

Last word

Extreme engagement in a harsh climate



Few historic leaders have shown so many traits of true, modern-day engagement under such harsh conditions as Ernest Shackleton did for his crew to the Antarctic back in 1914. Engagement thought leader **Bob Kelleher** explores what made Shackleton the engagement trailblazer and what organisations today can learn from him

Think back to England, circa 1914. Can you ever imagine leaders from this era being advocates of employee engagement? Let's take it a step further – is it possible in a world of cutting edge polar exploration, known for autocratic leadership, to have within its ranks an Antarctic explorer who practiced today's more enlightened leadership style back in 1914?

After extensive research of the famed Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, it is apparent to me that Shackleton was truly our first engaged leader. Although a coercive leadership style was common in England in 1914, Shackleton's humane leadership style was both unique and effective as he led 27 men to accomplish the extraordinary.

In 1914, Shackleton set sail on his ship – the *Endurance* – with 27 carefully selected shipmates whose goal was to cross the Antarctic continent by foot.

Shortly after reaching the Antarctic, however, the *Endurance* was trapped in ice, and drifted aimlessly across the treacherous Weddell Sea for 10 months, before being crushed by the ice and sinking. Now ship-less, aside from three small life boats, Shackleton and his men floated on ice for months on end. Shackleton's extraordinary leadership skills managed to keep his men focused, engaged, and most importantly, inspired to reach their vision.

He knew when to communicate a changed vision ("My new goal is to keep you alive"), when to 'walk the talk' (often the first one with the pick in hand to break up the ice), when to demonstrate succession planning (often rotating the men to different assignments on the *Endurance* – unheard of in 1914), and how to hire people to fit one's culture. In fact, although Shackleton's Antarctic exploration is often considered the greatest survival story of all times, I believe it is one of the greatest 'hiring' stories of all times.

With the days getting longer and the ice melting, Shackleton knew he had to make a decision to leave the melting ice and sail for land in his three lifeboats. They landed on Elephant Island, an inhospitable place and far from any shipping routes. It was a difficult decision but

Shackleton took sail again with a smaller group of men in an open-boat journey destined for the Island of South Georgia, a distant whaling station. This leg of the journey involved crossing 800 miles of the world's most forbidding seas in an open boat. Eventually, Shackleton found help on the Island of South Georgia and returned for the rest of his men.

After approximately two years away, Shackleton enjoyed a hero's return on his return to England in 1916, with all 28 men alive. Like the golfer who knows which club to grab, Shackleton knew how to engage his men by adopting different leadership styles depending on the situation. When the men needed direction, his leadership style became more authoritarian. When the more junior men were homesick, Shackleton would switch to a more altruistic leadership style. When there was work to be done under tight deadlines, Shackleton would personally exemplify a pacesetter style. And during times of emergencies, when quick action was necessary, Shackleton's style became necessarily coercive.

In the research on engagement, experts note that the true capture of discretionary effort is most apt to occur when staff believes their leader cares about their well being. Only then are people willing to go the extra mile. Historians have noted after reading leftover diaries and logs, there were countless examples of Shackleton putting the well being of his men in front of himself. A simple gesture of exchanging his dry mittens for someone else's wet mittens was but one example of Shackleton caring for his men.

Engagement experts often talk about the importance of 'line of sight' in fostering employee engagement – creating a link between the vision and one's job. Shackleton would often reinforce this link, acknowledging that all of the jobs on the ship were equally important, from the captain to the cook – and linking all the jobs with the ultimate goal.

It is often said that engaged leaders inspire others to follow. Shackleton was an optimist, who inspired hope and 'followship' in a death-defying adventure in the world's most extreme climate. ■