

STUCK IN AN ICE FLOE

In 1914 Ernest Shackleton, who was nearing Antarctica, got stuck in an ice floe that crushed his ship. At least as dangerous for organizations are the ice floes that squeeze our thinking. The organizational ship can be encrusted and slowly crushed by fixed notions. Peter Senge calls these frameworks our “mental models.”

In one organization, the Director’s expectations of teamwork collided with the mental model of his staff, who saw themselves as bottom feeders, not teammates. Talking openly about their different perceptions was a first step toward breaking up the ice floe. Next I used the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to highlight the ways staff members’ decision-making styles complemented each other. Working as a team, the staff then established decision-making processes that capitalized on people’s strengths. They created more efficient meeting procedures, a regular planning cycle and other changes that strengthened the organization.

Like Shackleton’s crew, this team survived because they openly discussed and then shifted their mental models. After living on the ice floe for months and then sailing across an ocean in three dinghies, Shackleton’s men fashioned shelter from an upturned dinghy on an island where no one would pass.

Initial interviews in another client revealed a strict separation between departments. Instead of seeing themselves as a team supporting all internal and external customers, each support person saw herself as answerable only to her department. This mental model dated from earlier days when each department was an independent organization. In order to talk across departments, I worked with support staff and management staff as a combined team. One day I brought a ball of twine and asked the group to rig it to represent the actual communication lines of their work tasks. A web resulted. This was a step toward discussing the organization’s common goals and overlapping work.

We explored other mental models. “Management staff” conjured up decision-making from the top; management set policy and tried, often unsuccessfully, to enforce it among the departments. What about changing the decision-making process, I suggested. On some issues, convene the combined management and support group to analyze the problem and gather suggestions. On other issues, give the issue to the whole staff; get them to own it so they would own the solution.

In order to seek help, Shackleton and four others sailed eight hundred miles in a dinghy. Fighting fierce wind, ice and thirst, they managed to reach the only inhabited island, but between them and a single whaling station lay a mountain range. Once again Shackleton imagined beyond the impossible, just as people in organizations must. (*Endurance*, by Alfred Lansing)

Please copy this article with complete copyright notice.

Copyright © 2000 Merryn Rutledge

About some recent clients:

Cathedral Square Corporation develops and manages affordable, service-enriched housing to meet the needs of 800 Vermonters.

Rock-Tenn Company in Franklin County produces 100% recycled paperboard.

79% of folks in **ReCycle North** job training programs find jobs within 3 months of graduating.

Harwood Moses Chambers provides A to Z marketing assistance to several leading Vermont resorts and health care organizations.

A client writes...

“I compliment you on the fine job [helping us with board building]...I am amazed at how quickly you grasped the [issues] of the Fletcher Free Library board.”

Beal Hyde
Board Vice Chair,
Fletcher Free Library,
Burlington, VT