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BAR-ILAN STUDIES IN HISTORY V

LEADERSHIP
IN TIMES OF CRISIS



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LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership and times of crisis are permanent factors in history and, throughout the ages, the conduct of leaders in times of crisis has inspired interest and speculation. Despite the intensity of the hundreds of years of debate on this issue, many questions still remain open; this draws us back to a renewed discussion of these leaders themselves, each time from a fresh point of view. The way in which leaders cope in times of distress also attracts our attention and our appreciation of their conduct and activity. In many cases, leaders' methods of coping may even constitute an example for other leaders, showing the way that action should be taken in different circumstances and in other frameworks. As an instructive example, we can consider the leadership behaviour and leadership strategy displayed by Ernest Shackleton, an officer in the British Merchant Navy, as an example of a leader focused on his men on their ill-fated trip to Antarctica.

In 1914, Shackleton set sail for Antarctica for the third time. This expedition was particularly daring, its members intending to cross the Antarctic continent from Vahsel Bay, via the South Pole, to Ross Island on the other side. Shackleton set sail in the *Endurance* mere days before the outbreak of World War I. He sent a telegram to the British Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, suggesting that he put the *Endurance* and its crew at the disposal of the British Navy. Churchill's response to him was: "Carry on!". The delegation, however, was compelled to abandon the original plan when the *Endurance* became stuck in the ice for about a year until, in the winter of 1915, it broke apart under the pressure of the icebergs and sank. Shackleton and his crew managed to salvage essential supplies and two lifeboats from the sinking ship. In the end, after an epic 22-month trek, the entire crew of the *Endurance* succeeded in returning safely to England. Another ship, commanded by Captain Aeneas Mackintosh, which had set out for the other side of the Antarctic continent to prepare supply stations for Shackleton's men, also sank; this crew nevertheless succeeded in fulfilling their mission, and leaving supplies for a crew that never arrived.

It was Shackleton's concern for the safety of his crew that enabled him to cope with the incredible undertaking of getting his men out of Antarctica,