

Churchill, his background and qualifications for becoming a PM

Continuing with our series on Churchill the Project Manager (PM), this article discusses his background, and why he was so uniquely qualified in May 1940. It looks at the skills that he brought to bear to the project. It also asks what is a good background for a PM, what are the most desired traits, and how important is previous project experience along with the battle scars?

When Churchill became PM at the ripe age of 65 in 1940, he had to find the strength to lead his nation forward from the darkest and most dangerous of times, towards the defeat of a tenacious enemy. But Churchill was ready for this and he had always believed he had a fate with destiny that would require him to lead his nation. As he took the position he had a very good idea of what he was undertaking with the background he had and could draw from experience in tough international negotiations or fierce political battles. In many ways he was so well prepared that he wasted little time in taking actions.

Churchill had an extensive career which was in and around politics but weaving in many projects and experiences that were to prove completely invaluable. His career background to 1940 included:

- 1894 – Commission for a second lieutenant in the British army
- 1896 – First book published, compiled from dispatches he wrote for a newspaper
- 1899 – Reporter in Boer war (became a POW although a non-combatant)
- 1901 – Member of Parliament
- 1905 – Cabinet Minister
- 1910-1911 – Home Secretary
- 1911-1915 – First Lord of the Admiralty
- 1915 – Member of the War Council of the British Cabinet
- 1916 – Commanded the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers on the western front
- 1917 – Minister of Munitions
- 1919-1921 – Secretary of state for war and air
- 1924-1929 – Chancellor of the Exchequer
- 1929-1939 – Out of office back bencher

During his career he crashed and burned several times with unprecedented disasters, projects that would have ended anyone else's career. But these tricky project assignments molded him and his outlook. He was able to extract lessons and continue on.

His career began as an adventurer and with an army commission he gained valuable military experience as an officer. After a few years he resigned his commission to pursue a career in journalism and went out to cover the Boer War. He was captured by the Boers and imprisoned, but managed to escape from prison which made him a national hero.

Churchill then became a Member of Parliament and had a meteoric rise to the position of Home Secretary. In 1911 as First Lord of the Admiralty he met with the Kaiser and

moved in prestigious circles. He could take credit for preparing the British Navy for the outbreak of First World War in 1914.

In 1915 as a member of the War Council of the Cabinet Churchill suggested a plan for a new war front that would force the Germans to split their army and support the poorly rated Turkish army. However, the value of good intelligence or the lack of it, and incompetent military leadership in the field led to a disastrous campaign in Gallipoli. He was demoted from the Admiralty and by the end of 1915 he had resigned his cabinet post.

With his political career in tatters Churchill embarked with the command of an infantry battalion in France so he could look people in the eye again. He saw the horror of a static war as he fought in the trenches. From this he clearly began to understand offense and the concept of “attack when possible” an important mantra later on.

In 1917 Churchill was recalled to the cabinet as Minister of Munitions. For the rest of the war, he directed industrial support of the war effort by organizing the national economy for production of war materials. He was responsible for tank production and saw first hand the lack of cooperation between military and industry which hindered his objectives.

Through the 1930s Churchill’s party was out of office and he held no cabinet position. However, he played a very active role in becoming a rallying point for warning the nation of the dangerous rise of German military power under the Nazi regime. This was to give him enormous credibility in 1940.

So what is a good background for a PM, and how important is previous project experience along with the battle scars? A PM needs experience in projects relative to their selection, initiation, definition, planning, risk management, resource management, budgeting, communication, tracking issues and status, and evaluating performance.

Churchill had experience with large scale projects in abundance. From preparing the Navy for war, to planning the Gallipoli campaign, to coordinating the economy for the production of war materials and tanks, to running the finances of the country.

As well as experience PMs require strong traits in business, technology, and behavior, and of course leadership skills. In Churchill’s situation:

- He better understood the challenges the UK faced than anyone. He had learned many lessons from the First World War which guided his priorities in May 1940. Foremost the lack of a central policy that undermined resource coordination, and prolonged the UKs response.
- He was very aware of technology and could see its application and providing a clear advantage. For example, in 1915 even though he was the Lord of Admiralty he sponsored the initial tank design. In 1938 he supported the development of Radar. Although he would be involved in technical discussions he would leave decisions to trusted Lieutenants — people he knew could do the job.

- He was very savvy to understanding human behavior and how to motivate teams around him. Communication management was a cornerstone of his strategy in 1940, communicating in all directions (cabinet, government, people), to avoid any surprises.

Churchill's leadership skills will be discussed in a future article.

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