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Programme Manager in Chief - Lessons in Managing Complex Change from the Obama Campaign

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Imagine running a programme with:

- An objective of gaining control of the most influential political office in the world in a way which expands the voting base by 20 million
- A budget of £400M, raised not with one business case but through individual appeals to millions of donors
- The need to rapidly mobilise fifty-plus regional sub-programmes, with a staff of thousands plus hundreds of thousands of volunteers
- An ever expanding group of national and international stakeholders

Now imagine managing this programme whilst under the glare of political opposition, intense media scrutiny, and a backdrop of economic meltdown.

If there is a news story of recent times with its share of lessons for project and programme managers, it surely is the US presidential campaign of Barack Obama – a master class in how to eat the proverbial (or in this case, Republican Party) elephant piece by piece.

Obama and his team can credit much of their success to the application of five key principles, which are relevant to any programme manager tasked with the impossible:

1 Set a simple vision, and trust in it

On the morning of February 12, 2007 when he announced his improbable campaign, Obama outlined the theme of '*change we can believe in*' as the vision of his campaign.

In the 20 months that followed, he and his team would place demonstrable trust in that theme, returning to it repeatedly even as the election generated surprises ranging from the extended nature of the primary contest to the selection of Governor Palin on the opposition's ticket.

Conversely, both Obama's key opponents, Clinton and then McCain, saw their standing as leaders falter when they started down the slippery slope of adjusting their themes in the heat of battle, and their campaigns paid the price.

Even after winning the election, the President-Elect's website has been set at www.change.gov. The message for project and programme managers is clear: consider your vision carefully, have faith in it regardless of the obstacles, and think strategically rather than tactically.

2 Ditch the drama

The calm and steadfast style which 'No drama Obama', and his campaign team, projected through political sandstorms has proven itself to have strong leadership appeal, especially in times of change and uncertainty.

As the New York Times put it: *"(Certain) candidates are propelled by what some psychologists call self-efficacy, the placid assumption that they can handle whatever the future throws at them. They rise with an unshakable serenity that is inexplicable to their critics and infuriating to their foes."*

Project and programme managers could do worse than to seek to emulate this trait. Rather than reacting to, and contributing to, the inevitable noise which accompanies change, they should focus on keeping the ship on an even keel and setting a tone of sober self-confidence grounded in competence.

3 Surround yourself with the best, and make them into a team

Much has been made of President-Elect Obama's cabinet appointments – bringing together highly experienced, and ambitious, rivals in an approach pioneered by Abraham Lincoln.

However, even as candidate Obama, this leadership approach was clear. For instance, his vice-presidential selection was someone with considerably more experience and perceived gravitas. Likewise, when the economy started to collapse, Obama surrounded himself with the best and brightest economists and former government officials in his appearances.

More than selecting the best staff is the ability – too often missing in large programmes – to get the senior management acting as an effective team.

In fact, Obama's campaign manager David Plouffe sites this as one of the key success factors: *"We didn't have that internal tension and in-fighting, so we could just focus on doing our damn jobs every day, and executing at a high level... And that can't be overstated. There weren't a lot of closed doors where people were complaining and we were a unit."*

How many programme managers can make this statement about their programmes?

4 Engage the ground troops

Project and programme managers have long been aware of the importance of addressing the people elements of change, but there is always room for innovation.

The Obama campaign invested extensively in nurturing a ground roots movement. For instance:

- Volunteers and activists would attend 'Obama University' sessions, receiving presentations on strategy, planning and fundraising by senior officials
- An 80 page training manual for field organisers detailed responsibilities of key roles with roadmaps for deploying those roles in terms of getting out the vote
- Obama's acceptance speech at the Democratic convention was moved to a nearby stadium to allow for a substantially larger, more inclusive audience

Key here is the application of community organising and social networking principles in the pursuit of change. Rather than relying simply on top-down communications as the bedrock of change management, programme managers should be thinking about how to create impetus for change in the myriad of 'micro-communities' which will be impacted by their programmes. After all, change, like politics, is local.

5 Use technology creatively

Although the use of new technologies for politics had been pioneered in 2004, Obama's campaign took it to a new level through application of Web 2.0 principles.

Led by 24-year old Facebook founder Chris Hughes, the campaign used technology in a myriad of creative ways, including:

- Use of SMS reminders to vote with directions to polling places
- Online telephone banking tools
- A 'Neighbour-to-Neighbour' tool to find local registered voters to canvas locally

The benefits of clever use of technology in change are clear. The Obama campaign material created solely for (free) YouTube distribution was watched for 14.5 million hours. An equivalent amount of paid advertising on television would have cost about £30M.

The campaign also had more than three million donors, double the previous record, and nearly half of that came from people donating relatively small amounts through the social networking website.

From the outset, any programme manager should be thinking of innovative ways to use technology to mobilise and enthuse their own 'online army' of change agents. If the programme's objectives are well-conceived, and the projected benefits are real, then there should be no reason why the Obama campaign approach can't be emulated in workplaces around the country.

Can we do it? Yes we can!

About the Author:



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Greg Vukasovic is a Principal at Moorhouse Consulting in the UK, which was recently voted the Association of Project Management's 'Project Management Company of the Year'. Greg has been involved in Project and Programme Management (PPM) consulting for many years, specialising in working with public and private sector clients to deliver large-scale business change initiatives. Greg's clients have included BT, Transport for London, the BBC, Jobcentre Plus and Hewlett-Packard. Before joining the consulting world, Greg worked in financial services in Milan and New York, and completed an MBA at London Business School. For more information on the latest in programme and project management, or to contact Mr. Vukasovic, please visit www.moorhouseconsulting.com.