



Rachael Robertson

A year in Antarctica, “one of the toughest workplaces on the planet”, gave this expedition boss a crash course on leadership, writes Kirsten Galliot.

How do you define good leadership?

For me, it’s about creating more leaders. I never saw myself as a leader because I didn’t want that capital-L leadership – you know, charge out the front and tell people what to do. I didn’t feel comfortable in that space – I’m an introvert. But I flipped it because good leadership is about coaching people, supporting them and gathering people together.

In 2005 you led an expedition to Antarctica where you spent a year with a bunch of strangers. What was your greatest fear as you boarded that icebreaker?

Being found out. The Antarctic Division recruits for qualities so you don’t need to know anything technically, you just need to be able to demonstrate resilience, empathy and integrity. I didn’t know anything about climate change science or glaciology but I had to manage 22 science projects. I knew nothing about construction and trades but I had to manage a major construction program. I spent a lot of time telling myself, “You’re not managing a science program, you’re managing people.”

As you write in your book *Respect Trumps Harmony*, you had no input into the selection of the 120 people who you’d spend your summer with or the 17 people who’d remain with you in winter. That has echoes of a new CEO joining an organisation. You thought a lot of people would be very similar but that wasn’t the case, was it?

No. I just looked at demographic diversity – we were all a similar age. It was only when I got to know them and came to understand sexuality, religion, politics, culture and cognitive diversities – from the big-picture storyteller to the detailed analytical brain – that I realised, we can’t get away from each other, we have to live together, so how do I create a culture where we speak up and deal with stuff? My two big fears were someone exploding with anger or someone spiralling with depression because I didn’t have the skill or tools to deal with either scenario. So that’s where the mantra “respect trumps harmony” came from. *Mateship* is a very Australian culture but this was a workplace and we didn’t have to love each other – we didn’t even have to like each other – but we always had to treat each other with respect. I reckon I said that at least five times a day.

Current role

Keynote speaker, author and leadership expert at Rachael Robertson Pty Ltd

Tenure

14 years

Age

51

Previous roles

Expedition leader, Davis Station, Antarctica;
Chief ranger, West Coast region, Parks Victoria

And how does your “no triangles” policy fit in with that?

“No triangles” was a game changer. It’s so simple – I don’t speak to you about another person. If I have something to say, I go directly to the person and I don’t complain and whinge and moan to a third party. No triangles. I did it to build respect in the team because it meant that under intense pressure, in really difficult situations, we knew we had each other’s backs. The side benefit for me as the leader, which I didn’t anticipate, was it freed up so much of my energy. I didn’t realise how exhausting those conversations were and I also didn’t realise that by listening to them I was actually condoning them.

How hard was it to implement?

It took me two months to embed it because Australians generally don’t like conflict and we find those conversations really confronting. But I got everyone in a room and I said, “Right, we’re going to build respect in this team so let’s have direct conversations. Put your hand up if you agree.” Every hand went up. So the next time someone came to me and said, “Oh, he did this to me or she said that to me,” I now had a tool to say, “Hang on, I saw you put your hand up and commit to ‘no triangles’ so why are you talking to me about it?” I also had to coach people on how to have difficult conversations with each other.

What do you think people commonly get wrong?

In my experience they use words that are absolutes, such as “always”, “never”, “everyone” and “no-one”. If you say to someone, “You’re always late for work”, as soon as “always” is out of your mouth, they’ll say, “Well, last Tuesday I was 30 minutes early so it’s not always.” I had to coach them on using facts. “The fact is, you’re due here at 8.30 and the fact is that you arrived at 8.45. We had a conversation about this last week and you said there’s no reason you can’t get to work on time.” Facts and data take the emotion out.

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Confronting issues can be more difficult when people are working remotely. Do you have any advice on that?

Have a personal conversation. Too much gets lost in translation via email. As soon as I’m aware of an issue, I make a time to call. I don’t leave it for days or weeks because many people get defensive when you explain it’s something that happened a while ago. I also flag what the conversation will be about – “Can I catch up with you tomorrow about that customer?” This way the person doesn’t feel like they have been hijacked and react with emotion.

You have said there are more triangles in senior leadership teams or in boardrooms than anywhere else. Why do you think this is so?

It’s political and typically about resourcing. If I’m a senior executive in the boardroom and I’m looking for resourcing – because resourcing will typically be finite, whether it’s budget or staff – then to get that money I have to take it from somewhere else. If I can somehow make your product or your team look inefficient or that it’s not contributing to the return on investment or shareholder value or whatever metric it may be, there’s a better chance of me swiping that budget. That’s where the triangles come in.

So how can a leader see that happening and stop that behaviour?

You’ve got to have transparent agreement around core activities. What are the priorities? If as an executive team or a board we decide on the top five, six, seven, eight activities then that takes the politics out of it because you navigate back to that every time. You say, “Well, is this one of our key projects or core activities? No, it’s not so we make the decision in that favour.”

Do you think one of the few benefits of COVID-19 has been that it’s set priorities quite clearly?

I was a firefighter for 19 years and some of the best teamwork was at fires. We had a core focus and it was simple – put the wet stuff on the hot stuff. It’s a lot easier in a crisis because there’s clarity around what we need to do. When the foot comes off the accelerator and we go back to business as usual, that’s when collaboration falls by the wayside.

So how do senior leaders keep that clarity of thinking outside crisis?

With my Antarctic team, one of the things I spent a lot of time on was hooking them all mentally and emotionally onto the core goal, which was the expedition goals. I had to communicate to a plumber or a diesel mechanic, “This is how you contribute to Antarctic science.”

Is that about purpose? So many businesses struggle to find purpose.

I had to be careful with that because some of my team had what I’d call a noble purpose – they felt like they were contributing to our knowledge of climate change science. But there were also a cohort who was there for the money



Rachael Robertson in her in-house production studio

– it’s a very well-paid job – and there was a lot of resistance between the two. I sometimes worry that we try too hard to get a consensus. Some people just want to get paid so they can support their family and that’s perfectly acceptable. We don’t all have to have this same noble purpose.

What did you learn about managing the mental health of people in such a harsh environment?

To make it normal. I remember Good Friday vividly. I was homesick and one of the guys asked how I was going. I was like, “Do I tell him? Or is he going to go, ‘Oh, girls. This is why women shouldn’t be station leaders.’” I decided to be honest and that moment was pivotal because it humanised me. And it made it okay for the rest of the team to reveal how they were feeling. We ended up with our own language – we called it NQR, which means “not quite right”. NQR was shorthand for saying, “I’m doing alright. Not a good day today but I’ll be fine.” It built empathy in the team.

The life of a leader can sometimes be lonely. How did you deal with your loneliness in Antarctica?

I was the second woman [to be expedition leader] at Davis Station so I had dinner with Diana Patterson, who was the first woman. She suggested I keep a journal. We had huge

issues to deal with but writing about them every night took the emotion out of it and meant I slept better. So that helped with my resilience. And the most important thing was my friendship with the station leader at Mawson Station, who was more than 600 kilometres away. We picked up the phone to each other all through the year. There was one person on this planet who knew what I was going through and vice versa. I’ve been more lonely as a leader in a capital city than I ever was in Antarctica and the only reason was because I had Graham [Cook].

One of the issues you faced was leading a rescue mission. When communicating to the team you chose to instill “optimism but temper it with reality”. Is that your general ethos in a crisis?

I’d seen leaders under pressure who would throw pens across the room or just exhibit pressure and we’d all sort of creep out of the room. I thought, “I’m not going to be that leader.” I’d trained for it but I’d never led a search and rescue so I had to dig deep and be poised. I had to pull myself up, slow my heart rate, slow my speaking and say, “We’ve got this”, and instil confidence. I gave them the facts but I had to make judgement calls on how much information to give them and I equally had to manage my own emotions. I wanted to stay in my office but I had these hundred other people watching me and getting their cues from how I was reacting. They were like meerkats. I couldn’t just be leading – I needed to be seen to be leading.

As a leader, you felt you were being watched all the time, didn’t you?

That’s true of every leader. I underestimated that. Even where I sat for meals was noticed. People often ask if I would go back again. I wouldn’t and that’s the reason why. Even though I loved it and it changed my life, the scrutiny 24 hours a day was too much. There was not one second where I could take off the leadership hat.

When you have that constant leadership, how do you set boundaries?

I had an epiphany in Antarctica. In my corporate life, I had been working longer and longer hours. I’d always blame my time management but it was never my time management, it was my boundaries. Every time someone said, “Rachael, have you got a minute?” my default answer was “yes”, when I should have said, “Not now”. I wasn’t listening and I wasn’t present. I never set boundaries before I went to Antarctica but I had to there, to stop people knocking on my door in the middle of the night.

What’s the hallmark of great leadership?

Self-awareness. People don’t remember what you say or do but they remember how you make them feel.

What advice would you give a brand-new CEO?

Invest a lot of time and energy in reflecting on yourself. It’s almost like standing on a balcony and looking down, watching yourself. And find some frank and fearless people who’ll give you feedback. If you build your own self-awareness then you can learn the rest. ●