Project lessons from the Great Escape

by Mark Kozak-Holland

Part 7: Human resource management

Most people are very familiar with the movie *The Great Escape* but may not be familiar with it as a project executed in the spring of 1944. This series of articles looks at the project from a modern perspective, considering it from different angles. Part 6 looked at quality management and now we move on to human resource management.

Roger Bushell (the Big X or project manager) was well aware that, in a project with so few resources, the biggest advantage he had was the human capital and potential with the 600 PoWs in the camp.

If he could harness the talent and skills, and enmesh the bulk of the PoWs into the project, it would give him a distinct advantage, and the ability to achieve all sorts of things that might be thought impossible.

Planning

Today we would start resource management with planning to define the project level structure and the work within the context of the organisational structure.

In the camp there were, perhaps not surprisingly, a wide range of professions, trades, and skills represented. There were miners, forgers, tailors, carpenters, engineers, physicists, geologists, and surveillance experts. Most of the airmen were conscripts so they could call on their civilian experiences. The challenge for the escape committee was to match this skill set against project activities to maximise the overall work effort.

Intuitively, Bushell knew what work had to be completed and the major project activities required to make the project a success. These project activities were readily identifiable in the organisation he set up, through a number of departments:

- Internal security
- Tunnel engineering
- Escape equipment and toolmaking
- Intelligence gathering
- Document production
- Compass factory
- Clothing production
- Mapmaking
- Dispersal diversion
- Supplies
- Dispersal

He selected a department head (project leader) for each department early on before the department was formed so that heads could understand their roles and provide direction to the department and project. Each department reported to the escape committee and himself (see Figure 1).

He then set up recruitment system where each block (hut) had a Little X (mini-Bushell role) and a Little S (mini-department head). Their role was to ensure that all PoWs were screened for their skill sets to determine where they could fit into the project. Once profiled for trades and skills, they were assigned to the departments. In fact, each PoW had a primary and back-up department assignment so that, once the work within a department came to an end, the PoWs could be reshuffled to another department.

With this set-up, there was a true matrix organisation (departments running vertically and Little Xs going horizontally). It also provided a very flexible arrangement for moving PoWs around the project.

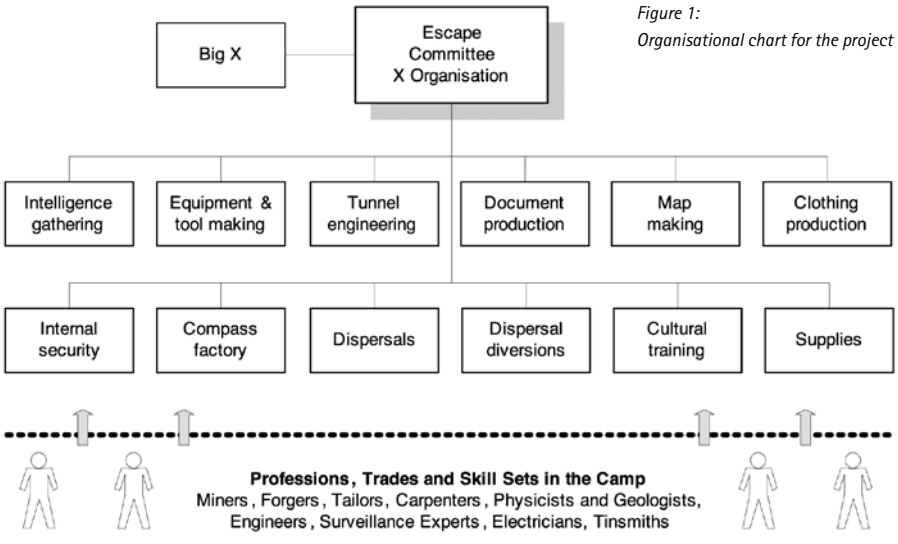

Figure 1: Organisational chart for the project

Developing the project team

Over time, practically everyone in the camp was involved in some capacity with the escape project, so there was a massive pool of skill sets for the respective teams. Some skills could be readily used, but others were less obvious. For instance, carpenters from the camp theatre would be employed in constructing the wooden supports to shore up the tunnel.

Tailors who were very skilled in sewing would convert uniforms into either civilian clothes or German-looking uniforms. Electricians would

Figure 2: Carpenters from the camp theatre were employed in securing the bracing for the tunnel. Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force Academy Library's Special Collections

link the tunnels to the camp electrical supply for lighting. Tinsmiths would convert empty dried-milk tins into the air pipes that ventilated the narrow tunnels.

The stroke of genius was setting up the departments with similarly skilled PoWs with genuine interest in that type of work. This meant that many approached the work with a true zeal, and became quite passionate about it.

There were other advantages to having the majority of the camps specialists in departments. It provided a rich training ground for new PoWs, and overall team development as new techniques and practices were evolved. It also allowed the department to excel in putting ideas into reality, and create sophisticated and advanced solutions.

For example, the Mapmaking department was faced with the arduous task of making thousands of maps where tracing was too slow by hand. As a result, they came up with the brilliant idea of creating a 'mimeograph', a simple copying machine operated by hand-pressing paper to a gelatin press, with the map outlined with crushed pencil leads. So successful was this machine it produced around 4,000 local and strip maps of routes.

Another department that gained significantly from this approach was the Document production department, which forged false documents for use in moving about in Germany after the breakout. The high concentration of artists, and men with artistic ability, provided the talent and skill to maintain a high level of quality (part 6) required in such a difficult undertaking. Any forgery that was not perfect was scrapped; this is where project quality control came in. PoWs prided themselves on delivering the best for the department.

Managing the team

Bushell set the POWs to work creating everything needed to mount a massive escape, and he met his department heads every day to review the project and assess how much progress was made. He also decided which problems were assigned to the departments, based on the available skill sets and experience in overcoming various challenges.

Conclusion

Bushell, together with the escape committees, set up an organisational structure that allowed each department to flourish and excel in its delivery. He was able to readily harness the talent and skills of the PoWs, and draw them into a project to give him a distinct advantage. This was probably the most challenging of the nine 'project management' knowledge areas for Bushell because of the scale of organising some 600 POWs.

Figure 3: Mapmaking department's Mimeograph – an example of the ingenuity of the departments

Mark Kozak-Holland's latest book in the Lessons-From-History series is titled 'Project Lessons from the Great Escape (Luft III)'. It draws parallels from this event in World War II to today's business challenges. Mark is a Senior Business Architect 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 website at www.lessons-from-history.com or via email to mark.kozak-holl@sympatico.ca. For more information on the Great Escape Memorial Foundation see www.thegreatescapememorialproject.com.

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