

## Churchill the Agile Project Manager (Part 7 in a Series)

### *Last Gasp Effort*

Most people are very familiar with Winston Churchill but may not be familiar with his “agile” approach to project management, and his management skills as a PM. Part 6 looked at how Churchill was thrown into the Battle of the West, on May the 10<sup>th</sup> 1940, and assessed problems ahead of him. This article looks at how the project worsened and Churchill had to make a monumental decision whether to stand and fight, or evacuate.

On May the 17<sup>th</sup> the Axis armored columns halted fearful of a counter strike to the wings, and this allowed the infantry and supply lines to draw near. Worried about different scenarios Churchill asked for plans to be readied, under the codenamed Operation Dynamo, for the possible evacuation through Dunkirk of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). He considered this a remote possibility and a precautionary move. He also with some foresight asked his Chiefs of Staff to prepare a paper on the prospects of the U.K. carrying the war alone.

In today’s world PMs need to be well prepared for critical situations with worse case scenarios in their plans so they are able to execute contingencies quickly when needed (Part 3).

By May the 18<sup>th</sup> Churchill was having serious doubts about the Allies ability to win the battle in the North. The Allied armies had still failed to take advantage of the enemy halt and continued to pull away towards the coast fearing encirclement.

On May the 19<sup>th</sup> an all important meeting between Churchill the War Cabinet determined there were two only options for the BEF. The first was to move back to the channel ports but this could shatter the fragile relationship with the French. The second was to move West to rejoin the Allied Southern armies but this would lose the channel ports (Boulogne, Calais, Dunkirk) and further undermine the Belgian army. They decided on the former and communicated this to the British commander in the field Lord Gort.

In today’s world a PM needs to keep a high level view of the project and understand impacts decisions and actions, and carefully consider the loyalties of stakeholders. Churchill demonstrated loyalties to his ally, even though the relationship was getting strained and confidence was decreasing by the day.

Churchill knew he had serious public relations problems in the U.K. with the British public (his primary stakeholder) who were completely unaware of the grave situation in France. That evening in his first radio broadcast to the nation he reset expectations on the possibility of defeat:

*"Our task is not only to win the battle — but to win the war. After this battle in France abates its force, there will come the battle for our Island — for all that Britain is, and all that Britain means. That will be the struggle. In that supreme emergency we shall not hesitate to take every step, even the most drastic, to call forth from our people the last ounce and the last inch of effort of which they are capable. The interests of property, the hours of labor, are nothing compared with the struggle of life and honor, for right and freedom, to which we have vowed ourselves."*

Churchill was preparing the public for the next battle and wanted it to be seen as a battle of good against evil. This was to stiffen resolve and dispense ideas about suing for peace:

*"...behind the Armies and Fleets of Britain and France — gather a group of shattered States and bludgeoned races: the Czechs, the Poles, the Norwegians, the Danes, the Dutch, the Belgians — upon all of whom the long night of barbarism will descend, unbroken even by a star of hope, unless we conquer, as conquer we must; as conquer we shall."*

- Winston Churchill, first public broadcast, May 19<sup>th</sup> 1940

The PM in today's changing world needs to constantly monitor where the project team and stakeholders are relative to their expectations of the project by asking questions, probing, and then updating the communications plan and constantly communicating.

On May the 20<sup>th</sup> French Prime Minister Reynaud replaced his commander-in-chief. Weygand immediately concocted new tactics to contain the invasion. But on the same day the Axis armored columns restarted their advance and reached the English Channel that evening with forward units, cutting the Northern Allied armies off. Churchill kept his poise on this disastrous day.

On May the 21<sup>st</sup> Churchill depressed at the lack of information and unfolding events flew back to France. He met with Weygand who convinced him of a combined attack, from the North and South, on the Axis armored columns. Gort launched a hastily prepared attack on the same day with heavily armored British tanks at the Battle of Arras. While initial gains were very good low infantry numbers and the lack of planning meant these gains were lost as Axis forces quickly built up. This action sent fear into the Axis high command that their armor divisions were overstretched. As a result, these columns were slowed down and with that the inevitable encirclement of the BEF.

The PM in today's world needs to be on the pulse of the project and react with agility. Churchill understood how desperate the situation was and the need for a concerted strike back. Regrettably lack of time in planning and lining up of resources meant the attack could not be sustained.

Gort continued to pull out of the encirclement between May 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>. The Battle of Arras had been a last throw of the dice. On May the 24<sup>th</sup> the Axis armor divisions halted 15 miles from Dunkirk, a very controversial decision as Goring predicted his Luftwaffe could prevent an evacuation and finish off the BEF.

### Conclusion

In the first 2 weeks of the project Churchill was managing an ever desperate and deteriorating situation. He took the monumental decision to stand and fight, rather than evacuate so as not to further strain the Allied relationship. But the speed of the demise of the Allied forces was astonishing as in 2 weeks the Allies had lost more territory than in 4 years in the First World War. Churchill was now going to be fighting for the survival of the project. Fortunately he had some contingency plans laid down.



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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 Architect 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](http://www.lessons-from-history.com) or via email to [mark.kozak-holl@sympatico.ca](mailto:mark.kozak-holl@sympatico.ca).