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## Churchill Assesses the Problems

### Churchill the Agile PM Part 6

*By Mark Kozak-Holland*

Most people are very familiar with Winston Churchill but may not be familiar with his approach to project management and his PM skills. Part 5 looked at how Churchill acquired the project on May the 10<sup>th</sup> 1940, and took his first actions. This article looks at how in less than a week the situation deteriorated into a near catastrophe. Churchill had to quickly assess and prioritize the problems around him, a skill important for today's project managers.

In today's world many project managers have little choice in saying "no" to a project that is thrust upon you, especially one that is already in flight. They have to make the most of it, and quickly get a grip.

By May the 13<sup>th</sup> the military situation in Western Europe declined rapidly. In the Battle of Flanders Dutch troops withdrew to their final defense line. In France the astounding speed of the invasion created a level of panic in the Allied forces as two armored columns tore a 50-mile gap into the defenses. The front line and supply systems were static, and not designed for mobile war (Part 3).

Any project manager walking into a volatile project needs first to quickly assess the overall situation as so to better understand the landscape, pain points, politics, and what needs to be addressed first. Actions may be required immediately in a fast changing situation.

On May the 14<sup>th</sup> the French Premier Paul Reynaud put pressure on Churchill to help with the defense of France by sending more fighter squadrons. The fighter loss rates were unsustainable. Although Churchill was aware of the problems facing the U.K., in coming into power he had a significant disadvantage as a new PM. His short tenure in the position meant he was not savvy to French politics and the authenticity of these demands.

A new project manager very often will be under pressure to address certain issues and drive the project in a particular way to meet specific agendas. Thus the importance of reading the landscape correctly and making the right assessments.

On the morning of May the 15th, French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud telephoned Churchill and said "*We have been defeated. We are beaten; we have lost the battle.*" Churchill reminded Reynaud of the First World War and the times the Allied lines had been breached only to be plugged later time. But by the end of the same day Holland surrendered to a force whose innovative combination of aircraft, fast armor, infantry, and modern communications demonstrated an understanding of the revolution in military

tactics (Part 4). Worse still for Churchill the Royal Air Force (RAF) had lost nearly 250 aircraft or 25% of its strength.

On May the 16<sup>th</sup> wasting no time Churchill proactively flew to Paris for meetings with Reynaud and to personally assess the situation, and to “talk up” resistance. When he got there he saw the gravity of the situation as the French government were burning archives and preparing to evacuate the capital. Churchill asked General Gamelin, "Where is the strategic reserve?" which had saved Paris in the First World War. "There is none," Gamelin replied. Churchill later described this as the **single most shocking moment in his life**.

A new project manager needs to get into the front line of the organization out amongst the troops, to clearly understand the situation, and to dig deep to ratify the problems and their priority for resolution.

On the same day the Air Chief Marshall of RAF Fighter Command, Hugh Dowding, wrote a letter that challenged Churchill over sending more fighter squadrons to France. Dowding recognized when to cut losses for the defense of the U.K. Churchill took this letter very seriously and this created a dilemma for him because he had personally promised these to Reynaud. In the end squadrons were sent but operated in France during the day and then returned at night to England. This action further strained the Allied relationship.

In addition to air defense Churchill was acutely aware of the following major problems faced by the U.K.:

- Lack of confidence in government circles around him.
- The public unawareness of the seriousness of the current situation in France.
- The economy not on war footing.
- Lack of clear priorities as to where to focus the fight, as there was no single minister in charge of prosecuting the war.
- The public unprepared for a total war and all the sacrifices that went with it.

A new project manager has to stand his ground, keep his composure, and lay out the problems in priority. He needs to negotiate agreements on these problems so a strategy can be developed, and requirements carefully understood and scoped out.

The scale of the Axis advance was becoming apparent by May the 17<sup>th</sup> as Allied forces were becoming separated by rapidly advancing armored columns towards the Channel coast that was only 70 miles away. The armored columns outrunning their supply lines were able to refuel at French gas stations not destroyed in time. Churchill clearly understood the Axis plan was to out flank the Allied forces in Belgium. He feared that the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) would be cut off if the French forces on Western flank did not rally.

## Conclusion

Within days of taking over the project Churchill was thrown deep into the cauldron of war. Within the first week the situation was disastrous but, Churchill kept his composure and his resolve. He stuck to a plan and continued to look for a resolution to the most pressing problems.



Mark Kozak-Holland



*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](http://www.lessons-from-history.com) or via email to [mark.kozak-holl@sympatico.ca](mailto:mark.kozak-holl@sympatico.ca)*