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Churchill the Agile Project Manager

Series Wrap up (2 of 2)

Part 26 in the Series

By Mark Kozak-Holland

Most people are very familiar with Winston Churchill but may not be familiar with his “agile” approach to project management and his skills as a PM in the summer of 1940. Part 25 started to wrap up the series through the first 7 takeaways. This article completes the wrap up to the series, and reviews the key points, the transformation project and solution, and highlights key learning lessons for today’s projects, and what you can do.

Agile leadership is important in today’s world as projects face an increasing environment of continuous change. Through the series, the characteristics of agile leaders were introduced with a focus on Churchill’s characteristics and background.

Take away #8 – ensure adequate governance is in place to get groups working

Churchill as Minister for War Production in the First World War was responsible for scaling up tank manufacturing. He oversaw the production of 350 tanks and *the importance of closely aligning industry (civilian) with military demand under government auspices*.

Churchill, conscious of the mistakes of the Great War, realized that he needed full authority for success. Churchill broke down the barriers between vertical organizations through a revised governance framework. He *deconstructed and reconstructed silos*. He kept the war cabinet to a manageable eight and combined his job with that of the Minister of Defence.

Churchill, served in the army and navy, and understood the military organization, mind, and culture. He united these organizations, which coexisted in bitter rivalry, harnessing their energies in the same direction to fight for the same cause. Churchill with the Chiefs of Staff embedded in the War Cabinet was the core of the system as the *Grand War Strategy*, run in a rational and logical way with checks and balances.

Take away #9 – listen to the experts, their ideas and solutions, and enact these

One of Churchill’s great strengths was that he listened to his experts, the scientists and technologists. He embraced emerging technology, understood, applied and adopted it. From the first tanks in 1917 to radar in 1938.

Churchill, a long-standing and skillful politician, knew the mechanics of government. As a war-time prime minister he had power and could navigate around the civil servants of the ministries, knowing which strings to pull, and enable change.

Take away #10 – select team leaders who are not afraid to challenge you

Churchill was able to recognize the brilliant mavericks like Beaverbrook and Dowding. He had the foresight to *allow them to get on with it*. He backed them when needed, helping remove all obstacles in their paths.

“He [Winston Churchill] delegated freely but also probed and interfered continuously, regarding nothing as too large or too small for his attention¹.”

These *leaders were able to stand up to Churchill and challenge him*. Beaverbrook had a combative relationship that Churchill respected, as the “Beaver” could get the job done.

Take away #11 – look for people resilient to constant change and who adjust to new situations quickly

In today's projects, that cross organizational boundaries, finding the right mix of people is a prerequisite for success. Leaders need to be flexible, agile, and react to situations that impact and affect a project. As pointed out in [The Resilience Factor](#) by Bob Weinstein "*Highly resilient people are best suited for a world of constant change.*" Often players from across the organization are needed to help with adoption and buy in.

Churchill recognized that the goals of a leader were to understand change and be proactive and agile in dealing with it. This needs not just information but insight and knowledge. Core to Churchill's solution was Bletchley Park, which provided priceless insights into the strategic thinking and tactical intent of the enemy, and could be attributed to shortening the duration of the war by 2 years. Knowledge was indeed power.

Take away #12 – continually project confidence and resolve to the cause

Churchill's greatest personal achievement was projecting confidence and resolve to the cause when most people were ready to give up. He did this through his speeches and actions, he acted courageously to shift the mood and bolster morale. In today's world morale is essential it can make or break a working project.

Churchill was also able to create a unique identity, a brand, the “bulldog,” based on his tenacity and resolve.

¹ Source: 2005 Encyclopædia Britannica

Final take away, AGILE characteristics exemplified by Churchill:

- Agile leaders portray self-belief, steadfastness, and integrity to a cause.
- Agile leaders are well informed read, study and seek challenging assignments.
- Agile leaders display honesty, sincerity, integrity and candor in all their actions.
- Agile leaders take competent actions based on reason and moral principles (the balanced decision making approach at Storey's Gate).
- Agile leaders are forward-looking, set objectives, and have a vision that can be adopted by the organization. They position for continual and sustained success of the organization.
- Agile leaders move quickly and iteratively once the vision is clear (response to Dunkirk).
- Agile leaders are inspiring, willing to take risks, and display confidence in all that they do (seen at Oran where Churchill took the most pivotal actions).
- Agile leaders are fair-minded and show fair treatment to everyone (Churchill's reaction to Dowding's letter).
- Agile leaders look for sub-leaders that can challenge the status quo, and are unafraid of going out on a limb (like Beaverbrook).
- Agile leaders are broad minded, seek out adversity of view points, and opinions.
- Agile leaders are courageous and persevere to reach an objective, even with insurmountable obstacles, (Churchill's pursuit of long term strategy).
- Agile leaders simplify complex situations (through tools) and use sound judgments to make good decisions at the right time.
- Agile leaders are imaginative and based on the situation can make timely and appropriate changes in their thinking, plans and methods.
- Agile leaders encourage creative thinking of new ideas and solutions (Churchill pushed his cabinet). They reward achievement, innovation and change.

Conclusion

Based on all this information, it is easy to understand why Churchill was such a great leader² and he was recognized for it in 1940³. It would have been all too easy to go with the majority of the establishment, sue for peace, and set up a "Vichy England." Instead, Churchill resolutely went against massive pressure and put up a fight that eventually led his nation to victory. In summary, Churchill's agility transformed the U.K. through a transformation project so it could "adapt to change" and become agile.

² Voted Greatest Briton, ahead of Shakespeare, Darwin, Newton, Brunel BBC poll 2003

³ Churchill is named 'Time' magazine's man of the year for 1940.

About the Author:***Mark Kozak-Holland****Author*

Mark Kozak-Holland's latest book in the Lessons-From-History series is titled "*Project Lessons from the Great Escape (Luft III)*" <http://www.mmpubs.com/books-LFH.html>. It draws parallels from this event in World War II to today's business challenges. His previous books include "*Churchill's Adaptive Enterprise: Lessons for Business Today*", "*Titanic Lessons for IT Projects*", and "*Avoiding Titanic Disasters: Project Lessons for IT Executives*". Mark is a Senior Business Architect with HP Services and regularly writes and speaks (presentations and workshops) 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.