

Churchill the Project Manager – Part 3

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Background: the years before September 1939

Continuing with our series on Churchill the Project Manager (PM), this article discusses the decade preceding his project and why through his actions he became the most credible candidate to lead it. Part 1 introduced the overall series and how Churchill acquired a project from hell, a project that no one wanted. Part 2 looked at his background, and the skills that he brought to bear to the project that made him so uniquely qualified in May 1940.

Most people are very familiar with the rise of the Nazis who came into power in 1933 by taking advantage of a country in chaos and ruin, ravaged by a financial crisis, depression, and the Treaty of Versailles. In the UK and the West there was little response as public support for another war was very limited. The western economies were still recovering from the depression. In fact, many senior British politicians thought that the Treaty had been too harsh on Germany, and leeway be given. Over in the US many believed that involvement in the First World War had been a mistake and attempts were made to stay isolated.

Churchill did not share this view of the Nazis and recognized early what was happening. Although he was not in a position of power he did what he could to call the Nazis ambitions out, and grill the politicians in power who tried to ignore him and take no actions. By 1934 he was particularly concerned about the growth of the *Luftwaffe*, German air force, which could strike directly at the UK.

Organizations today need to pay close attention to events and changes in the business environment, and prepare for worst case situations. Techniques like future scenario planning will better prepare potential options available to organizations which then have the ability to react and respond through a project should a series of events turn for the worse.

Churchill was considered by his peers and the press a maverick, a loose canon, out of touch with the realities of the time, and a dangerous eccentric who could trigger off a war. Somewhat at odds with public opinion his career was over, and he was out in the wilderness.

On the other hand he became a magnet for a small group of worried people. These included anxious intelligence officers who brought him statistics on air production in Germany, showing rearmament and contravention of the Treaty of Versailles. Churchill was unafraid of using this information in heavily criticizing the new Prime Minister Baldwin, as he spoke to the House on the slow pace of air defense research. By 1935

Churchill was perceived as conduit of getting issues on the table and someone who never wavered from his view.

By 1936 the situation worsened with the Nazis occupation of the Rhineland demilitarized zone. In the same year the Nazi propaganda machine used the Olympic Games, held in Germany, to promote an image of a peaceful, and tolerant Germany.

By 1937 Churchill had become a voice and rallying point as he wrote over 100 columns mostly warning of the Nazi intentions, and Europe's impending doom. The new Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was more proactive but with First World War guilt he was an ambassador for peace, and tried to mollify Hitler who he thought he could manage through a policy of appeasement. The mood in popular opinion pushed him to seek out a policy in which British interest were accomplished without entanglement in war as he believed the British public had no appetite for another world war.

By 1938 Chamberlain's misguided negotiations had played Czechoslovakia into Hitler's hands. He was a business man and thought he could handle Hitler through. Worse still it led to a Nazi-Soviet non-Aggression pact as Stalin who had been looking for a political and military agreement with Britain and France got nervous as he saw the Nazi Germany border get closer to the Soviet Union. Churchill the maverick repeatedly attacked Chamberlain and the government on their inability to halt the slide to war, urging them to stand up to Hitler. Churchill's was seen as someone with morale conviction who could pick up a cause and stay true to it, and his stature grew.

In today's world changing events initiate projects. But the response needs to be very rapid and so the project, vision, and scope need to be thought through, and already in place, and well understood in relation to the planned response scenarios. This also requires a project team in position to enact the project according to available options.

Conclusion

The road to the Second World War was very much down to the inability of Western politicians to say no. Churchill a historian understood early on what was happening and he was astute enough to maximize the impact of valuable information he had collected, and build up his case. He recognized that one of the chief goals of a project manager (or any leader for that matter) is to rally people to a cause, and to do this requires considerable credibility gained through self-belief, steadfastness, courage, and integrity to the cause. By 1940 through his actions he had become a real alternative to the status quo.

Mark Kozak-Holland's latest book in the Lessons-From-History series is titled "Churchill's Adaptive Enterprise: Lessons for Business Today" (<http://www.mmpubs.com/churchill/>). It draws parallels between events in World War II and today's business challenges. Mark is a Senior Business Architecture with HP Services and regularly writes and speaks 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 or via email to mark.kozak-holl@sympatico.ca