

Churchill Becomes PM

Churchill the Agile PM - Part 5

By Mark Kozak-Holland

Most people are very familiar with Winston Churchill but may not be familiar with his approach to project management and his PM skills. Parts 1 and 2 introduced the series and how Churchill acquired a project from hell, and why the skills that he brought to the project made him so uniquely qualified. Part 3 looked at his actions up to 1939 that made him a real alternative, and part 4 looked at how technology impacted the Allies "First World War" frame of mind. This article looks at how Churchill acquired the project in May 1940 and took immediate actions, and compares this to the act of project acquisition in today's world, and the importance of setting expectations.

The May 1940 the U.K. faced a desperate situation as Chamberlain had stalled for peace hoping he could manage his way out without declaring war. The U.K. was hopelessly unprepared for a modern war (Part 4). On May the 8th the British Parliament questioned his handling of the Norwegian campaign with the loss of about 4,000 British troops and the occupation of the country. In a vote of confidence his majority crashed as politicians lost faith in his failed leadership. A "coalition" government was desperately needed but the opposition parties, senior Labour figures, opposed forming this under Chamberlain. They firmly believed that the only leader credible enough to take over was Churchill, and made this a condition.

On May the 10th Axis forces invaded the West (Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg) by air and land. At Eben Emale, the linchpin of Belgium's entire defense and a fortress thought impenetrable, agile Axis forces quickly overran it in a few hours with little loss of life. Luxembourg was occupied within a day and the situation in Holland deteriorated. Reaction times had become enormously compressed and the Allies failed to grasp changes in modern warfare (Part 3) driven by agility and communications.

In the British Parliament the pressure for change was enormous and Chamberlain was forced to resign. His right hand man Lord Halifax was offered the project leadership but he turned it down. As a second choice Churchill was reluctantly offered it. Within Churchill's own party many thought Churchill was a major risk holding him responsible for the major military disaster at Gallipoli (1915). Offering Churchill the leadership was a desperate act yet no one was prepared to stick their neck out for this project because the U.K. was facing a worsening situation, and insurmountable problems. Even through there were no takers to lead the project it did not matter to Churchill as he saw this as part of his destiny and a privilege to be in the position.

In today's world this may all seem incredulous but even though Churchill had been marginalized politically he had built up back bench credibility across the parties. He was fully respected by the opposition who gladly accepted him as the leader of a unified team.

All along he had consistently predicted the outcome of Chamberlain's policies correctly and he never faltered or strayed from this core message (Part 4).

Why would anyone today even consider a risky project like this? Why did Churchill take the project on? In short, he was ready for it, mentally prepared as for a decade he had clearly seen the slide towards war and the government mistakes (Part 3). Because of his position and previous experience he had a better view of the Axis military than most people. He was able to ascertain what was required to get through the short term and how. He was also cognoscente of the consequences of the defeat of the U.K.

In today's projects accepting the responsibility for a project requires understanding scope, basic problems, organizational desire to solve, and the related risks. As a PM you may not get a say or a choice in leading a project that is put upon you. So in such a compromised situation it is important to set expectations as to what can be done, and highlight concerns and risks. Also going through a scenario planning exercise with the project team upfront is important so as to prepare for different possible outcomes. Churchill envisaged several outcomes as he had time to plan his approach before he accepted the project.

Churchill was the only senior government cabinet member not ready to admit defeat. He knew he had a split in his party with the majority of senior members leaning towards peace because of their concerns over preserving the status quo. Keeping the British Empire in tact was more important than the fate of the U.K. and Europe. Yet Churchill followed the logic of "*better in than out*" and kept his adversaries in the cabinet to the annoyance of his supporters. A shrewd move or a noble gesture; he wanted a united front for the public,

In today's projects, creating the right mix of people for the project team is a prerequisite for success. Specifically, bringing people from across organizational boundaries to help with adoption and buy in to the project.

On May the 13th Churchill faced parliament for the first time as leader and wanted to show he meant business. He delivered one of the most memorable speeches ever as he dedicated himself and the nation to the project. No one had addressed the British in this manner:

*"...I have nothing to offer but **blood, toil, tears, and sweat**. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many months of struggle and suffering. You ask, what is our **policy**? I say it is to wage war by land, sea, and air. War with all our might and with all the strength God has given us, and to wage war against a monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our **aim**? I can answer in one word. It is victory. Victory at all costs..."*

- Winston Churchill, House of Commons, May 13th 1940

In today's world when taking over a project a well thought out communications strategy is absolutely essential for setting the right tone for the overall project objectives. The more problematic a situation the more important the kick off meeting is to instill confidence into the project team and stakeholders.

Conclusion

As Churchill took over the project he took steps to boost the confidence of British politicians who recognized the depth of his commitment to the project. Churchill's ascent to PM was not a given. Following a shaky start it was unprecedented in that it extended over a lengthy period of 6 years.

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



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