of trust capital, not situational compliance.

From a human-resource perspective, Shackleton's approach demonstrated **"High-performing"** maturity level in clarity, consistency, and relational reliability.

### Motivating People to Deliver the Organization's Objectives

Shackleton recruited most of his men within minutes of meeting them, so it is unlikely that the crew began the expedition with an in-depth understanding of the mission's objectives.

However, once on board, he compensated for this initial gap by ensuring that goals were communicated clearly and that the crew understood what they needed to do to achieve them. An example that reflects this well is how they immediately jumped overboard with picks and shovels when a crack appeared in the ice to enlarge the opening and lead the ship toward open water. They also recognized the lifeboats as their "*ultimate salvation*", demonstrating alignment between purpose and behaviour.

A distinctive strength of Shackleton's approach was his reliance on evidence-based persuasion. He routinely measured distances, calculated food requirements, and adjusted course accordingly, modelling a literal version of the PDCA (Plan–Do–Check–Adjust) cycle. This rational framing of decisions increased understanding and reduced ambiguity, enabling the men to commit even under extreme uncertainty.

Shackleton also motivated his team by meeting their fundamental needs: physiological, safety, love and self-esteem (Maslow, 1943). He recognised that in a survival context, psychological stability mattered as much as physical endurance. His practice of serving hot meals whenever a man showed signs of weakness, without identifying the individual, preserved dignity while restoring morale.

Given the extreme situation, he did not require his men to reach self-actualization (the latest need in Maslow's hierarchy of needs). 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 in need. Moreover, when they abandoned the ship, he helped them through the transition. Indeed, 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 embraced their new mission of returning home by other means.

Through his optimism, passion and willpower, 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 for 36 hours with virtually no rest, crossing the uncharted part of South Georgia Island to reach civilization. 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). Therefore, the maturity level for this theme is also "High-performing".

**Developing Leadership Capability**

Frank Wild, Second in Command, 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, relying instead 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, Frank Worsley, was wild, erratic and impulsive. Shackleton always felt the need to watch him and reduced his authority after he failed to maintain discipline on board during the trip to Buenos Aires (at the beginning of the expedition).

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

Considering the gathered evidence, Shackleton's organization 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" organization, managers would know precisely the extent to which they are expected to lead, manage, and develop their people. Shackleton would also have recruited more capable managers and made his expectations explicit. Such managers would be predictable and would proactively encourage feedback from their people.

## Supporting

### Empowering People

Shackleton provided support and information so that his people could work properly and develop their skills. 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 the initiative, he reprimanded them. For instance, when Frank 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 when stuck in his tent suffering from acute sciatica.

This discomfort towards initiatives may be related to Shackleton's military background and an era that did not have the same appetite for participative leadership as 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 them to walk through grave dangers to reach Paulet Island, even though Worsley was firmly against it. Later, Shackleton decided to attempt another march despite mixed feelings from the others.

With the rest of the crew, Shackleton took action without consulting the people impacted. Despite whalers advising him to wait due to the risk of ice floes (which eventually sealed their fate), he still decided to leave for Antarctica without sharing these warnings with 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 high morale. 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.

However, 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 failed to free the ship from the ice, he was worried that the expedition was over, but he told them it was just a delay. It is an understatement to say that he was not sharing much about his thoughts.

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 (the carpenter) confronted him, Shackleton decided to separate him from the rest of the crew as much as possible. This mindset was systemic throughout the organization, as it was also present on Elephant Island, where Orde-Lees (skier and motor expert, from the Navy) was extremely frustrated when Wild systematically discarded his ideas (Orde-Lees, 1916).

The organization showed a "Developed" maturity level here. Indeed, Shackleton trusted and supported people to make some decisions. However, he was not transparent enough about sharing all the relevant information that could have changed the party's course of action.

### Overall Performance Review

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

In a better-performing organization, 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 ostracized.

## Improving Capabilities

### Understanding People's Potential

According to Orde-Lees, Shackleton "*[knew] one's limitation better than one [did] oneself*" (Orde-Lees, 1914). However, there is no evidence that he actively assessed and supported 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 nearly impossible to maintain the expected pace due to 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 organization by experimenting and transforming this experience into knowledge (Senge, 1990). They learned how to drive dog sleds, which became particularly useful for moving gear and boats on the ice, and they developed their hunting skills, crucial for their survival.

Shackleton tried to make the most out of challenging conditions by encouraging the organization to improve continuously. It was more of an opportunistic tactic than a well-thought-out strategy, however. If the journey had gone as planned, the party would have arrived on the land without knowledge of dog sleds, which could have severely damaged their chances of success. Finally, since Shackleton was only focused on the organization's goals and not on his men's personal development, the maturity level for this aspect 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*" (Orde-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 consider it necessary to acquire basic skills, such as skiing, even though one of the organization's objectives was to travel through Antarctica as quickly as Amundsen, who heavily 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. He used his in-depth knowledge of his men to assign them the right tasks, maximizing efficiency and likelihood of success. For instance, he chose the carpenter to come on the *James Caird* because of his abilities as a sailor. Also, he took advantage of the photographer's survivalist skills to fix and improvise equipment despite the lack of tools.

The maturity level for this theme is "Established" because Shackleton did not ensure that critical roles were adequately filled. A memorable example is his failure to secure a dog driver when he realized it would not be an easy task. He even discarded a ship's officer who had travelled with Amundsen and ultimately left for Antarctica without a dog driver.

**Overall Performance Review**

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

A better-performing organization would have identified the learning and development needs of its members and offered opportunities aligned with its strategic objectives. It would have anticipated capability requirements, recruited accordingly, and invested purposefully in personal development while assessing the outcomes of these efforts.

# Discussion

Popular accounts of Shackleton's expedition often portray him as a hero, emphasizing his courage and humanity while overlooking the mission's complete operational failure. This narrative bias tends to cloud assessments of his leadership and organizational practices. Applying the Investors in People framework offers a more objective lens through which to evaluate Shackleton's performance, separating emotional admiration from evidence-based analysis.

The assessment confirmed Shackleton's exceptional ability to inspire trust, maintain morale, and lead with empathy under extreme conditions. However, it also revealed structural weaknesses within his organization, particularly in leadership development and delegation. Decision-making remained highly centralized, and feedback from subordinates was limited. These findings suggest that while Shackleton excelled in personal influence, he did not fully empower others to lead or contribute strategically.

Finally, the analysis highlights a less-discussed aspect of Shackleton's leadership: his limited planning and foresight. While he demonstrated extraordinary adaptability in crisis, this reactive strength may have compensated for earlier shortcomings in preparation. The expedition's near-catastrophic circumstances can thus be partly attributed to weaknesses in risk anticipation and strategic thinking, a reminder that resilience, however admirable, cannot replace proactive planning and distributed leadership.

# Recommendations

Shackleton was a leader who could get people out of trouble in an extraordinary way. Every person who 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 believes he always knows best, leaving them unprepared to be on their own.

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

This section will formulate recommendations to help the organization move forward and improve.

Figure 1: Organization's overall performance

## Leading by Example

During this expedition, the organization had to face rapidly changing situations. Shackleton played a crucial role in helping it get through these changes by maintaining "*levels of energy and momentum throughout the [...] process*" (CIPD | Change Management, 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 maintained to keep performing in these areas.

## Implementing a No Blame Culture

The crew functions as a high-reliability organization (HRO), where any error "*could lead to the destruction of the organization*" (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, creating an "*atmosphere of trust in which people are encouraged, even rewarded, for providing essential safety-related information*" (Reason, 1997). (Provera, Montefuco, & Canato, 2010) demonstrated that HROs can benefit from implementing such a culture, as it improves communication, facilitates knowledge sharing, and strengthens preparedness for variability.

### Encouraging Feedback

Shackleton did his best to mute the voices of people who disagreed with him. This behaviour ignored the potential of the team and diminished the effectiveness of the strategies he designed. (Gratton, 2011) emphasizes that open innovation is crucial for organizations that want to create innovative and effective strategies. Open innovation implies that members at every level of the organization are invited to contribute to highly strategic debates. Different opinions should be embraced because they enable the discovery of more innovative ways to achieve the organization's objectives. The goal is to create a culture where everyone's participation is encouraged and valued, fostering creativity and innovation (Robinson, 2001), and become a learning organization in which collective intelligence consistently exceeds individual contributions (Senge, 1990).

### Increasing Transparency

This report highlighted that Shackleton lacked openness and transparency in sharing relevant information and his feelings. A study found that transparent leadership boosts employees' creativity (Yi et al., 2016). 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 organization, thereby reinforcing both trust and alignment.

### Identifying Future Needs

Shackleton communicated extensively with people on an intimate level. As a result, he knew them well, which is a behaviour that should be perpetuated. However, he did not accurately assess the organization's future needs 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 partly because of this lack of future thinking.

The ESTEMPLE analysis, for example, is an appropriate and efficient tool to identify the organization's future needs and design a learning strategy accordingly. It is then easier to recruit competent people and develop them in alignment with this strategy.

## Delegating

Evidence has shown that Shackleton sometimes struggled to delegate, particularly in matters of leadership. To move forward and improve, he could have empowered his people and provided them with greater autonomy. For instance, transferring the full implementation of certain decisions to other crew members would have deepened capability and ownership. 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, including the estimated effort required for implementation, the potential impact on the organization, and the indicators they will improve. This tool allows leaders to prioritize the implementation of recommendations.



Figure 2: Recommendations ROI

| # | Recommendation | Relevant indicator |
|---|----------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Implementing a "no blame" culture | Supporting |
| 2 | Encouraging and valuing feedback | Supporting |

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| # | Recommendation | Relevant indicator |
|---|---|---|
| 3 | Sharing all relevant information | Supporting |
| 4 | Sharing true feelings | Leading |
| 5 | Identifying future needs | Improving |
| 6 | Recruiting competent and relevant people | Improving |
| 7 | Delegating the implementation of decisions | Supporting |

## Conclusion

This analysis of Sir Ernest Shackleton's leadership through the Investors in People framework highlights both his extraordinary strengths and organizational shortcomings. Shackleton demonstrated exceptional emotional intelligence, communication, and courage, successfully maintaining morale and cohesion under life-threatening conditions. However, his leadership was also highly centralized and reactive, with limited delegation, transparency, and strategic foresight. These gaps reduced the crew's autonomy and learning capacity, revealing the limits of a purely heroic leadership model.

Shackleton's legacy endures as a lesson in balancing inspiration with empowerment. Effective leadership requires not only the ability to guide people through crises but also the foresight to prepare them for independence and change. His example reminds modern leaders that resilience and empathy must be matched by openness, collaboration, and long-term vision to create organizations capable of thriving beyond adversity.

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