

Leadership lessons from Rotheragate: The decision to head south, orca whales and smashing through the ice

In the spirit of insightful reflection, I tell the story of 'Rotheragate', an on-the-fly leadership development experience on the largest all-female expedition to Antarctica.

The setting was a journey down the Antarctic Peninsula, an inner journey toward becoming better leaders, and an epic adventure. Our goal was to reach Rothera, a British research station at 67° south, the southernmost point of the journey. On the way, we were working to heighten the influence and impact of our work as scientists through the Homeward Bound strategic leadership in science initiative.



The eighty women aboard the MV Ushuaia on the largest all-female expedition to Antarctica (photo credit: Oli Samson).

A visit to Rothera station is a big deal. Not many people get there and we were being welcomed as as one of only two ship visits each year. It was to be a final visit before the base closed for a two-year refurbishment, making our presence a special occasion.

On day thirteen of our voyage, we passed through the Buchanan Passage, which was a series of cliffed mountain peaks on either side as the ship took us between Adelaide Island and the Antarctic Peninsula. As we pulled into an area known as "The Gullet" in Hanusso Bay, the ice got thicker. Our expedition leader called us all to the lounge to announce that we were turning around.

A vote was called on whether we wanted to double back and head around to the outer, seaward side of Adelaide Island to continue our journey south, or abandon the plan of reaching Rothera to stay in

the Bay area for 2- 3 days before heading north. Rocky conditions would make the former option of heading into open seas uncomfortable, a prospect that sent a ripple of anxiety among the assembled crowd.

Once voiced, anxiety can be an influential and persuasive force. It is interesting to observe how people, particularly groups of women, respond to and empathise with fear. We voted. An independent decision was made not to go to Rothera.

At the time, I was struck by the difference between *informed* and *participatory* decision making. While the former accounts for the views of a group of people, the latter depends on those views, as in a typical democracy. It is interesting to note that the Myer Briggs Z decision making tool encourages groups to consider where they are at a given moment, what is most important, and where they think the critical minimum is for making a collective decision. Conventionally, if 35% are unsure about a given course of action, this is enough to prevent it being pursued. Although a majority of the women in the room had voted to continue south to Rothera, enough people expressed discomfort with the idea to change the plan.

Over the following day we shared our thoughts about what leadership lessons could be learned from the episode. We talked over the dinner table, in small groups, as a collective group and even workshopped the event, looking for meaning in the twists and turns of what had happened.

We used the life styles inventory (LSI) circumplex to chart the various thoughts, feelings and behaviours we had individually experienced on a twister-style mat. The LSI is a tool that identifies individual thinking and behavioural styles, describing them as constructive, passive and aggressive behaviours. It helps us to see how our thoughts are helping us to move us towards a desired outcome in a given situation. What emerged was a complex picture of multiple responses and behaviours in individuals. Scaled up across the 80 women in the room, these played out as a tangled psychological web, aptly captured by the tangle of bodies on the map.

Many of us reported a swing from what are known as *competitive* or *achievement* styles (which would underpin thoughts such as “I want to achieve the visit to Rothera Station!”), toward the seemingly contrasting *humanistic-encouraging* and *passive* styles (which would underpin empathetic thoughts towards those feeling uncomfortable about pushing forward to Rothera in rough conditions: “If I don’t go, I will be disappointed, but if we go, she will be miserable, uncomfortable and seasick, which is worse than disappointment”). Interestingly, the competitive-achievement sentiments found little voice in the room at the time of the vote, but were widely reported afterwards.



Using the life styles inventory (LSI) circumplex mat to chart the various thoughts, feelings and behaviours we had individually experienced during the decision not to visit Rothera Research Station (photo credit: Oli Samson).

The next morning, we boarded the zodiac inflatable boats to explore the bay surrounded by beautiful, intricately carved ice bergs. One distinctive characteristic of Antarctica is that somehow the wildlife, landscapes and sheer wilderness combine to create timely formative experiences. The disappointment of not reaching Rothera Station evaporated as we tracked pods of feeding orca whales across the bay, laughing and scrambling with our cameras. Somehow it seemed that our shared purpose had forged a bond based on mutual respect, consensus and understanding.

Upon returning to the ship, we were called once again to the lounge where our ship's captain and expedition leader let us know that the swell had died down. This meant that conditions were good to head south around the outside of Adelaide Island to Rothera Station after all, and the boat was leaving imminently. We whooped for joy, happy to leave our fate in the hands of two seasoned Antarctic travellers, and headed south.

The visit to Rothera was a success all around. We were regaled with stories of flying twin otters over the Transantarctic mountains, we got up close and personal with the dive facility, aquarium holdings and even paid the resident elephant seal population a visit.



British expedition members at Rothera Research Station, 67° South, Antarctic Peninsula

As we left the station, news from a nearby ice breaker ship reported that a change in wind direction had cleared the gullet of ice bergs. We made our way into our next adventure: cutting a path through thickening sea ice to head back north along the inner channel between Adelaide Island and the Peninsula, revisiting our previously ice-blocked route from the other direction.

The next twelve hours were spent zig zagging and making tiny steps forward across a mosaic of sea ice, interspersed with slushy, fragmented ice covered in tell-tale “frazzle” crystals, meaning that it was on the verge of freezing solid. This was undoubtedly the most adventurous moment of our voyage. We watched the ice close quickly in behind us as each small amount of headway was made, wondering for how much longer our captain’s nerve would hold. The tension on the bridge was palpable and I felt the strange sensation of having gone beyond my own comfort levels on my adventure-meter (something that doesn’t happen often!).

Having spent a lot of time on boats in tropical waters, I found our voyage an unusual mix of understanding the boating motions, but not the environment. Navigating a ship through Antarctic waters is an art that requires knowledge of ice conditions, wind and swell, alongside an ability to anticipate a changing landscape as glaciers and ice shelves melt to produce new islands and peninsulas in areas where even the most recent charts quickly become dated.



The MVV Ushuaia breaking through sea ice in “the Gullet”, Hanusso Bay, Antarctic Peninsula. An ambitious metaphor for breaking the glass ceiling!

While our safety was never in question, we came dangerously close to a stuck ship and a recovery operation. Many of us remained in blissful ignorance of this situation. As we finally broke free the following afternoon, it was wonderful to recognise the power of nature in that moment, and stand on the deck enjoying metaphors about breaking glass ceilings. This was definitely a *‘have-your-cake-and-eat-it moment’*: we had empathised, we had bonded over orca whales, we reached Rothera Station and we smashed the ice on the way home for good measure!

For me, there is an inescapable irony that the dramatic push to 67° south on our ‘largest all-female expedition to Antarctica’, and the adventurous return journey through the ice were determined by two of the highest ranking people on the boat, who were incredibly gracious, brave and modest men.

From a journey densely peppered with reflection and searches for learning opportunities, I am left with the idea that different leadership decisions call for different styles. Compared with their male counterparts, research suggests that women together are a little more collaborative, inclusive, have a legacy mindset and can be trusted with assets and money. In our case, 80 women informed a consultative decision not to go to Rothera. That decision was largely based on shared purpose and consensus and driven by empathy for the discomfort of others. It was then followed up by a more directive decision based on the expertise and authority of our captain an expedition leader.

All up, the adventures and achievements of our journey down the Antarctic Peninsula were delivered by a diverse set of minds at the leadership table of our ship. In a world of pressing scientific agendas, perhaps this means that the best gains are made when men and women bring their different leadership styles together. When women are able to sit at the STEM leadership table in equal measure, perhaps the sustainable future we all aspire to might just be within reach. Let’s make it happen...