Audacious goals, remarkable results

To understand how best to make decisions in modern crises, there is a surprising amount that we can learn by looking at how leaders made decisions over 100 years ago. **Brad Borkan** investigates

Crisis response, management and mitigation all have a common component: decision-making. While crises now have a global sense to them, and responses in the 21st century can involve a myriad of technology, the core element of human decision-making has not evolved as quickly.

In researching the book, Audacious Goals, Remarkable Results, my co-author David Hirzel and I discovered three extraordinary historical people who had a profound influence on the geophysical world we live in today. One was a Norwegian explorer; one was a British engineer (perhaps the greatest engineer who ever lived); and one was an American statesman. Three people. Three professions. Three different nations. Despite these differences, what we discovered was that when faced with crises, they overcame them with surprisingly similar mindsets.

Also, in studying their accomplishments and their decision-making processes, David and I discovered a way of approaching large-scale problems, which will be revealed later in this article. But before we get to that, who were these three people, what did they do, and what can we learn from them?

The explorer was Roald Amundsen. He was first to

sail a ship through the Northwest Passage – the sea-route connecting Europe to Asia sought for over 400 years – across the ice-laden waters above northern Canada. Amundsen was also first to reach the South Pole. He faced numerous risks on his expeditions, including blizzards, frostbite and scurvy, and at one point his ship caught fire and nearly exploded.

The engineer was Isambard Kingdom Brunel – a household name in the UK, but totally unknown in America and elsewhere. Brunel was key to the building of the first tunnel under a flowing river in the 1820s. Hampered by extremely hazardous working conditions, floods, and serious injuries, the techniques used to construct this tunnel have been used to build every bored tunnel built since then. Brunel also pioneered the modern railway, designing and building the Great Western Railway, a multi-year endeavour filled with setbacks and obstacles, including at one point Brunel nearly dying when a locomotive was being moved from a barge to the tracks.

The statesman was Theodore Roosevelt (who actually abhorred the nickname Teddy). Roosevelt was the driving force behind the US national parks and the construction of the Panama Canal. Though the risks to Roosevelt may have been more political than life-threatening, it is worth noting at one point while campaigning later in life, a gunman shot him in the chest as he was leaving a hotel to make a speech. The bullet, having been slowed by his metal glasses case and the 50-page speech in his breast pocket, was still lodged in his chest, when he decided he would continue with what he had planned to do. With blood still seeping into his shirt, he gave an 84-minute talk telling his audience it would take more than a bullet to stop a bull-moose (he was running for US president, in the Bull Moose Party).

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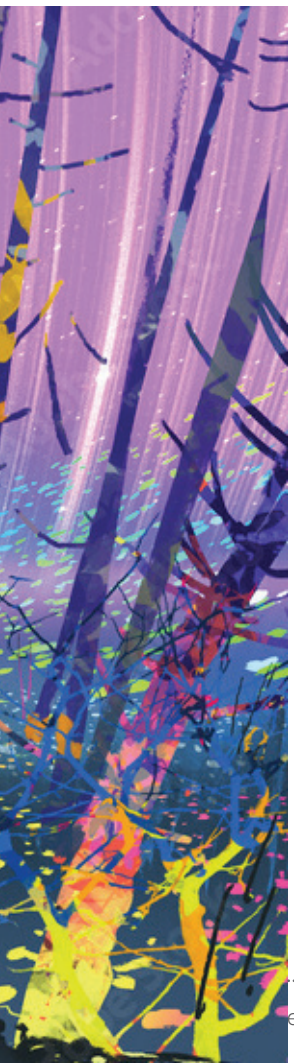


Amundsen, Brunel and Roosevelt's accomplishments all had similar elements. They were large endeavours, watched by the world. They were multi-year, multi-faceted and attracted a multitude of detractors who would exclaim: "It can't be done." Fifty engineers of Brunel's era proclaimed that a tunnel under the River Thames large enough for horse and carriage traffic could never be built. For centuries, some of the greatest sea captains and explorers died seeking the Northwest Passage. Amundsen's ship and expedition team were deemed too small to achieve such a venture. The French failed miserably under Ferdinand de Lesseps to build a canal in Panama (De Lesseps had successfully built the Suez Canal years earlier), and America's early attempt under Roosevelt was following along the same disastrous path.

But Amundsen, Brunel and Roosevelt all persevered. They proved the naysayers wrong. How? We identified ten attributes and will share three of them here.

First, master the details. These three men were all leaders, but they didn't stay at the big picture level. Each was immersed deep in the details of their endeavours. Amundsen was likely the most knowledgeable person on the planet about the Northwest Passage before he started planning his expedition. Brunel knew every mile of the Great Western Railway line from London to Bristol. He had surveyed the entire route on horseback to find the most level (and thus the fastest) route possible. At one point in his life, Roosevelt was a cowboy and knew the American west in detail and the value of protecting vast tracts, such as the Grand Canyon, which big business so desired for mining and development.

Second, to Amundsen, Brunel and Roosevelt, physical, political and financial risks were all part of the process. Amundsen's expeditions were financially potentially ruinous. Brunel was nearly drowned twice in tunnel floods. Politics in Roosevelt's day was as rough as it is today, and the press was equally brutal.

Third, they were each exceptionally good at reassembling and combining. Amundsen wasn't the first to attempt to get to the South Pole. Ernest Shackleton had tried before. Brunel didn't build the first railway – this was achieved by Richard Trevithick – and George Stephenson built the first steam locomotive. Roosevelt didn't pioneer building the Panama Canal, the French did.

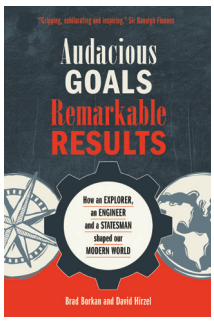
But what Amundsen, Brunel and Roosevelt all had in common was looking at what had gone before and learning from it. They thought about how it could be improved upon – made safer, quicker, better. Every previous assumption made by their predecessors was re-thought. Examples include Amundsen's detailed look at polar clothing and snow goggles. Brunel studied railway track widths, track beds, locomotive and carriage design and station design, as well as bridges, tunnels and viaducts, to find better approaches. After the disastrous early start of the Panama Canal by the Americans, Roosevelt accepted that a completely new approach was needed to tackle yellow fever, which was killing canal workers by the hundreds, and the plan for a canal without locks would need to be scrapped in favour of a lock-based plan, building locks three times larger than had ever been achieved anywhere in the world.

There are many lessons to be learned from these visionaries that can be brought to bear in crisis response situations. In addition, from studying all three men (when focusing on geophysical achievements of the 1800s and early 1900s at this level of magnitude, it was a male dominated world) we came away with one overarching realisation. What we started with was the explorer, the engineer and the statesman. What we came away with was an appreciation that while Amundsen, Brunel and Roosevelt may each have had one primary profession, they were each highly skilled in all three professions. Each had elements of being an explorer and an engineer and a statesman.

This led us to the conclusion that in tackling today's big problems, whether it's climate change, pandemics or other crises, there could be value in approaching the solution from the point of view of an explorer, an engineer and a statesman all at the same time. CRJ

Reference

■ *Borkan, B and Hirzel, D (2021): Audacious Goals, Remarkable Results: How an Explorer, an Engineer and a Statesman Shaped our Modern World*



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