



The Last Place on Earth

I need to apologize for not reporting more and more often. None of my explanations or excuses make much sense, even to me. I thought about a sort of chronological report and then thought again. Here goes with more to follow shortly.

Putting the new wheels under an LCI research agenda has been much on my mind. There is so much unexplored territory where safety; production system design, planning and management; and the lives and work of front line field supervision come together. This initiative will require "an act of memory, an effort of the imagination." (This lovely line is just now 100 years old. It comes from the Introduction to Frederick Taylor's 1911 book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*.) How we remember and what we remember is tricky, particularly when it comes to cause and effect. I'll get back to this in the next few posts. But now for something completely different, another event from 1911.

Charlie Rose recently interviewed Jim Collins, the author of *Good to Great*, on his latest book, *Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos, and Luck--Why Some Thrive Despite Them All*. I urge you to listen to this interview <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/11983>. The discussion centers on the 1911 race to the South Pole between the Englishman Robert Scott and the Norwegian Roald Amundsen. Both men were eager to be first to the South Pole. This is a great tale in project management because of they took very different approaches to managing the same project, the very same project at the same time. And the real race was to be first to get back. Scott loses both races and his life.

I was quite taken with Scott when I was younger, his heroism in the face of adversity and his tragic end 11 miles short of safety. His last diary entry demonstrates that courage and eloquence to the end. And then I read Roland Huntford's book now updated, "*The Last Place on Earth*" - <http://amzn.com/0375754741> and my view changed.

But how does this connect to Lean Construction? Hold that thought and use this definition of Lean Construction as you watch the interview, "A new way to see, understand and act in the world." (Perhaps, "A different way to see...." is now more appropriate.) Scott and Amundsen took very different approaches. These differences flow from their histories, backgrounds and temperament. They relied on different technologies, execution strategies and management theories. Their ends - get to the pole and back first - were the same but the means they used to achieve them quite different. A simple example, Amundsen used dogs and sleds. Scott planned to rely on maybe the earliest version of the snowmobile. Ponies were his fallback plan and men pulling sledges if that failed. Dogs and skis were out. Both teams established supply points well south of their departure point so that they could lighten the load for the sprint and return the following spring.



Amundsen was first to the pole and returns to his base camp on the day he had planned nearly a year before the expedition. An experienced Arctic explorer, he marked the route and the location of supply dumps by placing poles on the cache and well to the left and right of the track. He knew precise navigation in blizzard conditions would be difficult. In a sense, he invested in contingency to reduce the risk of failure. This act of memory and effort of the imagination increased resilience, the his ability to respond to and cope with the unknown.

By contrast, Scott takes decisions from the first that reduce resilience. He organizes provisions for a 4-person team. A few hours before they depart, he adds one more person, a young officer who pleads to join the team. Their bags were packed; they were ready to go. They load no additional rations so their team is less able to cope with the unexpected.

The way these explorers understood and managed the risk reminds me of the differences we see between traditional project management and lean. I urge you to listen to Jim Collins interview and to think about the implications for the way we manage projects in general; how we understand the relationship between contingency and safety in particular. There is a lot to learn from this story just now 100 years old. I will return to the larger theme of connecting high performance and safety after a bit of chronology in the next two posts.

And before that - a request

Please help me collect data on the nature and magnitude of uncertainty project managers face on projects. This approach was developed on a research project for the Project Organization Task Force (POTF) sponsored by the Construction Industry Institute late last century. You can find the result of that research on the CII website:

https://www.construction-institute.org/source/Orders/index.cfm?section=orders&ETask=1&Task=1&SEARCH_TYPE=FIN&FindIn=0&FindSpec=SP12-2

The work of the POTF was shaped by the research of Prof. Alex Laufer, now at the Technion in Haifa Israel. He was particularly interested in how real world project managers coped with two sorts of project; Uncertainty as to project objectives (What) was to be built, and about the means (How) to build it. We asked project managers to mark the position of their current or recent project at the start of construction on a simple 2 X 2 matrix. Note that the mark does not represent how complete the project is but rather the extent to which the objectives and the means to achieve them were certain.

Please take a moment to make your marks in the PowerPoint slide and return it to me. I plan to use the results in the LCI-Cascadia COP meetings on December 14 in Seattle and on the 15th in Portland. Details here as they happen.