

# Beyond limits – Leading at the Edge

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## Abstract

Every member of a working group or a team has a defined role, such as that of a leader or a mentor. Although every role has its own distinct definition, a great mentor can be a great leader and vice versa. One of the finest mentor leaders, explorer Ernest Shackleton, set an example of how to lead and mentor in harsh conditions; this was laid out by Dennis NT Perkins in his book *Leading at the Edge*. Even today, in these challenging times, Shackleton teaches us that, no matter how far beyond our reach a goal might be, the key is to never give up, but rather encourage yourself and your team to take small steps, celebrate your achievements, and stand tall even when there is “no land in sight”. Rest assured, beyond the horizon of our limitations lies a vast space of possibilities waiting to be explored.

## Introduction

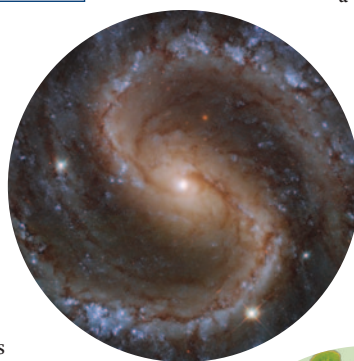
The universe is a complicated entity whose history is still a mystery. Blocks of structures, seemingly randomised, yet organised in specific patterns, form our cosmos.<sup>1,2</sup> Structure formations such as galaxies, stars, webs and planets, are the organisations of the universe.<sup>2</sup> Similar patterns exist on our planet Earth – the Fibonacci sequence present in the flower buds of Romanesco broccoli,<sup>3</sup> the expanding symmetry of fractals in snowflakes, and an alpha animal in an animal pack. The universe may seem chaotic and *orderless*, but its formations give it stability. The same applies to the life of plants, animals, humans, and even molecules. Everything is interconnected, and this secures these elements’ continued existence.

## What about us?

Structure formations can also be expressed in our genetic code, which is what has made our society grow and develop to its present day proportions. In ancient times, when there were no cities, a small group of people, such as a tribe, had to be well-organised to secure the food necessary for their survival and development. As the group grew larger and strived for more efficacy, villages, cities, and states were born as structures of society of the highest level of complexity, as posited by Elman R. Service in his 1962 book *Primitive Social Organization*.<sup>4</sup>

A complex organisation, such as those found in an industrial setting, consists of working groups and can be defined by its roles, tasks, interactions and cohesiveness.<sup>5,6,7</sup> A working group or a team generally consists of a leader, mentor and others.<sup>5</sup> A mentor is a person who advises and guides a group or an individual with their experience.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, a leader is a person who leads a team towards a specific goal; they don’t always have the necessary expertise, but they do have the right personality and are responsible for managing a team.<sup>6</sup> Leadership is commonly divided into the traditional and the modern model, which offer differing views. The traditional model is

a more



conservative one, where the leader is observed as a task-delegating, all-knowing autocrat.<sup>9</sup> The second model, known as the modern style of leadership, focuses more on the group or team members,<sup>10</sup> whilst the role of the leader is slightly pushed into the background. In this model, a leader acts as a symbol of empowerment, support and compassion,<sup>9</sup> especially when it comes to the ‘mentor leadership’ style.<sup>11</sup>

## A great mentor can be a great leader

Mentor leadership is a novel style in which a leader leads by mentoring their team members.<sup>12</sup> This approach creates a positive environment for the team members and encourages creativity and development.<sup>11</sup> One of the greatest role models

“If you want  
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for mentor leadership is Ernest Shackleton. He not only managed to save his crew during the dangerous expedition they had undertaken between 1914 and 1916, but he was also a great mentor to them.<sup>13</sup>

### A passionate leader with an indomitable spirit

Ernest Shackleton, born in 1874 during Britain's imperial century, was an explorer dedicated to reaching the shores that no one had reached before. As a teenager, he joined the Merchant Navy, which helped him become a crew member. He served as third officer on the *Discovery* in 1902 on a research expedition to Antarctica, where the new Farthest South record of 82° 17'S was set under the command of Robert Falcon Scott.<sup>14</sup> During that expedition, Shackleton experienced challenges typical of a polar expedition – unexpected obstacles on the route, starvation, the cold – and still, despite the



*Ernest Shackleton*

discouraging circumstances, especially his health issues caused by malnutrition, he decided to lead the Nimrod Expedition in 1907.<sup>15,16</sup> This time, Shackleton reached 88° 23'S, setting a new Farthest South record, 97.5 geographical miles from the South Pole, approximately the distance between London and Leicester in the UK.<sup>17</sup> As a man thirsty for success, 7 years later, Shackleton led the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition to explore the landscape of the Antarctic. After 325 days, this legendary expedition resulted in a

stranded crew and a sunken ship – the *Endurance*, which has still to this day not been found under the thick layers of ice.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the expedition was a great achievement for Shackleton and for humanity. He was able to bring his crew back home safely despite the extreme cold and starvation, even though his return initially wasn't warmly received because of the distraction of World War I. Upon his return he published *South*, a book about his expedition on the *Endurance* that was well received. Because of Shackleton's strong personality, experience in leading expeditions, and his extraordinary achievements, others attempted to keep his legacy alive. Some of the publications weren't referenced responsibly, nor published according to the original reports from the expeditions.<sup>19</sup> However, a publication by Alfred Lansing<sup>16</sup> stood out as he invested a lot of time in researching and interviewing Shackleton's crew. His work *Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage* is a



*The Endurance*

masterpiece that inspired lots of people including Dennis NT Perkins. Perkins was amazed by Shackleton's confidence, the way he managed his crew, and how he was able to get them home safely. In his book *Leading at the Edge*, Perkins reveals to us the Ten Strategies for Success™ based on the events of the Trans-Antarctic expedition; these strategies focus on how to become a better leader and how to approach personal development.

### **Leading at the Edge – Ten Strategies for Success™ by DNT Perkins**

Perkins's book covers 10 strategies on how to lead, as well as the philosophy of exceptional leadership, and the best approaches for becoming an exceptional leader. This perspective can also be applied to a mentor or for achieving a specific goal.

The first strategy talks about vision – to achieve a specific long-term goal, that goal should be clearly defined, and divided into smaller targets. A focus on smaller goals or achievements will give us more strength and push us towards ultimately achieving the long-term goal. After Shackleton and his crew had set off on their journey, when the ship got stranded and Shackleton realised that the ship's structural integrity would buckle, he shifted his goal toward bringing his crew home safely and succeeded in his intention. This strategy corresponds to Earl Nightingale's definition of success – "...Success is

*really nothing more than the progressive realisation of a worthy ideal..."* and reminds us that a person with a goal, as well as the determination to achieve that goal, reaps the rewards.

Another point the author makes is that a leader's message is strong and more powerful if it is presented in the form of symbols or memorable speeches. This second strategy is more about performance than theory. As an example, as the circumstances had become unbearable, Ernest Shackleton, who had just lost his ship, had no radio and needed to save his crew from suffering the harsh conditions from the constantly changing weather, gave several memorable speeches. He then discarded all of his valuables to motivate his crew to do the same, since they were traveling by foot to a research station for rescue, and traveling light would increase their chances of survival.

The third strategy reminds us that optimism can help bring us further and that we shouldn't live in denial. Challenging situations should be regarded as opportunities, not as obstacles. When Shackleton was aboard the *Discovery*, on his first voyage, his health deteriorated and the conditions of travel were harsh, yet he was still reluctant to give up, and he found the motivation to move forward. Leading or mentoring a team usually requires a lot of energy and time; if we want to do this, we must first and foremost take care of our needs to then be able to help everyone

**"Difficulties are  
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else. Sleep deprivation, stress, and malnutrition can impact our decision making and with it our performance.

Strategies five, six and seven emphasise the importance of the modern leadership style. As mentioned above, for a team to function as a unit, a leader needs their team members as much as they need their leader. Shackleton, a historic mentor leader who was ahead of his time, shared his food with the crew and lived by the motto "We are one, we live or die together". He also promoted equality among his crew members and insisted on the crew sticking together, no matter how long the journey back would take. Indeed, he recognised the importance of team work, as stated in the African proverb "If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together". This brings us to strategy number seven – conflict management. Shackleton realised that conflicts should be resolved instantly to keep the crew members' resentfulness at bay. Jealousy, gossip, and ill intentions tend to disrupt a well-organised and fully functional team.

The eighth strategy is similar to the third strategy, which encourages the celebration of any achievement, no matter how small. No matter how difficult the situation is, we should be grateful for it and stay focused on our long-term vision. Aboard the *Endurance*, the men celebrated while stranded on the ice, even though their return home was uncertain. They even celebrated their last morsel of food.

The path to achieving a goal involves taking risks, but not the unnecessary kind, or any type of risk where failing is inevitable. Naturally, every risk is coupled with uncertainty; however, this is part of the process. Strategy number nine covers stepping out of one's comfort zone, which could bring a positive outlook and might prove more efficient than merely sitting around waiting for something to happen. The stranded Shackleton and his crew could have simply sat around waiting to be rescued; instead, Shackleton decided that they should move forward to reach the station on South Georgia and organise their own rescue.

The last key strategy for becoming a mentor leader such as Ernest Shackleton is to not give up – especially in the face of failure or unexpected situations. They are part of a successful journey and, therefore, we shouldn't be afraid to take a step outside of our comfort zone. Likewise, optimism alone will give us strength, but won't necessarily

bring us closer to the goal. Consistency in action, combined with faith and optimism, is a recipe for achieving goals. Shackleton was aware that there is a solution for every problem and he was determined to find a way home. Before calling for help, the crew set up camp on Elephant Island. Shackleton decided that contacting the station on the island of South Georgia was imperative to bring everyone home safely. After assembling a small crew of five of his strongest men, Shackleton set off on a risky voyage and saved the rest of the crew on Elephant Island four months later.

## Conclusion

The makings of a great leader or a great mentor lie not only in the learned ability to lead or mentor a team – one's virtue also plays a great role. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "*The essence of greatness is the perception that virtue is enough.*" Ernest Shackleton was remembered for his great personality and his outside-the-box thinking. His knowledge, persistence and optimism helped his crew return home safely. Other great expeditions throughout history, such as the one under the command of Robert Falcon Scott, were not as successful as Shackleton's because the crew didn't stick together. Even though the personality and managing style of the leader or a mentor is crucial for success, Shackleton chose his team members wisely, insisting on diversity. Building a diverse team where every member has an equal opportunity to use their unique skills, will significantly improve the chance to achieve any given goal.

In the challenging times we currently face in the midst of a pandemic, during which we sometimes feel like we are drifting on ice in open sea, Shackleton teaches us that we should adjust our goals, be grateful for small achievements, and not give up. Our experience will indubitably make us stronger. In the words of Shackleton himself, "*Difficulties are just things to overcome, after all.*"

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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