

Ernest Shackleton – Exemplary Leadership Lessons From a Failed Mission

In August of 1914, British explorer Ernest Shackleton set out on his mission to be the first to reach Antarctica and walk across the continent on foot. The mission was undoubtedly a colossal failure. His ship, the Endurance, never reached Antarctica. None of its 28 crew members set foot on the continent, instead having to endure 2 years of horror. Nevertheless, the story of Ernest Shackleton and his failed expedition is one of history's most dramatic and inspiring accounts of leadership in the face of extreme adversity.



The Expedition Begins

1

Initial Progress

The adventure really hit the ground running at the beginning, as the Endurance ship made great progress towards Antarctica.

2

Trapped in Ice

However, the expedition ground to a halt in January 1915, within sight of the Antarctic mainland, when the Endurance became trapped in ice, leaving Shackleton and his 27 crew members completely stranded with no hope of movement until next summer.

3

Countering Threats

Shackleton knew immediately that in order for his team to survive he had to counter the fear, boredom and pessimism which threatened to take hold while stuck in the ice. He gauged that this would pose a greater threat than the cold itself.

Leadership in Crisis

1 Maintaining Duties

In order to combat this, he required that each man maintain his ordinary duties as closely as possible. Sailors cleaned the boat; scientists collected samples from the ice; others were assigned to hunt seals and penguins for food.

2 Leading by Example

Shackleton insisted on carrying out some of the most difficult tasks himself, showing a willingness to suffer alongside his team and lead by example even in the harshest of situations.

3 Boosting Morale

He insisted that everyone ate together and socialized after dinner in order to boost morale.

The Ship Sinks

1

June 1915

Days became weeks, and weeks became months, and still the ice held the ship. By June 1915 — midwinter in the Southern Hemisphere — the ship was weakening under the pressure created by the ice.

2

October 1915

In October water started pouring into the Endurance.

3

Abandoning Ship

Shackleton ordered the crew to leave the sinking ship and make camp on nearby ice with three small lifeboats, some tents and limited supplies.



Exemplary Leadership

Setting New Goals

The next morning, he immediately announced a new goal: To go home. By immediately setting a goal, he was able to foster a sense of shared mission and a sense of purpose. This also kept his team's focus on the future. The ship was gone; previous plans were irrelevant. Now his goal was to bring the team home safely, and he improvised, adapted and used every resource at his disposal to achieve it.

Embodying the Mission

Shackleton realized that he himself had to embody the new survival mission — not only in what he said and did, but also in his energy and mood. He knew that each day, his positive presence had huge impact on the men's mindsets. He struck a delicate balance of maintaining honesty about the situation, whilst keeping his own confidence and mood high. When these flagged, he never let his men know.

Managing Opposition

When a few men expressed scepticism about his plans, he acted quickly to contain their opposition and negativity by trying to win them over and keeping close watch on them. He assigned several potential troublemakers to his own tent, so that he could understand their reservations more closely and foster trust.



Journey to Elephant Island

1

Ice Breaking Up

By April 1916, the ice began breaking up, and Shackleton ordered the men to the lifeboats to find land.

2

Stormy Seas

After a week of stormy seas, they arrived at the deserted Elephant Island.

3

Risky Decision

At this point, Shackleton again demonstrated his ability to make highly risky calls under extreme pressure. He knew that the only way to rescue all of the team was to find a bigger boat.



The Rescue Mission

1

Perilous Journey

He decided to sail on an 800-mile journey with 5 of his team through some of the most dangerous seas in the world to South Georgia Island, where he knew he would find help.

2

Leaving Men Behind

This meant leaving 22 men behind on a deserted island, not knowing whether he would ever return. Such was the trust that Shackleton had built among his team, along with demonstrations of dedication and commitment, Shackleton's men were sure that he would return to rescue them one day.

3

Reaching South Georgia

On South Georgia island, they finally found people, and began looking for a ship to rescue the rest of his team back on Elephant Island.



Final Rescue

1

Failed Attempts

During the next months, he tried to reach there in 3 different ships, but couldn't cut through the ice nearby.

2

Successful Rescue

Finally, 4 months later, on Aug. 30, 1916, Shackleton reached the island and rescued all 22 remaining men.

3

Mission Accomplished

After 2 years of hellish conditions, they whole team made it back home safely.

Based on the context of the presentation, can you match the words in the box to the definitions listed below? Then add the word into the example sentence. You may need to change the form of the word to fit the meaning of the sentence.



undoubtedly

in the face of adversity

to hit the ground running

to ground to a halt

to counter

to gauge

to pose a threat

to lead by example

exemplary

to flag

to win over

reservations

to make a call

1. To start a task or project with energy and immediate focus, making quick progress:

"If we onboard the new hires this week, they'll be ready to _____ by the product launch."

2. To persuade someone to agree with or support an idea, plan or opinion: _____

"Not everyone is supportive of our new sustainability initiative. We need a strong presentation to _____ the board."

3. While dealing with difficulties or challenging circumstances: _____

"During the supply chain disruption, the team showed incredible resourcefulness _____."

4. To become more tired and less enthusiastic: _____

"Some team members started to _____ near the end of the project."



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5. To measure or assess something, such as a level of interest, a level of risk, a reaction or a situation: _____

“We will conduct a survey in order to _____ customer interest in our new product.”

6. Doubts or concerns about a decision, plan, or idea: _____

“I have some _____ about the proposed timeline. It seems a little bit too ambitious.”

7. Certainly, without any doubt: _____

“She is _____ the best candidate for the role based on her performances during the interviews and the group tasks.”

8. To act in opposition to something: _____

“We should come up with a plan in order to _____ this decline in sales.”



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9. To make a decision, especially in a situation that requires action or judgement: _____

"It is a really difficult decision, but I am willing to _____ on it."

10. Serving as an excellent example, often used to describe performance or behaviour: _____

"The team's work on this project has been _____."

"He has shown _____ leadership during this difficult time."

11. To be a potential danger, risk, or challenge to something or someone: _____

"Our competitors _____ to our market position."

12. To demonstrate the desired behaviour or attitude through one's own actions, setting a standard for others to follow: _____

"She is always the first person to arrive in the office every morning. She always strives to _____."

13. To slow down significantly and then stop completely, often referring to processes or progress: _____

"Bugs in the software have caused the project to _____."

Comprehension: Can you answer the questions below about the text?

According to Ernest Shackleton, what was the biggest problem facing the team when they got stuck in the ice?

In what ways was Shackleton able to demonstrate strong leadership qualities when the ship first got stuck?

Based on the context of the sentence, what do you think the phrasal verb 'stepped up' means in paragraph 5?

Summarize the 3 key takeaways from Shackleton's leadership after he ordered the crew to leave the Endurance ship

Why was Shackleton able to leave 22 men alone on a deserted island without encountering any pushback or resistance?

Below you can find a paragraph. Can you fill in the gaps in the paragraph with the words from the box below? You may need to change the form of some of the verbs in order for them to fit into the sentence.

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Potential Supply Chain Disruptions

As you may all be aware, there are political tensions in certain seas along our supply chain route from China to Europe. These tensions could severely disrupt operations. As these tensions are getting worse by the day, I believe that they _____ to our business, as the whole supply chain could _____ . In order to _____ this threat, I have made a very important _____. I have decided to look for a new supplier right here in Europe. I know that some of you will _____ have strong _____ about this move, because a new supplier is likely to be much more expensive than our current supplier. However, I have calculated all the risks, and I believe that the cost of potential supply chain disruptions will be far greater than a slight increase in the cost of our products. I have calculated the figures and probabilities involved, and I aim to _____ any doubters with a compelling presentation.

We need to make sure that any new supplier offers absolutely _____ service in order to measure up to the standards of our current supplier.