

Coronavirus Local Response Initiative Session Six

“Learning from History to Act Now and Prepare for the Future: Leading through a Multi-Stage Crisis”

This handout reviews key points on crisis leadership from session six of the Coronavirus Local Response Initiative for city leaders with Nancy Koehn and Jorrit de Jong.

“A real leader is somebody who can help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to do better, harder things than we can get ourselves to do on our own.”

—David Foster Wallace

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM ERNEST SHACKLETON’S POLAR EXPEDITION

In the middle of a public health crisis unlike anything you’ve seen before, you may be wondering why we’re talking about an Antarctic expedition that took place over 100 years ago. Even three months ago seems a world away. But that is precisely the point.

Shackleton sailed toward the South Pole with one mission in mind: to lead the first expedition across the Antarctic continent. Abruptly, he found himself and his crew facing a very different set of circumstances: an iced-in (and eventually sinking) ship and a slow-burn crisis that would play out over nearly two years, with peaks of intensity and peril—and many long, hard, tedious days and weeks in between. And yet, he managed the impossible, safely leading himself and his crew of 27 men through some of the most grueling physical and psychological trials in human experience.

In your cities right now you, too, are facing challenges nobody has seen before, and there is a gaping stretch of time and an enormous amount of work ahead before you can see light at the end of the tunnel. How can you lead your teams and your communities through the next 18 months?

LESSON 1: TASK MANAGEMENT AND MISSION LEADERSHIP

Shackleton recognized that his mission had changed utterly: from discovery to survival. He **defined the mission** clearly and committed himself to achieving it, but remained entirely **flexible** in his approach to doing so. Knowing that daily routines and tasks would help establish and keep order, he kept his crew busy and on task, but focused everyone’s sights on the long-term goal.

Strong leaders quickly get comfortable with widespread ambiguity and chaos. They commit themselves and their followers to navigating point-to-point through the turbulence, adjusting, improvising, and redirecting as the situation changes and credible information emerges.

Inspirational leaders charge individuals to act **in service of the broader community**. They give people jobs to do, remind them why their work matters and (in both word and deed) **prioritize helping others**.

Skilled leaders frame the stakes of the crisis, articulating what is at risk, the tradeoffs or biggest obstacles, and how we can overcome them. They stay on top of the managerial work of assigning tasks and monitoring

performance even while making continual adjustments and effectively communicating the mission and the need to work together.

LESSON 2: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY AND TAKING RISKS

Shackleton took **full responsibility** for the situation he and his crew were in—and worked constantly to improve it. He met with himself every day, reflecting and cooking up the “mental medicine” that would keep his crew alive. He remained outwardly calm and focused on managing his team’s energy.

He made himself responsible for the **engagement, outlook, and cohesion of the team**. Prior experience had taught him that indecisive and insecure leaders put the safety of their people at risk. He knew leaders have to be prepared to make hard and unpopular decisions in service to a worthy mission and keep the team focused—even when the mission itself had to change. (In his words: *“Better a live donkey than a dead lion.”*)

Having the courage to wake up and be this kind of leader all day, every day, requires the **discipline** to keep your sights constantly trained on the future—not shying away from lessons learned, but never dwelling on mistakes made or past difficulties. (As he wrote in his diary: *“The Endurance sank today: I cannot write about it.”*)

Courageous leaders understand they will make mistakes along the way and they will have to pivot quickly as this happens, acknowledging mistakes and learning as they go.

Strategic leaders focus on the likely outcomes. They do not spend a great deal of time thinking or talking about the best- or the worst-case possibilities, which are lower-probability scenarios. Work to cultivate this attitude and discipline not just for yourself but also for your team. Emphasize to your followers that you expect everyone—individually and as a group—to learn their way forward, to experiment with new ways of operating, to expect the occasional failure and then quickly pivot to a new tack, to figure out the future together.

LESSON 3: ACKNOWLEDGING FEELINGS AND MANAGING ENERGY

The most remarkable thing about Shackleton’s leadership is how seriously he took the task of tending to the emotional lives and energy of his team. His first order of business was to **ensure team cohesion** through shared activities, diversions, and productive work. He recognized that the psychological wellbeing of his team would decide whether they lived or died. Keeping alive the belief that they could and would survive was critical.

Shackleton kept close tabs on his team’s **morale**, identified the men who might undermine the group’s ability to maintain a positive outlook, and **pulled doubters in close**.

Serious leaders cultivate strong morale among their followers by keeping close tabs on **collective sentiment** and then responding as needed to shifts. They recognize that every crisis is also a battle for the hearts and minds of their followers, who ultimately hold the power to help solve the crisis or to disintegrate into division, discord, or worse.

Perceptive leaders address the fear of their followers without feeding it. **Collective determination, solidarity, and a sense of shared purpose** are indispensable elements of success, partly because they help dial down fear. Recognize that most of your employees are anxious about their health, their finances, and, in many cases, their jobs. Explain that you understand how scary things feel, but that you can work together to weather this storm. **Encourage resolve**.

LESSON 4: SECURE YOUR OWN MASK BEFORE HELPING OTHERS

Crises take a toll on all of us. They are exhausting and can lead to burnout. For those who lose loved ones, they are devastating. Keep your finger on the pulse of everyone’s energy and emotions and respond as needed—**beginning with yourself**. As a high-ranking executive commented before the pandemic, “If you as the leader flag, everything flags. Everything else, including your organization’s mission, becomes vulnerable.”

So, in these trying times, take good care of yourself, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Know when you are capable of being focused and productive, and when you need a break. Eat well, get enough sleep, exercise regularly, spend time outdoors (six feet away from strangers), connect in person with your partner, kids, or animals and virtually with friends and extended family, plan for at least two device-free periods per day (of a minimum of 30 minutes each), and rely on other practices that help you get grounded.

It is worth remembering that this crisis presents a powerful opportunity for organizations and teams of all kinds to better understand their strengths and weaknesses, what really engages and motivates their people, and their own reason for being.

This difficult, turbulent time will surely someday be seen, in part, as a fertile, living laboratory in which courageous leaders were made, not born.

FURTHER READING

For further reading, please see Nancy Koehn's New York Times article on [Leadership Lessons from the Shackleton Expedition](#) and view her interactive [presentation](#) on the same subject.