

Respect Trumps Harmony - Five Leadership Lessons from The World's Toughest Workplace

By Rachael Robertson **

Leadership is an intrinsic part of everyone's workplace, no matter the role you're in. Australian - Rachael Robertson, led an expedition in Antarctica for a year and since her return has become an author, keynote speaker and leadership expert. Rachael's leadership and teamwork skills were put to the test during her time in Antarctica and in this article, she shares crucial leadership lessons developed from her time there. These lessons are relevant to all of us and may be applicable in your business team.

The Antarctic winter is harsh—temperatures hover around –35 degrees Celsius, there are constant blizzards, months of darkness, and you can't get in or out. Work becomes tedious and your sense of purpose is sapped by the knowledge that nothing will change until the re-supply ship arrives, a distant nine months away.

It sounds extreme. But the reality is every workplace has an Antarctic winter. Every business has a period where the work slows down, and work is just work. There are no big, challenging projects on the horizon and capital expenditure slows to a trickle. In these times, more than ever, leaders must find ways to inspire their people and retain the best staff, ready for the inevitable up-swing.

In Antarctica I used five tools to keep my team, and myself, inspired and motivated through the long Antarctic winter.

No Triangles—the practice of only having direct conversations, built respect within my team and resulted in very high performance. We had a simple rule: 'I don't speak to you about him/her and you don't speak to me about him/her.' No Triangles. Go directly to the source.

It's a powerful tool that reduces conflict and clarifies accountability. The practice of No Triangles also ensures your time as a leader is spent dealing with issues that matter, issues that will have the most impact on the organisation. Not burning up your energy handling personal disputes.

It also shuts down 'answer shopping'—people who keep asking the same question, going over people's heads, or around people, until they get the answer they want.

Manage your Bacon Wars—a major dispute over bacon threatened to shut down our Antarctic station: should the bacon be soft or crispy?

Every workplace has their "Bacon Wars". They are seemingly small, irrelevant issues that grate on people, but build up over time until they become distractions and affect productivity. It may be dirty coffee cups; people who are consistently late for meetings; people playing on phones while someone is presenting...they appear to be small offences but, they are usually a symptom of a deeper issue.

Leaders must identify and probe their "Bacon Wars". Find out what's underneath and resolve it.

For us, it turned out the "Bacon War" was a manifestation of something deep and important: respect between two teams.

Find a Reason to Celebrate—recognise milestones and important moments. If you don't have one readily apparent, then create one. Find a reason. In Antarctica we celebrated big events but also the smaller successes such as a month without a power blackout, significant scientific data collection or a period of uninterrupted internet access with a fully functioning server.

Usually it was just a notice on the whiteboard in the dining hall, but it was important to find the time to stop and celebrate. **Why - because these moments create momentum. They give a sense of progress, of moving forward and getting closer to our outcomes.**

Peer Support Is Gold—leadership can be a lonely road. As leaders we must retain a strong boundary between ourselves and our staff.

I had no one I could talk to about issues on our station, but I did have a peer at one of the other Australian stations. I could phone this Station Leader and explain what was going on with confidence that he would fully understand. He'd call me and I'd have the same empathy.

A colleague who understands the challenges of your role; someone you can relate to and can discuss options with, is something to foster, nurture and treasure.

Respect Trumps Harmony—my expedition team was the most diverse team I've ever worked with. I didn't recruit them - I was handed them. We were from vastly different backgrounds, a mix of professional skills including scientists, engineers, IT, trades, pilots and weather specialists. The only generalist role was mine: Station Leader.

With such a mix of people, it was impractical to think we'd all get along with each other all the time. The interpersonal pressure was intense, and privacy was scarce. It would be unreasonable to expect total harmony, so I didn't. **Instead, we aimed for respect - simple, professional courtesy and respect.**

I have grave concerns for any team that, explicitly or implicitly, strives just for harmony at the expense of productivity and respect. It's dangerous for two main reasons. Firstly, dysfunctional behaviour continues, it just goes underground so the illusion of harmony remains. Secondly, it stifles innovation. People are often too afraid to put up their hand and offer a different view or opinion because they don't want to rock the harmony boat.

Instead of harmony, teams should aim for respect because 'respect trumps harmony', every time.



**** Rachael Robertson has written two books on leadership – “Leading on the Edge” and “Respect Trumps Harmony”.**

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