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Underground Leaders



The rescue of the 33 Chilean miners trapped for 69 days happens to coincide with the anniversary of the Senghenydd mining disaster on 14th October 1913. In that instance 439 men and boys died.

Their survival had an element of luck: they faced a rock fall, not an explosion. The major factor was that the men stood together, due largely to the way they were led. This is particularly so for the first 17 days, when those on the surface held out little hope, and the trapped men had no idea if they would be rescued.

The shift foreman Luis Urzua showed true leadership qualities. He quickly concluded that the rock fall would not be cleared quickly, so rationed the 48 hours worth of food available, getting the others to accept a spoonful of tuna every 48 hours.

Media psychologists have made much of the metal toughness of men used to working underground. This is partly true, and physical hardship of mining can certainly lead to mental strength. However, one man had only gone underground to repair a truck, while several had been miners for only a few months. Some had become miners after surviving the February earthquake.

Urzua led by

- Splitting the group was split into subgroups, and the day into shifts.
- Allocating work (the first job was to make a reservoir to collect water).
- (Both activity and structure helped avoid the twin dangers of boredom and despair).
- Giving individuals different responsibilities, but also using their own leadership qualities. The former corporal urged his fellows to show discipline; the evangelical preacher had a role in maintaining morale. We can guess that the miner whose own father had been trapped for a week underground will have told the story of his rescue.
- Treatment the men as both part of the group and as individuals, echoing Shackleton's skill in rescuing his party from Antarctica without losing a man.

Once contact was made, it was Urzua who spoke to the President to insist his men were brought out. Once that appeal was made, it was impossible to refuse.

Leadership above ground was also important. The trapped men were not initially told how long the rescue would take, but when the information was given, the estimate was deliberately on the long side. Similarly the use of the rescue capsule took less time than anticipated. This management of expectations kept morale underground high, and also kept the media onside.

The last miner out of the hole was, of course, Luis Urzua, having first made sure that all of his team were safe. "Serve to lead", as they say at Sandhurst.

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