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A Dealer in Hope

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In 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton and his crew set sail from London toward Antarctica aboard *Endurance*. The ship *Endurance* was ironically named because it never reached its destination; it was “frozen in” about a day away from its planned landing point. This led to a ten-month ordeal while the crew waited for the weather to warm enough for the ice to soften, but even after all this time, the ship was still stuck. With hopes crushed, a new mission emerged: that of staying alive. After the crew attempted to march to land, they camped on the ice for six more months. At last the ice opened up enough to allow them to use lifeboats to reach an island and bring the crew to safety. Remarkably, all 28 of the crew survived.

Like most leaders, Shackleton faced many problems during this expedition. His original mission failed spectacularly. He didn't even come close to achieving his goal; he merely survived in the most difficult of circumstances. He had to handle fears, stop negativity, prevent stress and work with limited resources. All he really achieved was damage control, but he did it in a most spectacular way.

His biographers wrote: “Shackleton's wisdom is by no means simple or obvious. Much of it is counterintuitive, especially for those schooled in more conventional management tactics. Shackleton served tea in bed to the ship's crybaby, flattered the egomaniacs, and kept close to him the most abrasive personalities. Often, he made great personal sacrifices. Sometimes he led by not leading at all.”^[1]

Shackleton was optimistic about success and he inspired this optimism in others. He let everyone know that he was in charge and confident of success. He kept up the crew's spirits by making things fun, such as soccer matches on the ice, dog racing and other goofing off, creating the atmosphere of a summer camp. He redefined his goals as the environment changed, obliterating the failure to achieve the previous goal with the success of attaining the new one.

Shackleton got his crew through a crisis by using a variety of methods:

- He immediately addressed the crew and asked for their support.
- He defused tension and kept the crew busy.
- He let all members of the crew participate in the solution.
- He was patient, and sometimes did nothing but watch and wait.
- He gave the crew early warnings of unpopular decisions to let them get used to the idea.
- He kept the malcontents close to him where he could influence them and win them over.

In today's economic situation, having to lead in difficult times and in crisis situations is a sobering thought. To remember Shackleton is to remember that leaders are “dealers in hope” (Napoleon). Shackleton's way was to use the tools he had at his disposal: humor, generosity, intelligence, strength, and compassion, even in a time when all hope could easily have been lost.

^[1] Morrell, Margot and Stephanie Capparell. 2001. *Shackleton's Way: Leadership Lessons From the Great Antarctic Explorer*. Viking Press: New York.

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