

*Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage*

By Alfred Lansing



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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/sir-ernest-shackleton>

## Summary

1. Lansing recalls the how Ernest Shackleton and his men stuck together and survived the world's most brutal conditions for nearly two years.

## Key Takeaways

### 1. Leadership

- a. Thus, while Shackleton was undeniably out of place, even inept, in a great many everyday situations, he had a talent—a genius, even—that he shared with only a handful of men throughout history—genuine leadership. He was, as one of his men put it, “the greatest leader that ever came on God’s earth, bar none.” For all his blind spots and inadequacies, Shackleton merited this tribute: For scientific leadership give me Scott; for swift and efficient travel, Amundsen; but when you are in a hopeless situation, when there seems no way out, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton.
- b. Though he was virtually fearless in the physical sense, he suffered an almost pathological dread of losing control of the situation. In part, this attitude grew out of a consuming sense of responsibility. He felt he had gotten them into their situation, and it was his responsibility to get them out. As a consequence, **he was intensely watchful for potential troublemakers who might nibble away at the unity of the group. Shackleton felt that if dissension arose, the party as a whole might not put forth that added ounce of energy which could mean, at a time of crisis, the difference between survival and defeat. Thus he was prepared to go to almost any length to keep the party close-knit and under his control.**
  - i. *As Ford, Patterson, Firestone, and others showed, it is worth going to almost any length to keep the group united and optimistic*
- c. **Shackleton was concerned. Of all their enemies—the cold, the ice, the sea—he feared none more than demoralization.**
- d. When morning came, the weather was dull and overcast, but the temperature had climbed to 6 above zero. The men turned out stiff and cold from sleeping on the ice. It took a very long time for them to wake up. Shackleton did not press them, and after a time they turned to the job of sorting out equipment and stowing it securely on the sledges. It was a quiet time, and very few orders were given. Everyone understood his job and went about it without having to be told.
- e. Nevertheless, there was a remarkable absence of discouragement. All the men were in a state of dazed fatigue, and nobody paused to reflect on the terrible consequences of losing their ship. Nor were they upset by the fact that they were now camped on a piece of ice perhaps 6 feet thick. It was a haven compared with the nightmare of labor and uncertainty of the last few days on the Endurance. It was quite enough to be alive—and they were merely doing what they had to do to stay that way. **There was even a trace of mild exhilaration in their attitude. At least, they had a clear-cut task ahead of them. The nine months of indecision, of speculation about what might happen, of aimless drifting with the pack**

were over. Now they simply had to get themselves out, however appallingly difficult that might be.

- i. *Indecision and speculation are some of the hardest things to live with. Make quick and decisive decision if they are able to be undone relatively easily. If not, take some more time...*
- f. Speaking with the utmost conviction, Shackleton pointed out that no article was of any value when weighed against their ultimate survival, and he exhorted them to be ruthless in ridding themselves of every unnecessary ounce, regardless of its value. After he had spoken, he reached under his parka and took out a gold cigarette case and several gold sovereigns and threw them into the snow at his feet. Then he opened the Bible Queen Alexandra had given them and ripped out the flyleaf and the page containing the Twenty-third Psalm. He also tore out the page from the Book of Job with this verse on it: “Out of whose womb came the ice? And the hoary frost of Heaven, who hath gendered it? The waters are hid as with a stone. And the face of the deep is frozen.” Then he laid the Bible in the snow and walked away. **It was a dramatic gesture, but that was the way Shackleton wanted it. From studying the outcome of past expeditions, he believed that those that burdened themselves with equipment to meet every contingency had fared much worse than those that had sacrificed total preparedness for speed.**
  - i. *Sacrifice preparedness for speed.*
- g. Though Hurley was a skilled photographer and an excellent worker, he was also the sort of man who responded best to flattery, who frequently needed to be jollied along and made to feel important. **Shackleton sensed this need—he may even have overestimated it—and he was afraid that unless he catered to it, Hurley might feel slighted and possibly spread discontent among the others. And so Shackleton frequently sought Hurley’s opinion, and he was careful to compliment him on his work. He also assigned Hurley to his own tent, which appealed to Hurley’s snobbishness and also minimized his opportunities for gathering other latent malcontents around himself.**
  - i. *Amazing how deeply Shackleton got to know his men and how this impacted how he treated and dealt with everyone*
- h. **He wanted to appear familiar with the men. He even worked at it, insisting on having exactly the same treatment, food, and clothing. He went out of his way to demonstrate his willingness to do the menial chores, such as taking his turn as “Peggy” to get the mealtime pot of hoosh from the galley to his tent. And he occasionally became furious when he discovered that the cook had given him preferential treatment because he was the “Boss.” But it was inescapable. He was the Boss.**
- i. The fact that the entire party had been kept occupied contributed much to their feeling of well-being...Every available time-killing pastime was exploited to the fullest and often much beyond. On February 6, James wrote: “Hurley & Boss play religiously a set of six games of poker patience every afternoon. I think each rather regards it a duty but it certainly passes away an hour. The worst thing is having to kill time. It seems such a waste, yet there is nothing else to do.”

- j. Then Greenstreet paused to get his breath, and in that instant his anger was spent and he suddenly fell silent. Everyone else in the tent became quiet, too, and looked at Greenstreet, shaggy-haired, bearded, and filthy with blubber soot, holding his empty mug in his hand and looking helplessly down into the snow that had thirstily soaked up his precious milk. **The loss was so tragic he seemed almost on the point of weeping. Without speaking, Clark reached out and poured some of his milk into Greenstreet’s mug. Then Worsley, then Macklin, and Rickenson and Kerr, Orde-Lees, and finally Blackboro. They finished in silence.**
- i. *Beautiful scene in which one man loses his precious cup of powdered milk and everyone else, without prompting, shares. This is a team that is all-in*
- k. Shackleton searched their faces for an answer to the question that troubled him most: How much more could they take? There was no single answer. Some men looked on the point of breaking, while others showed an unmistakable determination to hold out. At least, all of them had survived the night.
- l. All this had been discussed and discussed again. And though the Caird’s chances of actually reaching South Georgia were remote, a great many men genuinely wanted to be taken along. The prospect of staying behind, of waiting and not knowing, of possibly wintering on this hateful island was far from attractive. Shackleton had already made up his mind, after long discussions with Wild, not only as to who should be taken, but who should not be left behind.
- i. *Took each man into account and understood their personality and the group dynamics. He knew not only who should come but also who should be left behind.*
- m. **There was also a good deal of bartering in the matter of rations, and several food pools were formed. Typical of these was the “sugar pool” in which each man who belonged passed up one of his three lumps of sugar each day in order to partake of a feast when his turn came around every sixth or seventh day. Wild made no objection to this sort of thing. In fact he permitted a wide range of flexibility in most matters. It served to avoid friction and it gave the men something to occupy their minds.**
2. Optimism
- a. This indomitable self-confidence of Shackleton’s took the form of optimism. And it worked in two ways: it set men’s souls on fire; as Macklin said, just to be in his presence was an experience. It was what made Shackleton so great a leader. But at the same time, the basic egotism that gave rise to his enormous self-reliance occasionally blinded him to realities. He tacitly expected those around him to reflect his own extreme optimism, and he could be almost petulant if they failed to do so. Such an attitude, he felt, cast doubt on him and his ability to lead them to safety.
- b. But there was very little depression on board the *Endurance*. The coming of the polar night somehow drew the men closer together. When the *Endurance* sailed from England, there could hardly have been a more heterogeneous collection of individuals. They varied from Cambridge University dons to Yorkshire fishermen. **But after nine months of being together almost constantly and living and working in the same close quarters, the men had built up a**

**backlog of shared experiences that offset the vast differences between them.**

During these nine months, the men on board the Endurance had come to know one another very well indeed. And with few exceptions, they had come to like one another, too.

- c. Besides these spontaneous affairs, there was a regular series of social occasions. Each Saturday night before the men turned in a ration of grog was issued to all hands, followed by the toast, “To our sweethearts and wives.” Invariably a chorus of voices added, “May they never meet.”
- d. There was now actual daylight for about three hours every day, plus seven or eight hours of twilight. The men resumed their hockey games on the ice, and some spirited contests were held.
- e. Macklin commented: “I cannot help feeling sorry for Worsley at the mouth of our tent, for he gets the wet brought in by everybody.” Worsley, however, was far from distressed. He wrote in his diary that same night: **“The rapidity with which one can completely change one’s ideas . . . and accommodate ourselves to a state of barbarism is wonderful.”**
- f. They were castaways in one of the most savage regions of the world, drifting they knew not where, without a hope of rescue, subsisting only so long as Providence sent them food to eat. **And yet they had adjusted with surprisingly little trouble to their new life, and most of them were quite sincerely happy. The adaptability of the human creature is such that they actually had to remind themselves on occasion of their desperate circumstances.** On November 4, Macklin wrote in his diary: “It has been a lovely day, and it is hard to think we are in a frightfully precarious situation.” It was an observation typical of the entire party. **There was not a hero among them, at least not in the fictional sense.** Still not a single diary reflected anything beyond the matter-of-fact routine of each day’s business. There was only one major change in their general outlook—their attitude toward food. Worsley had this to say: “It is scandalous—all we seem to live for and think of now is food. I have never in my life taken half such a keen interest in food as I do now—and we are all alike. .
- g. In some ways they had come to know themselves better. In this lonely world of ice and emptiness, they had achieved at least a limited kind of contentment. They had been tested and found not wanting. They thought of home, naturally, but there was no burning desire to be in civilization for its own sake.
- h. **Through one means or another, they kept their spirits up—mostly by building dreams.**
- i. There was, on the whole, an astounding absence of serious antagonisms, considering the conditions under which they were attempting to exist. **Possibly it was because they were in a state of almost perpetual minor friction. Arguments rambled on the whole day through, and they served to let off a great deal of steam which might otherwise have built up. In addition, the party had been reduced to an almost classless society in which most of them felt free to speak their minds, and did.** A man who stepped on another man’s head trying to find his way out at night was treated to the same abuse as any other, regardless of what his station might once have been.

- i. *Constant “pressure release valves” are important. You can’t let problems reach a critical mass, when it’s too late to stop or do anything about it. “Perpetual minor friction” is healthier and more robust than “always perfect” conditions*
- j. But there were definite fluctuations in morale, in accordance with the weather and whether the pack was in or out. When the sun did shine, the island became a place of rugged beauty, with the sunlight shimmering off the glaciers, producing indescribably vivid colors that were constantly changing. For all the party, it was difficult to be unhappy on days like this. But most of the time the island was far from beautiful.
- k. Only very occasionally did they think about South Georgia. It was so remote, so Utopian that it was almost depressing to contemplate. **No man could have endured with just that to keep him going. Instead, life was reckoned in periods of a few hours, or possibly only a few minutes—an endless succession of trials leading to deliverance from the particular hell of the moment.** When a man was awakened to go on watch, the focal point of his existence became that time, four hours away, when he could slither back into the cold, wet rockiness of the sleeping bag he was now leaving.
- l. Her crew consisted of six men whose faces were black with caked soot and half-hidden by matted beards, whose bodies were dead white from constant soaking in salt water. In addition, their faces, and particularly their fingers were marked with ugly round patches of missing skin where frostbites had eaten into their flesh. Their legs from the knees down were chafed and raw from the countless punishing trips crawling across the rocks in the bottom. And all of them were afflicted with salt water boils on their wrists, ankles, and buttocks. But had someone unexpectedly come upon this bizarre scene, undoubtedly the most striking thing would have been the attitude of the men . . . relaxed, even faintly jovial—almost as if they were on an outing of some sort.
- m. For thirteen days they had suffered through almost ceaseless gales, then finally a huge rogue sea. They had been the underdog, fit only to endure the punishment inflicted on them. But sufficiently provoked, there is hardly a creature on God’s earth that ultimately won’t turn and attempt to fight, regardless of the odds. In an unspoken sense, that was much the way they felt now. **They were possessed by an angry determination to see the journey through—no matter what. They felt that they had earned it.**
- n. All of them fell sullen—even Shackleton, who from the beginning had required of the men that they make every effort to remain cheerful in order to avoid antagonisms. But it seemed too much—to be so close, possibly only one good day’s run, and to have to stop. The strain on Shackleton was so great that he lost his temper over a trivial incident. A small, bob-tailed bird appeared over the boat and flew annoyingly about, like a mosquito intent on landing. Shackleton stood it for several minutes, then he leaped to his feet, swearing and batting furiously at the bird with his arms. But he realized at once the poor example he had set and dropped back down again with a chagrined expression on his face.

- i. *Shackleton wasn't immune to any of these pressures, insecurities, doubts. He just knew that he had to suppress them for his men but cracks like this show just how much this was weighing on him*

3. Other

- a. The ship had been named the *Polaris*. After the sale, Shackleton rechristened her *Endurance*, in keeping with the motto of his family, *Fortitudine vincimus*—"By endurance we conquer."
- b. *The Endurance* was one of the strongest and sturdiest wooden ships ever built – Outside this planking, to keep her from being chafed by the ice, there was a sheathing from stem to stern of greenheart, a wood so heavy it weighs more than solid iron and so tough that it cannot be worked with ordinary tools. **She was designed by Aanderud Larsen so that every joint and every fitting cross-braced something else for the maximum strength. Her construction was meticulously supervised by a master wood shipbuilder, Christian Jacobsen, who insisted on employing men who were not only skilled shipwrights, but had been to sea themselves in whaling and sealing ships. They took a proprietary interest in the smallest details of the *Endurance's* construction.**
- c. As the weeks went by this slowly deepened into depression and then despair. In time they found it almost impossible to concentrate or even to eat. In order to offset the terrifying symptoms of insanity they saw in themselves, they took to walking in a circle around the ship. The route came to be known as "madhouse promenade."
- d. These currents are affected only slightly by the wind, so that often a condition known to sailors as a "cross sea" is set up—when the wind is blowing in one direction, and the current moving in another. At such times, angry hunks of water—3, 6, 10 feet high—are heaved upwards, much as when breakers are thrown back from a bulkhead and collide with incoming waves. A cross sea is a perilous thing to a small boat.
- e. **They were all still crippled from the six days spent in cramped positions in the boats, and now for the first time they began to realize the incredible tension they had been under for so long. They became conscious of it, strangely, by a mounting awareness of a long-forgotten feeling. It was something they knew now they had not really experienced since abandoning the *Endurance*. It was security.** The knowledge that, comparatively at least, there was nothing to fear. There was still danger, of course, but it was different from the imminent threat of disaster which had stalked them for so long. In a very literal way, it seemed to release a portion of their minds which hitherto had been obsessed with the need to remain ceaselessly alert. It was a joy, for example, to watch the birds simply as birds and not for the significance they might have—whether they were a sign of good or evil, an opening of the pack or a gathering storm.
- f. The truth was that he [Shackleton] felt rather out of his element. He had proved himself on land. He had demonstrated there beyond all doubt his ability to pit his matchless tenacity against the elements—and win. But the sea is a different sort of enemy. Unlike the land, where courage and the simple will to endure can often see a man through, the struggle against the sea is an act of physical combat, and

there is no escape. It is a battle against a tireless enemy in which man never actually wins; the most that he can hope for is not to be defeated.

- g. Again and again the cycle was repeated until the body and the mind arrived at a state of numbness in which the frenzied antics of the boat, the perpetual cold and wet came to be accepted almost as normal.

#### What I got out of it

1. Shackleton managed to keep a spirit of optimism even in the more dire circumstances. He was also expert in getting to know his men – where they excelled and struggled, what they enjoyed, their personalities – and constructed teams, expeditions, duties, and more around these variations. He knew who could do what, when, where, with whom, and what wouldn't work. He also made it a point to always have a set routine and work for his men – idle minds and hands were never wanted



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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/ernest-shackleton-overlooked-irish-antarctic-explorer>