8-2011

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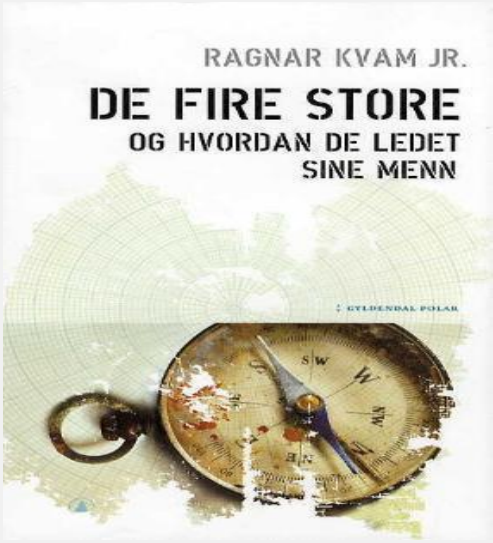
OF ICE AND MEN: CHILLING LEADERSHIP TALES OF FOUR GREAT EXPLORERS

Published:
3 Aug 2011



Following a brief pause after the Age of Exploration, the desire of human beings to reach every corner of their earth, however remote, was revived when expeditions to the two Polar Regions began in the 19th century. Participants of such harsh expeditions might have been carrying on the mantle of adventure or seeking fame, but they also provide fine examples for some very important lessons, said author Ragnar Kvam.

Documented in the Norwegian book, '*De Fire Store*' (The Great Four), Kvam studied four famous explorers – Fridtjof Nansen, Ernest Shackleton, Roald Amundsen, and Robert F. Scott – and proposed three qualities for success: courage, patience, and the ability to rise above disappointments. Speaking at a Wee Kim Wee Centre seminar, Kvam argued that it was the explorers' individual qualities that shaped their expeditions to the North and South Poles at the turn of the 20th century.

Kvam holds a Masters degree in History from the University of Oslo, and was, for many years, a newspaper political correspondent. In 1987, he bought a 37-foot long sailing boat and began what would later become a 14-year voyage. It was his fascination with exploration that led him to think about the trailblazers before him: How others have steered their own course and why.

Fridtjof Nansen's impatience

Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen was a visionary and a master at building explorations. Nansen, who led the first crossing of the Greenland interior in 1888, gained international fame for leading an expedition to the North Pole between 1893 and 1896. He also came up with the idea of commissioning the design and construction of a ship specifically for sailing in the icy seas of the North Pole.

The ship – which featured a rounded hull that makes it difficult for ice to form – kept Nansen's crew safe and warm in their expedition. The drawback was that it could not go fast. After six months of slow sailing that sorely tested his patience, Nansen wanted to abandon ship; to continue the journey on his own, taking just the dogs and the dog-driver.

From then on, Nansen's leadership onboard the ship turned sour. Although his men were happy to prepare Nansen's equipment – such as sleeping bags, and the sledges and harnesses for the dogs – Nansen was irritable and overbearing. He put his nose into everybody's business and became a pain, said Kvam.

After He disembarked with his dogs and dog-driving expert, Hjalmar Johansen, the ship's skipper documented in his diary that the entire crew had only scorn for Nansen. So while Nansen may be remembered as a visionary or a great explorer, he was not celebrated as a person, Kvam said. His crew had no faith in him, and he never did reach the North Pole.

Roald Amundsen's luck

Roald Amundsen, a fellow Norwegian explorer, achieved the distinction of being the first person to reach both the North and South Poles. During his expedition to traverse Canada's Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans from 1903 to 1906, Amundsen learnt Arctic survival skills from the Netsilik Inuits – the indigenous people of that part of Canada. These skills, such as using sled dogs and wearing animal skins in lieu of heavy, woollen parkas, came in handy for subsequent expeditions.

Did Amundsen succeed where Nansen failed? "Amundsen was an excellent planner… He said luck is not something that you have, luck is something that you plan for," Kvam noted. And so, for his expedition to the South Pole, Amundsen and his crew of specialists created supply depots along the way to the South Pole – using skis and dog sleds for transportation. He had also planned to kill some of the dogs during the expedition for fresh meat.

Amundsen had his faults. In his anxiety to reach the South Pole before British explorer Robert F. Scott, he got impatient and wanted to set off before the end of 1911's harsh winters. Hjalmar Johansen, who had accompanied Fridtjof Nansen in the earlier North Pole journey, was on Amundsen's South Pole quest. With his past experience in mind, Johansen warned Amundsen against setting off before the end of winter, saying that it would be too cold and that the dogs would suffer and die.

Amundsen chose not to listen. He was so adamant about beating Scott that he lost all rationality, Kvam said. As such, Amundsen launched an attempt on 8 September 1911, together with Johansen. The attempt was aborted after just one week due to extreme temperatures.

On a subsequent trip, Amundsen had trekked far ahead of Johansen, leaving the latter to take care of another ailing team mate. Tired and frustrated, Johansen voiced his displeasure. Amundsen did not take well to Johansen's criticisms, and he subsequently denied Johansen a spot on the expedition's final leg.

Robert Falcon Scott's determination

The man whom Amundsen beat in the race to the South Pole was English naval captain Robert Falcon Scott. Tragically, not only was Scott unable to grab the prize before Amundsen by a mere five weeks, he and his four comrades had all succumbed to extreme cold, exhaustion and starvation on their return journey in March 1912.

Scott was courageous and ambitious. Becoming the first man to reach the South Pole was to be his great career move in peacetime Victorian England. And though he had assembled an expedition team, Scott was not a good planner nor a very good leader, Kvam noted. "He did not delegate work well, and if something went wrong, he would always blame others; never himself."

Unlike Amundsen, who planned, rehearsed and practiced, Scott sat in camp during the winter season, playing football and chess. But for all his failings, Scott was an eminent writer who wrote beautiful prose about his experiences. He was later honoured as an icon of courage.

Sir Ernest Shackleton’s optimism

Of the four explorers portrayed in Kvam's book, Sir Ernest Shackleton is probably his favourite. Also a navy officer, Shackleton joined Captain Robert F. Scott’s expedition to the South Pole during the early days of his career. He was, however, sent back to England by Scott on health grounds – despite an inconclusive medical report.

To recover from his wounded pride, Shackleton returned to the Antarctica in 1907 as head of the Nimrod Expedition. He wanted to outdo Scott. In January 1909, Shackleton and three companions got to within 180km of the South Pole. But rations were running low and it became clear that there was not going to be enough food to make the journey to and fro.

Shackleton turned around. He knew that he would otherwise be risking the lives of his crew, said Kvam. "Shackleton knew he was saying goodbye to glory and fame. But he said he'd rather live than be famous."

In 1914, Shackleton undertook a new expedition to cross the Antarctic continent. He assembled a crew of 56 in two ships. During the course of the expedition, Shackleton’s main ship was trapped in an ice floe for some months and was subsequently abandoned because water had begun pouring in.

Shackleton and his men endured numerous dangers at sea and on ice floes before the expedition ended three years later with the loss of three lives. Through it all, it was Shackleton's determination and optimism kept the entire crew going. He was somehow able to sustain their morale and he refused to blame anything or anyone for all of the misfortunes, said Kvam.

Not all of the four great explorers accomplished their goals or got to their destinations on time. Yet, there is only one worthy hero and leader in Kvam's opinion – and he was neither the first nor the fastest. So while each journey conveys a different lesson, leadership if defined only by outcomes, would miss a big chunk of the picture.

It is Shackleton's commitment to the journey and his people that continues to inspire Kvam as he travels around the world today.