

DAILY REPORT

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Leadership lessons for Obama

ANTARCTIC EXPLORER Ernest Shackleton exuded optimism even in the face of life-or-death crisis

WHEN PRESIDENT Barack Obama strode before the nation this week and gave his inaugural speech, I kept thinking about our nation's incredible challenges. Few speeches have been delivered with so many crises looming and with so many lives and livelihoods at stake.

As he stood in his overcoat delivering his pep-talk to the nation, he reminded me of Ernest Shackleton, the Anglo-Irish explorer. Though Shackleton died long before Obama was born, the new president seems to have learned from Shackleton how to carry himself in a crisis. And anyone who must lead in challenging times can learn from both of them.

Shackleton led the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, recounted in Alfred Lansing's gripping book "endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage." The expedition (1914-1917) planned to sail to Antarctica and trek across it. The journey failed when the ship, aptly named the Endurance, became trapped in ice, was eventually crushed, and sank. The crew drifted on ice floes at the bottom of the earth for months, eating penguins and fighting for survival. They finally found Elephant Island where they perched on a rocky, wind-battered beach.

Leading when lost

Realizing that they couldn't survive there long, Shackleton chose a few men for a daring rescue mission. Leaving the rest of the crew behind, they rowed 800 miles across the south Atlantic Ocean to South Georgia. They crossed icy mountains on a three-day trek to a whaling station. Shackleton arranged for a boat back to Elephant Island and returned for the crew. All survived.

A reporter later asked Shackleton whether, when he left elephant island on the rescue mission, he believed he would return. The reporter expected Shackleton

to admit that he had no hope. But he said that he never allowed himself any doubt. "Optimism," Shackleton said, "is the true moral courage."

Shackleton knew that in a crisis, leaders must maintain an air of confidence and optimism. In his diary, he acknowledged that group morale depended on his positive demeanor. During the months trapped in the ice, he organized soccer matches and nightly skits. If Shackleton had doubts, he never let them show.

President Obama seems to be channeling Shackleton's optimism.

In his inaugural address, President Obama seemed to be the embodiment of Shackleton's spirit of optimism in crisis. Obama wasn't ignoring the challenges. But to look at him and hear his words, you couldn't detect anything other than confident resolve.

Stocks are plunging. People are losing jobs. Houses are being repossessed. Bombs are falling in the Middle east. The ice caps are melting. And there stands our new president speaking without a hint of doubt and laying out plans to address all of it.

"Starting today," he said, "we must pick our-selves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America."

His confident demeanor made me feel confident.

If you're a leader, remember that people are watching you.

The lesson is that leaders must remember that they are always being watched. If you're the managing partner, a practice group leader or an associate managing your first litigation, never forget that people take cues on how to feel about the situation from your face, body language and voice.

Just something to keep in mind as we navigate today's treacherous seas. ☞