



**Organisational
development**

Leadership at the Edge of the World

Shipwreck Study

“The man who has experienced shipwreck shudders even at a calm sea”

“Below the 40th parallel south there is no law; below the 50th there is no God.”

The Auckland Islands are one of the most forbidding places in the world. Situated in the middle of the southern ocean 285 miles south of New Zealand, with year-round freezing rain and howling winds, to be shipwrecked there means almost certain death.

But an extraordinary coincidence occurred on the islands that enables us to make valuable observations about leadership. In 1864, two ships were wrecked at opposite ends of the Auckland Islands at about the same time. Each crew was unaware of the other’s existence. One of the crews all but perished while the other survived. What can account for this remarkable difference of fortune? The true story of human nature at its best and worst provides one of the most extraordinary natural social ‘experiments’.

The three schools of thought on leadership

Elliot Jaques and, more recently, Justin Menkes both claim that leadership effectiveness is explained mainly in terms of intellectual or cognitive capacity. A leader, they argue, needs to think critically and judge maturely, grasping the subtle interplays

between people, operations and overarching strategy. Both Jaques and Menkes are dismissive of personality and style and claim that intellect and ability to handle complexity are far more important to overall effectiveness and that the impact attributed to individual differences in personality or style is negligible in comparison.

In contrast, Walter Michel claims that it is fruitless to study individual differences when trying to explain leadership effectiveness as situational differences account for most variance in leadership effectiveness. That is, different leaders in the same situation are likely to display far more similarity in their behaviour than the same leader in a variety of different situations.

A third school of thought emphasises the crucial role played by personality and style. This school

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is associated with scholars such as Bob Hogan, who regard personality as the key factor in explaining variance in leadership effectiveness.

With these competing theories in mind, it is instructive to consider the story told by Joan Druett (2007), whose fascinating book *'Island of the Lost – Shipwrecked at the Edge of the World'*, recounts the shocking tale of two parties who were shipwrecked together 150 years ago at opposite ends of the same island.

To be stranded on the Auckland Islands 150 years ago equated with almost certain death. The howling sub-antarctic winds drove ships onto the shallow reefs and most sailors quickly drowned. Those who made it to shore soon died of exposure and starvation. The few who survived did so in dreadful conditions. Using the survivors' diaries and journals and supported by historical records, Joan Druett describes the circumstances encountered by the two parties, who were both shipwrecked on the same island at the same time without being aware of each other.

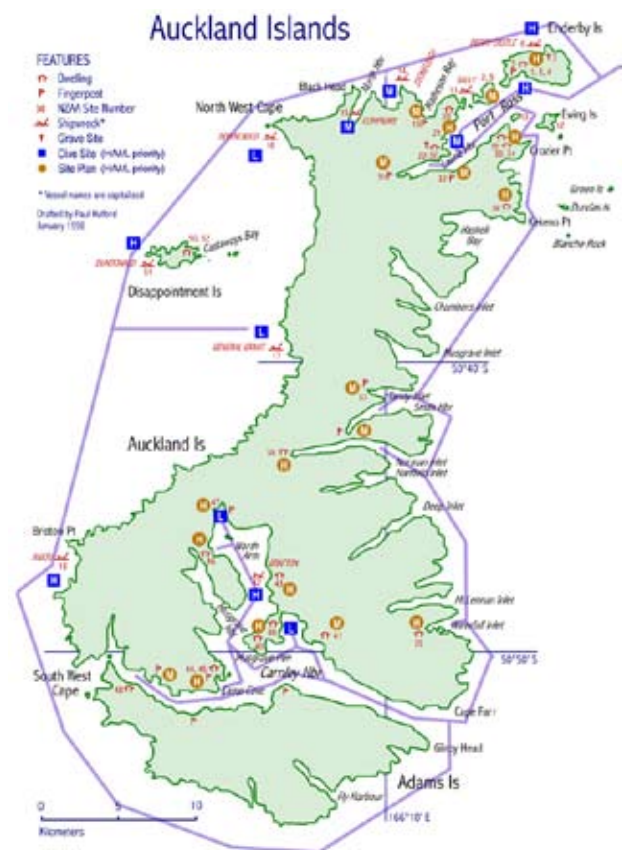
She explores the unique and different set of personality characteristics and leadership behaviours displayed by the two Captains, and uses these to draw a fine line between order and chaos, life and death.

The fate of poor leadership

In 3rd May 1864, the 888-ton *Invercauld* left Melbourne for South America with a crew of 25 on the second leg of her maiden voyage. Most of the crew came from Aberdeen. The crew was led by Captain George Dalgarno, first mate Andrew Smith, and the recently-promoted second mate, the American James Mahoney. On May 10, the ship was running southeast before the northeast gale in horrendous weather conditions. Dalgarno was barking orders to bring the ship about on the starboard tack, assuming that the sighting of land just reported was the southwestern end of Adams Island. Disastrously, however, he was 20 miles off his estimated course and, without realising it, he had navigated the ship onto one of the most dangerous subantarctic coasts. With a series of dull crashes the mighty *Invercauld* struck, breaking up fast.

The ship went aground and 19 men made it safely to shore on the Northern part of Auckland Island. Almost immediately, the ship's captain began to show a failure of leadership. Faced with the awful reality of their situation, the diary of one of the mariners records that:

“Instead of demonstrating leadership, Captain Dalgarno seemed too paralysed to order a search for shelter and food. Instead, the party stayed on the beach a total of five days and nights, of which the nights were perhaps the worst. The lean-to, which was built from the wreckage, measured only five by eight feet, and so 19 men had to pack themselves on top of each other for them all to fit in, which led to fights and agonising cramp.” (Druett, p. 111)



Dalgarno failed to cope with the dismal circumstances. Instead of rallying his men, he is recorded as depressed and apathetic. As a result, his men gradually disintegrated into despair and anarchy. There were hardly any team-oriented, co-ordinated efforts with the records showing that they “all lied down dying slowly”.

The only ray of hope was a 23-year old seaman, Robert Holding. He went on several expeditions by himself to seek food, help and better shelter. He tried to encourage the others to act together to build shelter and find food but, as a young ordinary seaman, he had no credibility. Even though he managed to provide food, identify shelter and even lead the survivors to a deserted camp where they had some shelter, Captain Dalgarno refused to support him. Instead, Dalgarno saw the young seaman as a threat and preferred to pull rank on him. To assert his rank, both he and his first mate threatened the young Holding with a knife for defying their authority and forced him to fetch roots for them while they kept their own counsel in an “officers area”.

George Dalgarno was a poor leader who stood by helplessly as the survivors wandered aimlessly for weeks without any thought-through survival plan. The captain is often the subject of reports such as: “That Captain Dalgarno, who should have exhibited the leadership expected of a man of his rank, was so extremely apathetic boded badly for them all.”

Lack of leadership resulted in the men fighting amongst themselves and splitting up. One by one, they died from exposure or starvation and some of them even turned to cannibalism. After three months, only three remained alive. On 22 May 1865, a passing ship rescued the inept Dalgarno, first mate Andrew Smith and seaman Robert Holding.

The success of good leadership

Incredibly, on the day of the wreck of the *Invercauld*, five castaways from the shipwrecked schooner, the *Grafton* were sitting around a roaring fire in the shelter they had built in the four months since they had been wrecked on the opposite end of the island only 20 miles away. They were enjoying a well roasted seal they had caught earlier that day.

The *Grafton*'s Captain, Thomas Musgrave, was a different character to Dalgarno. Although a master mariner with the reputation as a steady captain and a gifted navigator, he was an adventurer, a risk taker and an adaptable improviser. In 1863, when his luck – and job – had run out, he put his savings into a wild venture proposed by two friends. He was led to believe that there was a rich mine of argentiferous tin on the remote Campbell Island which had not yet been located but was there for the taking. Seduced by the magic term argentiferous (which means “silver bearing”), he bought a schooner and, together with his French business partner, an engineer named Raynal, he recruited three additional seamen and set off on a dangerous and risky voyage to find his fortune on Campbell Island.

On arrival at their destination, they searched for the tin mine but found no trace of the precious metal. As their worst expectations were realised, they tried to find some way of salvaging the expedition. Killing seals for their pelts and oil was the best alternative but, as there was no sign of fur seals, Captain Musgrave decided to return to Sydney. On route, he called at the Auckland Islands to assess its seal population.

On 3 January 1864, the crew of five men led by Captain Musgrave sought shelter from hurricane-force winds in a natural harbour nestled inside deserted Auckland Island. However, as the schooner *Grafton* lost its anchors, it wrecked on the southern end of the island.

From that moment, the story makes clear the critical importance of Musgrave's leadership style. Wrecked far from the shore, one of the seamen managed to combat the extremely harsh rocky sea conditions to create a line between the schooner and the shore. Seaman Raynal, who was extremely ill and too weak to hold onto the line in order to drag himself to shore was at risk of not surviving the wreck. Captain Musgrave tied him onto his back and, seizing the pulley, he jumped. The double weight dragged the rope down so that Musgrave was forced to plough his way through the top of the surf with Raynal desperately clinging to him. This personal bravery and decisiveness brought Raynal to safety and inspired Musgrave's men.

The conditions the castaways endured were relentlessly cold, wet and windy, with extremely low winter temperatures, snow and sleet. Utterly alone in the dense coastal forest, plagued by relentless rain and stinging blowflies, Captain Musgrave, rather than succumb to this dismal fate, inspired his crew to take action. Encouraged by their Captain, the men banded together in a common quest for survival. With nothing more than their bare hands, they salvaged material from the wrecked *Grafton*;

built a cabin and a forge where they manufactured tools; hunted for food; made shoes from sea lions' skin; rotated cooking duties; and nursed one another.

Under Musgrave's leadership for over 20 months, they banded together and remained civilized through the most terrifying, dark days. In the end, they planned and executed an astonishing escape by building their own boat to sail to safety.

What determines who sinks and who swims?

Both Captains on the same island at the same time faced the same challenge. One of these leaders failed his men and fell apart while the other inspired his team and brought them all home safely. What can we learn from this in the context of the schools of leadership outlined earlier?

Firstly, we can conclude that it is not the situation that makes the leader but rather the opposite. On the Auckland Islands in 1864 it was most definitely the case that it was the difference in leaders that determined the outcome. Under Musgrave, the crew resources were shared (even the private tobacco of Captain Musgrave). No-one pulled rank. In contrast, Dalgrano and his first mate forced the junior deck boys to fetch them food and water and were more content to drink water from the boys' boots than to fetch it themselves. Similarly, when the resourceful and ingenious Robert Holding devised a new way of catching fish and was able to seize a big catch, his request from the first mate to help him carry it to camp to share with others was refused. He was even threatened at knife point by Andrew Smith, the first mate, for refusing to go outside to fetch him some roots to eat. The situation faced by the two crews, although not perfectly identical, was as similar as one could imagine. Thus, the differences in their fates need to be explained in another way.

Secondly, we can convincingly conjecture that the situation on the Auckland Islands did not require any advanced cognitive abilities. It is likely that all that was required to survive was to solve three simple problems: morale, shelter and food. 'Executive Intelligence' cannot account for these differences. Captain Dalgarno was a capable seaman, otherwise he would have not been put in charge of the mighty *Invercauld*. Survival on the Auckland Islands did not require complex decision-making. It required effective co-ordination and motivation of a team so that the team output is greater than the sum of the individual inputs – simple and basic leadership skills. Druett's account of events makes it clear that the test of leadership in the sub-antarctic came down to character rather than intellect. The conclusion that we are drawn to – since all other factors are equal – is that the personal style of the two leaders was the deciding factor that made all the difference. Dalgrano stuck rigidly to his idea of rank and remoteness, failed to rally his men and wallowed in his private despair. Musgrave, on the other hand, shared his own tobacco, showed personal bravery and made a direct impact on morale. Dalgrano, on the other hand, Dalgrano also failed to move swiftly, leaving his men at the mercy of the winds for five days with no plan and precious little shelter. In complete contrast, Musgrave secured shelter, food

and warmth and clearly had a determined goal to survive from the very outset.

As the fate of these shipwrecked mariners shows, much of the success and failure that we endure together hangs on the character of our leaders. When the winds around our organisations blow cold and harsh and our ship goes aground,

it is that character that may make the difference between building a new boat to sail to success or consuming ourselves in cannibalism.

References

Druett, J. (2007). Island of the lost: Shipwrecked at the edge of the world. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.

From the Southland News 29th July 1865 Remarkable Escape from Shipwreck

It has seldom fallen to our lot as journalists to record a more remarkable instance of escape from the perils of shipwreck, and subsequent providential deliverance from the privations of a desolate island, after a two years' sojourn, than that we have now to furnish. Captain Musgrave, formerly of the Grafton, brigantine, from Sydney, in November, 1863, has arrived in Invercargill, and has furnished us with the particulars of the wreck of his vessel in one of the inlets of the Auckland Islands on the 3rd January, 1864. He reports that having been unsuccessful in the sealing expedition – the object of his voyage – he left Campbell's Island, with the intention of returning at once to Sydney, but subsequently determined to renew the attempt at the Auckland Islands, and entered into one of the sounds there on the last day of the year 1863, and got to anchorage next morning. A heavy gale came on, which increased in fury until it became a perfect hurricane, continuing to midnight of the 2nd January, 1864, when the anchor chains parted, and the vessel almost immediately struck upon a rocky beach, and within a few minutes was nearly full of water. Providently all hands, four men in addition to the captain, were able to get safe ashore, and to secure from the wreck nearly all the articles likely to prove of service to them. The vessel having been provisioned only for a two months', the supply of provisions was but scanty, and the country on which they were cast was barren and inhospitable. To detail the hardships undergone by the little band during their two years' seclusion in the desolate spot, their only food being seals' flesh, and their drink water, is a task for which no one who has not passed through a somewhat similar phase of suffering, is at all competent.

With the imperfect shelter afforded by a tent formed of portions of the spars and sails of the wreck, their employment being that of killing seals to sustain their own lives, and the monotony of their existence being only varied by an occasional climbing to the tops of the mountains in hope of discovering a sail, they were buoyed up with the probability of their discovery by some vessel which might be sent in search of them. This hope, however failed them, and at length Captain Musgrave, the mate of the Grafton, and one of the seamen, determined to make an effort to reach some inhabited land in a boat which they constructed for the purpose, by enlarging the ship's dingy (13ft), using the few tools – insufficient for the purpose – which they had been able to save from the wreck. The remaining two seaman preferred to continue on the island, trusting to the probability of assistance being rendered by the safe arrival of the captain and the other two at some port. Had they wished to come away, the cockle shell of a boat in which the venture had to be made was incapable of carrying them, in addition to the three who had already decided on the attempt. The frail craft was so leaky as to require incessant pumping to keep her afloat, and for five days and nights did these brave men unremittingly battle with the winds and waves, sustained by the hope of life and the prospect of deliverance. On the morning of the sixth day, the little party reached Port Adventure in safety, where they were fortunately immediately seen and received by Captain Cross of the Flying Scud, who hospitably entertained them, and subsequently brought them on to Invercargill in his own vessel. On their arrival here, with the benevolence characteristic of the British merchant, the case of the sufferers was taken in hand by John M'Pherson, Esq., and a subscription set on foot for chartering and furnishing a vessel to proceed at once to the Auckland Islands for the delivery of the two seaman still remaining there.

CONTACT:

Dr Tuvia Melamed
Director

ClearWater
Assessment & Development
2 Pear Tree Way; Wychbold; Droitwich Spa; Worcs WR9 7JW

Mobile: 07739 285710
Email: TMelamed@ClearWater-UK.COM