

Shackleton's secret: ability to adapt

Sir Ernest Shackleton never did get to walk across the South Pole. The explorer's huge ego had betrayed him when he set off for Antarctica in the dead of winter, despite warnings. Instead, in January 1915, ice trapped his ship, *Endurance*, within sight of the goal. In October, the crew abandoned ship, and as they camped on an ice floe, the *Endurance* sank.

Despite all that, plus terrible setbacks for nearly two more years, Shackleton is remembered today for saving all 27 of his men by showing remarkable ability to adapt to new situations. His leadership role changed from explorer to survivor.

"I was fascinated with how completely Shackleton's enterprise had to change once the ship was frozen in the ice," says Nancy Koehn, who created a business case study called *Leadership in Crisis: Ernest Shackleton and the Epic Voyage of the Endurance*. "That happens in all kinds of businesses. Anyone who has tried to start a business or manage an existing one knows that you often have to change horses midstream several times if the thing is going to succeed."

Maneuvering quickly—even when lives are at stake—is difficult.

After more than a year and three failed attempts to escape, Shackleton and five crewmen made their way to a whaling station on South Georgia Island. Arriving in May 1916, Shackleton tried tirelessly to rescue the 22 men trapped on Elephant Island, although stymied by some of the world's most treacherous waters.

Between May and August, when he finally rescued the men by ship—counting each one as he sailed toward them—Shackleton's hair turned white.

Yes, his persistence paid off. But nothing says more about Shackleton's leadership than the fact that eight members of the ill-fated voyage signed up for his next expedition to Antarctica.

— Adapted from "Shackleton: An Entrepreneur of Survival," Martha Lagace, HBS Working Knowledge.