

Churchill the PM

By Mark Kozak-Holland

Winston Churchill is widely regarded as not only one of the greatest British Prime Ministers but also one of the greatest leaders of the 20th century. How else could he have beaten out titans like Darwin, Shakespeare, Newton, and Brunel to be voted as the greatest Briton ever¹?

But was he a Project Manager in the modern sense—driving a project to completion? What did he actually do that we can learn from today? This article looks at Churchill as a project manager who is managing a massive change effort in the United Kingdom (UK) during the summer of 1940.

In May 1940, the UK was facing a dire situation, an imminent invasion. The forced evacuation from Dunkirk was a disaster in terms of equipment loss. Even though the British had evacuated an unexpected number of troops, most of its heavy fighting equipment—enough equipment for ten divisions and over 200 ships—was lost during the withdrawal. The Royal Air Force (RAF) was about 50 percent below its target strength and was woefully behind in its ability to fend off the German Luftwaffe, having lost 509 fighters in April and May of that year. Aircraft production needed to be stepped up but it could not possibly meet Luftwaffe strength in time.

Churchill had to create a project to address problems and come up with a solution. As he became Prime Minister, he first assessed the situation, and then set up some objectives related to the problem, its scope, whether it could be solved, and what resources were available. The situation didn't look good. Public confidence in him and his government (the project team) was at an all-time low. In fact, his own team was ready to give up and sue for peace.

Churchill set out clear objectives of what he had to do. He set out a short and long term strategy to win the war:

- Short term he had to stave off the invasion.
- Long term he had to somehow get the Americans involved in the war. There were no other powerful allies he could call upon, as the Soviet Union and Nazis had signed a non-aggression pact.

Short-Term Strategy

As part of the short term strategy, Churchill had to restore confidence in his project, first within his government, and then with the public. He also had to inspire his nation to continue a fight already considered lost by many.

Churchill brought in experts and listened to them. Although aircraft production could not meet demand in time, implementing a sense and respond solution would reduce the

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/tv_and_radio/2509465.stm

number of fighters required as they could be directed to specific targets. If the pilots could fly multiple sorties per day (3-4) then the overall number would start to match the strength of the Luftwaffe.

As a result of the assessment, Churchill had to immediately:

1. Set up an effective project team.
2. Create an overarching governance framework.
3. Improve the supply-chain, focusing only on producing essentials tied to specific demands.
4. Implement emerging technologies create a sense and response (adaptive) solution
5. Transform his organization and processes to line up behind the solution.
6. Run it as an agile project—flexible and open to new and changing requirements.

Long-Term Strategy

As part of the long term strategy, Churchill quickly had to move the peacetime economy to one that could support a war.

As a result, Churchill took the following actions:

1. He brought in trusted Lieutenants—people he knew could do the job. Foremost he brought in Lord Beaverbrook, a Canadian newspaper magnate.
2. Churchill trusted his own experience from the First World War when he was Minister of Munitions responsible for tank production. There, he saw first hand the lack of cooperation between the military and industry. He had to change that.
3. He appropriated resources accordingly. Up to this point in time, the three armed services had been jockeying with each other for scarce resources.
4. He knew first hand the value of intelligence so he supported Ultra, the code breaking establishment at Bletchley Park. Lack of good intelligence had been major undoing for him at Gallipoli during the First World War.
5. He stopped defeatist talk in his cabinet and focused on changing the outlook and attitude of his ministers.
6. He dissuaded the Royal Family from moving to Canada, and he prevented the great works of art from being shipped out of the UK. He did this to prevent a collapse in public confidence in himself and his government.
7. He bought time by letting his foe believe he would negotiate for peace.
8. He prioritized what had to be addressed.

Churchill, under tremendous pressure, inspired his nation to continue a fight considered lost. By October 1940, not only did he stave off an imminent enemy invasion but also he had moved the peacetime economy to one that could support a war. He had focused slender resources on the immediate threat, unified a disparate economy, and directed its output into immediate military use. With very little time, Churchill had transformed his organization into the equivalent of a modern-day Adaptive Enterprise so that it could adapt to unexpected situations.

The next article in this series will continue to look at how Churchill transformed the UK in May 1940.

Mark Kozak-Holland's latest book in the Lessons-From-History series is titled "Churchill's Adaptive Enterprise: Lessons for Business Today" (<http://www.mmpubs.com/churchill/>). It draws parallels between events in World War II and today's business challenges. Mark is a Senior Business Architecture with HP Services and regularly writes and speaks on the subject of emerging technologies and lessons that can be learned from historical projects. He can be contacted via his Web site at www.lessons-from-history.com or via email to mark.kozak-holl@sympatico.ca