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EMERGENCY PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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Good practice in project management as now represented by standards, models, techniques and bodies of knowledge distilled over 50 years' collective experience tell us that a project should best start with an agreed objective, unambiguous scope, practicable plan, stakeholder support, empowered leadership, prepared resources, influential metrics and responsive controls.

So what happens if a project is unexpected and urgent, so that we start with no scope, plan, support, leadership, resources or controls? Such emergencies have become more frequent, and their success more vital, for instance to respond to unexpected business opportunities in the increasingly volatile commercial world, or to respond urgently to overcome damage to our increasingly more complex and interdependent industrial and public service systems. Any of these may be unexpected and urgent, and so demand an immediate start.¹

In a case of a new business opportunity an organization made an immediate start by appointing a leader while identifying other stakeholders and with them agreeing objectives, a plan, resources, metrics and controls. Other organizations faced with overcoming large-scale damage due to flooding and rail accidents proceeded similarly. In a case of urgent flood protection the public authorities drew on established emergency consultation procedures with stakeholders. Common to all the cases was that 'urgency' meant that the cost of working as fast as possible was not a factor in decisions. Physical conditions were the limiting variable, most notably in the case of sifting, making safe and removing the 1.6 million tons of the World Trade Center rubble 'pile'. These cases show how unexpected urgent work can demand not only instant acceptance of cost risks but also the sustained involvement of top management and immediate attention to all stakeholders' interests.

Emergency projects are possibly the only projects which follow the definition of having "a definite start". Whereas a 'normal' project emerges through stages of often diffuse discussion, in an emergency there is only the one stage gate. Scope, plan and control evolve with the work. Instead of the normal series of project proposals up and down hierarchies, all levels take part simultaneously, typically twice-daily

¹ Unexpected urgent emergency projects – Lessons for all project managers, Wearne, S H, 2008, *Project Perspectives*, XXXI, 80-83, International Project Management Association.

meetings to agree and authorise the next immediate commitments. Commitments are oral. Expertise leads. Two-tier leadership enables one level to concentrate on operations, the other on stakeholders. Resourcing is initially circumstantial. Motivation and ideas are rich, and sustained. Cash flow is a priority. Budgets follow cost – that defines what ‘urgency’ means.

Emergencies are rare events - they have to be rare to be socially and economically tolerable. Few project managers or other people therefore have direct experience of them, but anyone may unexpectedly need to draw on that experience. Emergencies vary in their causes, the authorities involved, public concern, nature, scale, immediate resources available, uniqueness and location, but there are common characteristics and therefore potentially common lessons for anyone in future who has to plan and manage unexpected work. The causes of major emergencies, crises and man-made and natural disasters, how to reduce their recurrence, contingency planning and the lessons of relief work are analyzed in many publications. And advice on planning and implementing the restoration of systems and services is abundant. Only a few publications report the experience of managing the work to restore systems and services after severe damage.²

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² Management of urgent emergency engineering projects, Wearne, S H, 2005, *IEEE Engineering Management Review*, v 33, n 3, 21-31.

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Stephen Wearne, PhD, CEng, Hon FAPM, is Senior Research Fellow in Project Management, University of Manchester. He came to the University after factory training and then 12 years with consultants and contractors on hydro and nuclear power projects in the UK, Spain, Venezuela and Japan. Recruited to the University for this experience he initiated the teaching and case studies in project management. He was then appointed to the new post of Professor of Technological Management at the University of Bradford. After ten years he took early retirement to return to Manchester, continuing with research on project organizations, joint ventures, contracts, engineers' needs for managerial skills and expertise, plant commissioning, and the lessons of engineering project failures. He was Founder Chairman of the UK Engineering Project Management Forum and of the Contracts & Procurement SIG, UK Association for Project Management, and editor of the APM guide *Contract Strategy for Successful Project Management* and *APM Standard Terms for the Appointment of a Project Manager*. His studies of emergency projects led to his being the only non-citizen invited to the US government's first review of the 9/11 lessons. He maintained PMP and PMI membership until retirement. His neglected hobbies include organization theory, bridge, modern history, walking, model making and music.
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