

POST CARD

FROM BILL KERMODE

NEXT CEO Bill Kermode has had to change his sabbatical plans due to the COVID-19 crisis. But before lockdown he was privileged to travel to Antarctica and hear a story of resilience - with lessons we may be able to draw on in this period of adversity.



A key theme for me (and my bubble partner, wife Robin) in getting through a month of self-isolation is resilience. Like many New Zealanders who were overseas in recent weeks we had to change our plans and return to New Zealand, but just before that we had been privileged to travel to Antarctica and so connect with one of the most remarkable stories of human resilience I know.

That is of course the story of Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton. The account of Shackleton's perseverance and persistence in the face of seemingly impossible odds has been often told. And it gives some useful pointers for us as we begin our own challenging journey into an unknown.

In 1914 Shackleton and a crew of 25 set off on an expedition to be the first to walk across the Antarctic continent. Soon after leaving their South Georgia Island south seas base, their ship, the Endurance, got stuck in the ice. Shackleton realised that his men would have to wait out the coming winter in the ship's cramped quarters until summer's thaw. They then lived on the ship and the ice for close to 11 months, with no hope of rescue and no way to call for help.

Then the ship was crushed by the ice and sank.

The men set up camp on the ice, but eventually were faced with the ice breaking up and needed to get to solid land. After a week of rowing in lifeboats - having now visited the region I find even just this part of the story unbelievable - they reached Elephant Island, off the Antarctic Peninsula but offering no protection and not on any shipping routes.

So Shackleton decided he and a small crew would row for 800 miles to get back to the South Georgia whaling station they had left about 15 months before. After 17 days and one hurricane crossing one of the world's most treacherous seas in a glorified rowing boat, they reached South Georgia, only to discover they were on it's wrong side. They crossed 35km of mountain ranges and glaciers to get to safety, and three months later rescued the men they had left on Elephant Island. Incredible.

So what are three things we can learn for ourselves from Shackleton's amazing mission?

- The first is about realigning your expectations in the face of new circumstances. On realizing that the original mission was doomed, Shackleton dramatically realigned his expectation and goals. His new goal was to make sure his crew would return safely. We too are faced with dramatically changed circumstances, so we too need to realign our expectations for the month – set new goals that align with our new situation.
- The second is about creating predictability. Shackleton feared the potential effects of idleness, anxiety and disengagement among his men more than he did the ice and cold. So he made sure his men had order in their day. That schedule involved the men's specialist duties (to the extent possible), ship related activities (until it sank), food gathering activities, games, teatime, and mandatory socialising as a group after dinner. By making sure they were not simply sitting around idly, the men experienced an internal sense of structure that helped the days go by smoothly. Through the routines, order and interaction, Shackleton managed the collective fear that threatened to take hold when the outcome was so uncertain.
- Third, Shackleton understood that teams are only as effective as their weakest member. When he identified crew members struggling he made sure to help them in any way he could. Rather than approaching the situation as "survival of the fittest" he practiced "protection of the weakest". That approach inspired confidence that all were cared for equally, and reinforced loyalty to him as a leader.

History remembers Shackleton's mission not for failing to cross Antarctica, but for the human spirit that shone through in the circumstances. Success in adversity is more than the outcomes that eventuate. It is also the "how" of it all – the way we are for ourselves and for others on the journey.

Be the Shackleton in your bubble!

Bill Kermode