



## **SOUTH TO THE POLE: CELEBRATING THE SUCCESS OF ROALD AMUNDSEN**

A TESTAMENT TO THE POWER OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

By Professor Bill Fischer - January 2012

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On December 14, 1911, just over a hundred years ago, Roald Amundsen, and a small team of four others, accomplished what no one else had ever done before: they reached the South Pole. At the time, this was truly terra incognita: one of the most dangerous and forbidding destinations that could be imagined. Cold and uncharted, it was a project into the unknown.

Amundsen's team was not alone in their ambition. A larger, much better-endowed, and "bigger-branded" team from Her Majesty's Royal Navy, led by Captain Robert Falcon Scott, was moving at exactly the same time, virtually in parallel, towards the same goal. French, German and Japanese projects were being considered as well. But there could be only one winner, and the success of the "start-up" Norwegian team is a testament to the power of effective leadership, with lessons that are still valuable today.

In many ways, Amundsen's victory is a tribute to "learning." Amundsen was the consummate Idea Hunter! He learned from anyone who could help, regardless of the source of their knowledge or station in life. At a time when discrimination against aboriginal peoples was common, Amundsen was a devoted student of the lessons of the Netsilik Eskimos, who lived in the Canadian arctic, and with whom Amundsen had spent substantial time studying their diets, clothes, and survival skills, while on the first successful expedition to discover and traverse the Northwest Passage. As a result of the Netsilik lessons learned, not only did Amundsen's party reach the Pole more than four weeks before Scott's did, but they had actually gained weight on average when they returned to the base camp; Scott's team never returned: victims of exposure and starvation.

Amundsen's irrepressible zest for learning was undoubtedly associated with the passion that characterized everything that he did, and would do, regarding Polar exploration. He was clearly in it for the experience — to be sure, fame was undoubtedly sought as well — but the goal was the expedition itself, not the indirect benefits that might accrue from success. This was quite a different motivator than what characterized Captain Scott, who aspired for promotion to a more senior Naval position as a result of his work in the Polar region.

Successful, complex and innovative projects rely upon teamwork, and Polar exploration was no exception. The composition of the two teams could not have been more different, however. Amundsen's team was composed of real experts, at every position. Rather than surrounding himself with "friends," Amundsen opted for skills; skills that they would need in the forbidding environs of the Antarctic region. Scott, on the other hand, assembled his team capriciously, from old-friends, casual acquaintances, and hangers-on. What Amundsen recognized and Scott did not, was that when risky projects are at hand, the traditional wisdom of "hire for attitude, train for skills" no longer applies. In such situations, the leader must, instead: *hire for skills — because you need them, and then figure out how to deal with the attitudes that undoubtedly will accompany the big-egoed skill-holders.*

Any skill-based team, built around real functional experts, requires strong, in-touch, self-confident leadership, and Amundsen exemplified these leadership attributes. At the critical moment in the project, when the final race to the Pole took place, Amundsen understood that leadership was a "contact-sport" and positioned himself not at the front of the team, but at the rear, where he had a better view of how the team was performing, and from where he could move up and down the line to confront and solve problems without slowing the team's momentum. This was an interesting choice in personal positioning, but one based on thoughtful consideration. This was not about symbolic false-modesty, but about real tactical leadership effectiveness.

Perhaps the most impressive characteristic of Amundsen's leadership style, and one that resonates across the decades, from Thomas Edison to Steve Jobs, was his obsession with details. Whether it was the unusual design of the team's clothing, the ambience of the pre-fabricated Norwegian cabin that he brought along to create a more congenial base-camp environment, the number of supply-chain depots he insisted on to guarantee replenishment of life-critical resources when the race to the Pole and back was on, or the lack of sentimentality when it came to assembling the final Polar team, Amundsen was always in the middle of the conversation. No vital detail was ever so insignificant as to be accepted without consideration, and reconsideration. While Scott's style was frequently casual and accepting of compromise, Amundsen's was demanding, unreasonable, and without compromise. In the end, that attention to detail may have made the difference between life and death.

There should be no doubts about the bravery of both teams, or about their considerable accomplishments. The margin in achievement, after all, was only four weeks; hardly a significant difference in the long history of Polar exploration. Both teams embraced risks. Scott, in

fact, was pushing the state-of-the-art in Polar efforts by his adoption of motorized vehicles [that failed, in the end, to work, but it was his initiative to even try that deserves recognition -- Amundsen was certainly worried about the potential of the technology to be a "game-changer". What is so sobering, in fact, is that both teams did well, on average; however, it was not the average that mattered. What separated life from death in their adventure was not the average, but the variance. Scott had the misfortune to launch his final assault on the Pole just when the Antarctic temperatures took an unlikely plunge. In average conditions his team might have survived, but their misfortune was to be struggling at the wrong-end of the climatic distribution, for just a short time, but long enough to spell the end of their efforts, and their lives.

Managing for the variance instead of the average is the outcome of great project leadership: a search for the best ideas, leadership thoughtfulness, ambitiousness, a passion for the job at-hand, the assemblage of the right skills, obsession with details, and unreasonableness in the attempt to get the most out of the talent assembled, are all attributes characteristic of great teams, and of great leaders. In this amazing two-project race, the smaller and least-likely team won, despite huge resource disadvantages, because of the leadership of Roald Amundsen.

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