



### **Dennis N.T. Perkins, Ph.D.**

Dennis Perkins is Chief Executive Officer of The Syncretics Group, a consulting firm devoted to effective leadership in demanding environments—especially those characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, and rapid change.

Dr. Perkins has worked for over twenty-five years as an advisor to senior leaders in organizations ranging from Fortune 100 corporations to nonprofit associations. A graduate of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, he served as a Marine infantry officer in Vietnam. He subsequently received his MBA from Harvard University, and a Ph.D. in psychology at The University of Michigan.

While a faculty member at the Yale University School of Management, he developed a breakthrough leadership approach based on the study of groups facing The Edge—the outer limits of human endurance. By studying The Edge, Dr. Perkins believes, “leaders can learn what it takes to help their organizations achieve their greatest potential. And they can remember these principles when they are stretched, stressed, and challenged to the limit.”

Dr. Perkins’ passion to understand The Edge has taken him to disparate places: to Antarctica, where he retraced the footsteps of famed explorer Ernest Shackleton; and to Australia, where he sailed with the crew of the *Midnight Rambler*, winners of the challenging Sydney to Hobart Race. He subsequently completed the 700-mile race, often called the “Everest” of offshore racing, as a crew member on a Volvo 60 racing boat.

Dr. Perkins has written extensively on leadership and organizational effectiveness. He is the author of *Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton’s Antarctic Expedition* (second edition to be published in spring 2012); *Racing through the Storm: Building Exceptional Teams in Extraordinary Times*; *Using the Power of Resonant Metaphor to Increase Leadership Effectiveness*; and *Managing Creation: The Challenge of Building a New Organization*. He is currently working on his third book, *Into the Storm: Lessons in Teamwork from the Treacherous Sydney to Hobart Ocean Race*, with Jillian Murphy, to be published in late 2012.

### **Speech Topics**

From research on The Edge, Dr. Perkins has identified a set of fundamental strategies that can be applied in any challenging environment. These critical strategies are illustrated by two dramatic stories.

## **Leadership at The Edge: The Shackleton Saga**

The "Leadership at The Edge" presentation recounts the saga of legendary Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton.

On December 5, 1914, Shackleton and 27 men sailed from South Georgia Island in the Southern Ocean aboard a wooden vessel named the *Endurance*. Their burning goal was to be the first to cross the Antarctic continent. But forty five days after their departure, disaster struck. *Endurance* was beset by solid pack ice, and the expedition was trapped. For nearly two years, Shackleton and his crew were stranded in the icy sea. They endured unimaginable hardships: brutal cold, total darkness, aching thirst, gnawing hunger, constant danger, and utter desolation. Facing these challenges with astonishing good cheer, Shackleton and his crew returned—without any lives lost—after 634 days in the Frozen South.

How did Shackleton inspire his crew to reach such extraordinary levels of courage, unity, and commitment? The "Leadership at The Edge" presentation answers that question and explains how Shackleton's leadership approach can be applied to any leadership challenge in today's business environment.

## **Teamwork at The Edge: The Midnight Rambler Story**

The "Teamwork at The Edge" presentation tells the contemporary story of the *AFR Midnight Rambler*, winners of the treacherous 1998 Sydney to Hobart race.

This 723-mile, deep-water challenge—often called the "Everest" of offshore ocean racing—is considered to be one of the toughest in the world. Unpredictable weather and seas make each race particularly challenging, but the 1998 race proved to be the most perilous in the race's 61-year history.

As the starting fleet of 115 boats sailed south down the coast of Australia, they were hit by an unexpected "weather bomb"—a massive storm that created 80-foot waves and nearly 100 mph winds. Six sailors perished in the maelstrom, and another 42 were saved in what became the largest search and rescue operation in Australia's history. While many tried to maneuver around the storm, the crew of the *AFR Midnight Rambler* believed their best chance for survival lay in heading directly into its path. This courageous action, which allowed them to sail quickly through the storm, would not have been possible without a fully aligned team.

The decision to head into the eye of the storm—along with their extraordinary tenacity, optimism, courage, and teamwork—enabled this group of "amateurs" to out-perform professionals on bigger boats. After 88 hours at sea, the *AFR Midnight Rambler* arrived safely in Hobart, Tasmania, and was proclaimed the overall winner and awarded the coveted Tattersalls Trophy. They were the smallest boat in 10 years to win the iconic race.

What were the factors underneath this stunning victory? This inspiring presentation answers that question, and explores the nature of building and leading a high-performance team in the face of change and adversity.

## **Comparison of the Two Presentations**

The story of the *Endurance* expedition and the *AFR Midnight Rambler* race are both amazing tales of adventure and triumph in the face of adversity. Here are some similarities and differences:

- Both presentations provide riveting examples of the extraordinary difference that strong leadership and teamwork can make under conditions of adversity, uncertainty and change.

- Both illustrate how the strategies that have been used by leaders and teams at the limits of physical survival can be applied in any challenging business environment.
- Both incorporate Dr. Perkins' personal photos and video, including his expedition to Antarctica and experience aboard a 60-foot sailboat in the Sydney to Hobart Race.
- The "Leadership at The Edge" presentation highlights the special role of the leader and emphasizes Shackleton's role in the success of the expedition. The *Endurance* tale is an epic historical saga, recounted in an original and revealing new light.
- The "Teamwork at The Edge" presentation uses the lens of distributed leadership to explore the role that each team member can play in prevailing over adversity. It also introduces the element of competition, stressing the need not only to survive but also to sail faster than competitors.

Whichever gripping presentation is chosen, the story will provide a compass for leadership and teamwork at The Edge, and will serve as a powerful metaphor to inspire resilience and persistence in tough times.