

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE COVID-ERA

5 Lessons from the early Antarctic Explorers

By Brad Borkan and David Hirzel

The early Antarctic expeditions, led by Captain Scott, Ernest Shackleton, Douglas Mawson and Roald Amundsen, thrived in the most difficult situations. The explorers faced many risks and hardships including: scurvy, frostbite, snow-blindness, falling through a "snow lid" into a crevasse, starvation, blizzards, and other hazards. There were no certainties. They had no communication to the outside world.

Why is this important to us today?

By studying these 1900's explorers, we can glean guidance for coping with our 2020 version of the unknown – as the world is now in the throes of the global coronavirus pandemic.

Here are five lessons we can apply right now from the ways they dealt with their environmental and personal stresses on a daily basis.

1. Who's on your team?

Everything done on the expeditions was done in teams.
Facing a crisis by being part of a team saved many
Antarctic explorers' lives.

Teamwork is as essential to us today in our world, as it was to them in theirs. Resiliency is gained when thinking of yourself as a valued team member – whether it's a team of family, friends or work colleagues.

Map which teams you are on, even if they are geographically diverse and only communicating by Whatsapp or Zoom. Try to join or build more. Like the early explorers, gain strength from knowing that you are essential to the teams you are on.



Group of all the shore party (except Clissold, laid up and Ponting, photographing). Taken outside the hut, October 1911

Ponting, Herbert (1870-1935) ©Scott Polar Research Institute,
University of Cambridge Expedition: British Antarctic Expedition
1910-13

2. Reset your goals

On Shackleton's 1907 Nimrod expedition, he and three others tried to trek to the South Pole. They got close to their destination however with 103 miles to go, they were desperately running out of food. If they were to live they'd need to turn around that day and start the 700-mile walk back to base camp. It was a disappointing end to what could have been a glorious victory – being the first to the South Pole.

There seemed to be only two choices: to continue on and reach it and likely perish on the way back, or turn back early and hope their food supply held. But Shackleton proposed a third alternative—leave their tent, sleeping bags and all their supplies behind and walk south as far as they could in one day. They'd plant a flag, trek back to their camp, and the next day start for home.

They planted the flag at 97 miles from the South Pole. Why was this important? Because Shackleton reasoned that getting to within 100 miles of the South Pole would give them a milestone they could be proud of.

A good strategy when your goal has to change is “Plant a flag” on your old goal, and identify a new one. The new goal may not be as grand, but still vitally important, such as simply surviving a self-isolation period. In explaining his decision to his wife, Shackleton wrote, *“I thought you would rather have a live donkey than a dead lion.”*

3. Focus on the present

Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition (1914-1917) had a goal to be first to walk across the continent of Antarctica. The trek never got underway. The ship got crushed in the sea ice and sank. Their situation was hopeless. Twenty-eight men were stranded on ice. No one would rescue them. Eight hundred miles of the roughest seas in the world separated them from civilization.

Shackleton brought his men together and calmly told them they were all going to make it home. He successfully focused the men on the new mission, forcing them not to dwell on the bad luck or bad decisions that led to the disaster. In the bitter cold of Antarctica, they couldn't waste energy on “what-if.” They had to deal with the present situation.

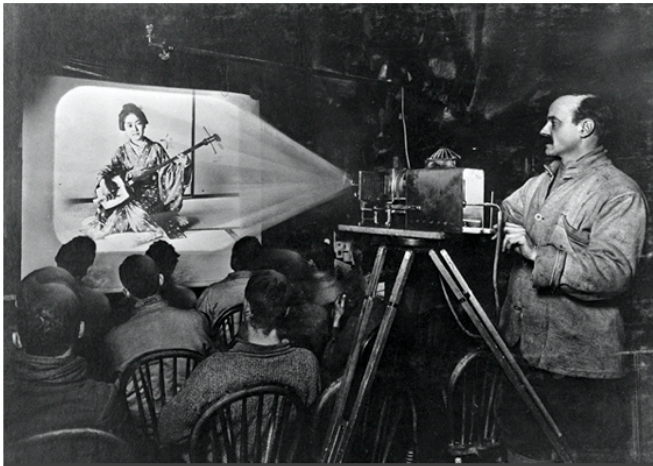
Let's leave whatever brought the world to its current stage to be discussed by historians, years from now. For now, we all need to focus on where we are today to find the inner resolve to face whatever happens next. Early Antarctic explorers had to keep their imaginations in check. Every time you envision a bad outcome use the same energy to think of a positive outcome. Think only of how you move forward from where you are right now.

4. Keep your spirits up

It wasn't all gloom and doom on the early Antarctic expeditions. They kept diaries, made up poems, listened to music, read books, told stories. Amundsen's Norwegian Antarctic expedition brought a sauna. Shackleton's brought specially blended whiskey.

All in all, they developed coping mechanisms enabling them to focus not on the dangers and risks, limited food supplies, blizzard conditions, but on the work at hand.

If the early Antarctic explorers could maintain their calm when facing near-constant risk, then with all of our modern conveniences we can too.



Herbert Ponting lecturing on Japan using lantern slides, October 1911

©Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge Expedition:
British Antarctic Expedition 1910-13

5. Never, ever give up trying

Antarctica was a challenging place in the early 1900's. The cold, coupled with blizzards, treacherous landscape, scurvy and other risks had to be dealt with while pursuing science, discovery and exploration.

But, there was one thing that stood out across the expeditions led by Scott, Shackleton, Amundsen and Mawson. They never gave up. Mawson fell into a crevasse when he was on his own. He never gave up trying to get out. Shackleton's ship was crushed in the ice, stranding twenty-eight men, but he never gave up trying to get his men to safety. Amundsen's too-early start for the South Pole encountered terribly cold weather; some of his team barely surviving their hasty retreat back to base. By regrouping, and waiting, they achieved their goal of being first to the South Pole.

We have no idea what the future holds. Using some guidelines from how the early Antarctic explorers dealt with uncertainty, risk and danger can help us cope with whatever happens next.

Brad Borkan and David Hirzel are co-authors of *When Your Life Depends on It: Extreme Decision Making Lessons from the Antarctic*. The book is about the life-affirming decisions made by the early Antarctic explorers and looks at what we can learn from their situations to help us make better decisions in our modern lives. Brad is also the newest member of the Friends Committee.

www.extreme-decisions.com



Further immerse yourself in the lives and survival strategies of our famous polar explorers and delve into the online archives of the Scott Polar Research Institute. Visit the [Museum Catalogue Online](#), the [Shackleton Online Catalogue](#) and while away the hours exploring the fabulous [Picture Library](#). And, for those wishing to take it one step further, why not create a [cocktail for the brave](#) using Shackleton's specially blended malt scotch whiskey, which has been recreated and named in his honour!

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Our mailing address:

The Friends Office, Scott Polar Research Institute, Lensfield Road,
Cambridge CB2 1ER, UK

Tel: 01223 336 540

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