

## PM WORLD TODAY – FEATURED PAPER – SEPTEMBER 2008

## Churchill the Agile Project Manager

*Series Wrap up (1 of 2)*

Part 25 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 24 looked at the sequence of historical events in September 1940 for the utilization and the effectiveness of Churchill’s solution. To date it had performed well and proven its value. This article wraps up the series, reviews the key points, the transformation project and solution, and highlights 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 #1 – look for opportunities to establish credibility**

Churchill was a historian who understood early on in the 1930s what was happening with the rise of fascism. With a long exile he was astute enough to maximize the impact of valuable information, and build up his case for responding to the threat with proactive actions. He recognized that one of the chief goals of a leader is to rally people to a cause, and to do that requires considerable credibility gained through *portraying self-belief, steadfastness, and integrity to a cause*.

*“An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last.”*  
Winston Churchill, 1940

**Take away #2 – formulate how to approach a PM position and actions to take**

Churchill was a politician and adept to changing situations. He could read the mood of the people and respond. Churchill saw the PM position as an opportunity to try something different. In May 1940 senior politicians moved away from this “no win” position. In contrast, he had already *formulated how he would approach it and what he would do*, and recognized he needed full authority to have a reasonable chance of success.

**Take away #3 - communicate and then reinforce the vision for change**

Many transformation projects are often instigated in a “back to the wall situation,” where the outcome is critical to the success or even the survival of the business, with little elbow room for the schedule. This was the situation for the UK in 1940. Agile leaders should constantly communicate and then reinforce the vision for change, as part of the project to overcome resistance.

**Take away #4 – create contingencies for worse case scenarios**

Churchill showed the depth of his commitment to the project by decisions he made. He did not panic and faced difficulties face on, like Dunkirk, the situation was disastrous but Churchill kept his *composure and his resolve*. *He stuck to a plan to continue to find a resolution to the most pressing problems*. Fortunately he had *contingency plans in place*.

*“Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”*  
Winston Churchill

Churchill put his position at considerable risk and walked a tight rope were he could have been ejected from power following Dunkirk. Instead he pulled off one of the most significant speeches of the whole war and his life were not only did he boost morale but set out his priorities. This was leadership at the finest and Churchill’s prestige was elevated, and so was his resolution to keep going.

**Take away #5 – create a communication plan and stick to it**

Churchill and Alfred Duff Cooper had turned Dunkirk into a propaganda victory, particularly with the role of the "little boats." In fact, the spin was almost too successful, setting off a wave of public euphoria were a gallant loser escapes from disaster at the last moment. This was important as the news was not going to get any better. *In today’s world we call this a communication plan*.

Churchill’s speeches are legendary. However, oratory did not come naturally to Churchill he had to study and practice it. He never gave a speech from memory and would spend days preparing it. He liked short words believing they would be better understood. He also used statistics as cold blooded facts in getting his point across.

**Take away #6 – show preparedness where possible**

Churchill hated negative thinking, procrastination, tentativeness, second guessing, second hand information and advisory committees. He wanted to show preparedness (material, moral, practical and psychological) for all eventualities and pushed for actions that reflected that. He was a devotee of action who thrived on challenge and crisis, a man of iron constitution,

inexhaustible energy, and total concentration. He established a culture that took the fight forward, for example, he set up the Commandos.

### **Take away #7 – create both short and long term strategies**

Churchill pushed *a tactical to strategic transition by laying out* short and long term objectives to win the war. In the short term:

- He had to restore confidence in his project and the will to fight on within his government, and the public.
- He had to win the air battle and stall the invasion till spring 1941.

*“It is a mistake to try to look too far ahead. The chain of destiny can only be grasped one link at a time.”*

Winston Churchill

In the long term (up to 5-7 years), he had to:

- Quickly move the peacetime economy to a war footing.
- Expand the war through an alliance with U.S.
- Bring hope to Nazi occupied Europe and to the free world.

### **Conclusion**

Churchill’s approach characterized agile leadership, increasingly important in today’s world as projects face an environment of continuous change. Churchill came into the PM position with a plan but was flexible enough to react to changing situation and still enact his strategy.

**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](http://www.lessons-from-history.com).