

## PM WORLD TODAY – FEATURED PAPER – FEBRUARY 2008

## Napoleon's Six Winning Principles

By Jerry Manas

Adapted from his book, *Napoleon on Project Management: Timeless Lessons in Planning, Execution, and Leadership* (Nelson Business, April 2006)

*“Get your principles straight. The rest is a matter of detail.”*

- NAPOLEON

Napoleon Bonaparte, the greatest military figure in European history, was perhaps the greatest project manager of all time too. He not only turned France into a military powerhouse, he also brought good governance to all his empire. Even his greatest adversary, the Duke of Wellington, when asked who the greatest general of his day was, responded, “In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon.” Perhaps it’s why countless military leaders throughout history have studied and benefited from Napoleon’s principles and techniques, and why many modern leadership and marketing books quote Napoleon to this day.

In addition to successfully leading over fifty military campaigns, Napoleon also led hundreds of development and rebuilding efforts all throughout Europe, including financial reforms, infrastructure setup, construction of roads, bridges, marinas, museums, and more—all during a period of constant warfare. And he succeeded using sound principles and techniques that are as applicable today as they were then. To oversee all of these efforts, he used advanced project portfolio management practices before the term *portfolio management* even existed—except he used it to manage an entire empire. Furthermore, he did all this without the use of email, telephones, or computers.

With this in mind, surely, there must be a wealth of lessons to learn from Napoleon’s vast accomplishments. And indeed there are. What helps is that he, and many others, documented how he did it—in the form of factual details and written maxims. Based on research, I have extrapolated this information into what I call “Napoleon’s Six Winning Principles.” These principles are:

- Exactitude
- Speed
- Flexibility
- Simplicity
- Character
- Moral Force

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These principles work together and feed off of one another like interlocking gears. A lack of any one of them can impede success. We can have a highly motivated team, but without the proper planning and adequate, simple systems and processes, they can fail. Likewise, we can do extensive planning, but without the flexibility and speed to sustain the effort, the project can sink under its own weight. Thus, we need to consider all six principles to be truly effective. Let's take a brief look at each.

## Exactitude

*"If I always appear to be prepared, it is because before entering on an undertaking, I have meditated for long and have foreseen what may occur. It is not genius which reveals to me suddenly and secretly what I should do in circumstances unexpected by others, it is thought and meditation."*

- NAPOLEON

Napoleon often spoke of the importance of exactitude. By this, he meant pinpoint precision through constant situational awareness, extensive research, and continuous planning (not just once, but throughout the entire initiative). He knew that if such precision was to be reached, it would be dependent on a combination of preliminary investigation and up-to-the-minute knowledge of events. In this way, he could be sure to increase the chances of zeroing in on the right target at the right time.

Situational awareness sounds easier than it is. It takes work, and doesn't come naturally to many people. To achieve it, we need visibility of projects, organizational events, people, and external information; observation and analysis of that information; adequate experience to know what is relevant; and, via all of that, the strategic intuition to be able to make decisions on the fly. This can all be bolstered by extensive networking and frequent two-way communication. In essence, by building awareness, conducting adequate pre-project research, and by planning continuously throughout our project (not just once at the beginning), we can achieve the exactitude Napoleon spoke of.

## Speed

*"The strength of an army, like the power in mechanics, is estimated by multiplying the mass times the rapidity; a rapid march augments the morale of an army, and increases all the chances of victory."*

- NAPOLEON

Napoleon recognized that the scientific definition of momentum (mass times velocity) applies to achieving goals with people as well. And he knew that, without adequate mass, velocity becomes even more critical. But mass and velocity alone do not complete the picture, because regardless of the mass and velocity, there is always some sort of resistance that will cause the momentum to fade (unless there is quite a bit of mass). So, increasing speed is mostly about reducing resistance. And this can take the form of resistance from stakeholders, resistance

from potential customers, or resistance from the team itself (perhaps due to lack of adequate tools, or unclear goals, etc.). The astute project manager will take pains to address these concerns.

In addition to reducing resistance, we must increase urgency and provide focus. The best way to do this is with a combination of two related concepts, both at the core of Napoleon's strategy; *Concentration of Force* and *Economy of Force*. We need to put the *maximum effective amount of resources* on the most critical work, and the *minimum effective amount of resources* on secondary objectives (those that support the primary objectives). Reserve resources can be used to support secondary objectives or for some strategic use later in the project. Any more or any less than this is inefficient.

### **Flexibility**

*"Plans of campaign may be modified ad infinitum according to circumstances, the genius of the general, the character of the troops, and the features of the country."*

- *NAPOLEON*

As the saying goes, "the map is not the territory." Knowing this, Napoleon made sure his armies were able to quickly react to a variety of situations, yet still operate according to a strategic plan. There were three ways in which he did this.

First, he made sure his troops were *adaptable*. For example, he organized his soldiers into mobile units. This allowed them to jump from one area of need to the next (as opposed to staying within their own division), which gave the illusion they were everywhere at once. They were also ready for change at a moment's notice and were well trained in the ability to swiftly regroup to meet any given situation.

Second, he made sure they were *empowered*. By arming them with knowledge of the mission's concept and structuring them so that they could operate independently, he was able to give brief, simple instructions to his commanders and know that the mission would be followed through. And by receiving regular communications from his commanders as to any variations, he made his army contributors to the plan, not just followers of a rigid process that didn't take reality into account.

Finally, he made sure they were *unified*. His armies operated under a common doctrine, and were integrated through centralized planning and administration. Most importantly, they served under one ultimate leader—Napoleon.

## Simplicity

*"The art of war does not require complicated maneuvers; the simplest are the best, and common sense is fundamental. From which one might wonder how it is generals make blunders; it is because they try to be clever."*

- *NAPOLEON*

From Napoleon to Patton to Jack Welch, great leaders have often cited simplicity as a key element of success. Simplicity can take various forms when it comes to managing projects and people. It can mean straightforward objectives, as opposed to trying to get overly complicated; or it can mean concise, clear, and focused messages, something that top leaders and marketing people have stressed for years. It can also mean simple processes for managing and executing our plans. In all of its forms, simplicity is a way to reduce misunderstanding and confusion.

Throughout his career, Napoleon focused on achieving simplicity in three major areas. First, he made sure his *objectives* were simple. He knew that complicated objectives carried many risks and were often unnecessary, so he always planned for the most straightforward, basic path wherever possible. Second, to support these objectives, Napoleon made sure that his *messages* were simple. Napoleon knew that cluttered or vague messages could undermine even the most straightforward objectives. Finally, Napoleon's *processes* were simple. He realized that, even if the objectives were straightforward and well communicated, confusion could still arise if the underlying processes to achieve them were overly complicated.

With straightforward objectives, concise messages, and uncomplicated processes, Napoleon was able to greatly diminish the chances of confusion among all parties, including the *Grande Armée* and the people of France. Likewise, we can bring needed clarity to *our* stakeholders and project teams using the same techniques. Besides, what worked for Napoleon, Patton, and Jack Welch, can work for us as well.

## Character

*"A military leader must possess as much character as intellect. Men who have a great deal of intellect and little character are the least suited... It is preferable to have much character and little intellect."*

- *NAPOLEON*

Traits such as integrity, calmness, and responsibility are often associated with the greatest leaders throughout history. Napoleon was no exception. Driven by his ambition to leave a positive mark on the world, he always maintained his honor and integrity. He knew that any

looting or pillaging by his troops would leave a permanent stain on his image, and went out of his way to encourage respect of different cultural backgrounds. Equality was always foremost in his mind and the guiding value of his administration. Any persecution of individuals or groups based on their heritage would have been out of harmony with that value. Indeed, it would have displayed a lack of integrity. To that end, he always stuck to his principles, doing the right thing even when pressured to do otherwise. Of course, he was open-minded enough to solicit the opinions of others in general, but when it came to actions that violated the core principle of equality, he was unbendable.

In addition, although prone to minor outbursts on occasion, he generally kept a cool head, especially when faced with danger, and above all, when among his troops. He knew that a leader who didn't maintain composure could quickly demoralize people and cause general concern among the masses. Another key to his success was his sense of responsibility. He assumed full responsibility for his actions, bearing the weight of France and its citizens, and especially his troops, on his shoulders. In all, integrity, calmness, and responsibility are central to good character, and there is no doubt that Napoleon had these traits in abundance. If we want to be successful, we must build these traits as well.

### **Moral Force**

*"In war, everything depends upon morale; and morale and public opinion comprise the better part of reality."*

- *NAPOLEON*

Moral force is perhaps the most important of Napoleon's Six Winning Principles. It is what allows teams to surpass expectations and overcome the inevitable obstacles. It's what gets everyone on board with the mission and excited by the potential outcome. People do their best work when they have self-confidence and feel that what they're doing is worthwhile and important (and are recognized accordingly for their efforts). Napoleon understood this when he said, "It is moral force more than numbers that wins victory... The moral is to the physical as three is to one."

Knowing this, when Napoleon first took command of the French army as a general, he promised his troops, "honor, glory, and riches." We can do the same by insuring that our teams are given work that is worthwhile and in adherence with the right principles (honor), widely recognized (glory), and adequately rewarded (riches). And by supporting this with a sense of order, much as Napoleon did, we can give our teams the confidence that they are in good hands.

Unfortunately, many leaders ignore this crucial part of their jobs, focusing instead on the mechanics of management or those items that can be measured. Perhaps it is because the moral elements are so immeasurable that leaders so often ignore them. As Clausewitz said of

these incalculable, but important, elements, “They will not yield to academic wisdom. They cannot be classified or counted. They have to be seen or felt.”

To be sure that *we* do not ignore them, we must make it a point to provide order, purpose, recognition, and rewards. By doing this, we can then say that we have morale force in our favor. And, with exactitude, speed, flexibility, simplicity, and character, and the winds of moral force at our backs, we can fully exercise the power of Napoleon’s Six Winning Principles.



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