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. Part 7 looked at human resource management. This article looks at the seventh of the project management knowledge areas of the PMI PMBOK, communication management, which determines stakeholders, plans communications, sets expectations, distributes information, reports performance, and manages stakeholders.

Stalag Luft III

Project lessons from the Great Escape

by Mark Kozak-Holland

Part 8: Project communication management

To support all aspects of the project, Roger Bushell (the Big X or project manager) needed to have a comprehensive communications plan. As a first step, he had to determine his project stakeholders, namely the Escape Committee, Department Heads, and the rank and file of POWs. With the latter there was a considerable difference in attitude towards the project. Escape was a restless itch for about 25% of the camp population, and only 5% of those were considered to be dedicated 'hardcore' escapers. The other 75% were on the fence but, if convinced, would work in support of any escape attempts. Bushell had to work on this group to get his message through.

No easy task

The ability to manage 600 stakeholders (POWs) was never going to be easy, especially when open communication was impossible. The English-speaking 'ferrets' (German Army Intelligence Officers) were always eavesdropping on conversations and listening for key words that could be related to an escape attempt. Hence the reason Bushell banned the word 'tunnel' from everyday conversations, referring to the three project tunnels as 'Tom, Dick, and Harry'.

The escape committee worked with Bushell in communicating the plan to the POWs to get buy-in and active participation in the project. They had to unify the camp to work on this one project and dissuade POWs from working on other escape attempts that could compromise the Great Escape.

This required the creation of compliance, and adoption plans which were required to persuade the camp to contribute resources (skills, foodstuffs, and materials) to the project, and provide support to the project. The plans had to establish and maintain a high level of trust necessary for project success.

One of Bushell's directives was that they needed to be well informed about what was happening in all the theatres of war. A couple of radio operators built a compact and powerful receiver that was cleverly hidden below a toilet. This was very dangerous as the POWs had been warned that they could be shot if they were caught in possession of a radio.

The radio was used illicitly at night and shorthand writers took notes of the daily news, and the progress of the war. The next day these bulletins were read to small groups of POWs, in great secrecy, while stooges were posted as lookouts to secure the hut.

Figure 1: A POW radio set. The radio operators also collected the materials for a radio transmitter, but this was not used in the project. Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force Academy Library's Special Collections

When the news was good, it helped improve morale and link the POWs, and what they were doing in their project, to the rest of the Allied war effort. Some of the POWs used this information to track the Eastern front on a large map in one of the huts, displayed on a wall. One day one of the guards noticed the frontline had changed and asked where the POWs were getting their information. One quick-thinking POW answered 'through the steady stream of captured airmen coming into the camp', at which point the matter was dropped.

As part of his communications plan Bushell would use these bulletin meetings whenever he could to update the POWs on what was happening in the project. He would set and reset expectations, distribute any new information, and report on the progress, highlighting any performance or results.

Bushell communicated with his department heads daily, on an individual basis. Typically, he would walk around the camp's inner perimeter among a throng of other exercising POWs, to hide their conversations. These meetings allowed Bushell to understand issues, critical problems and potential showstoppers for each department. Later in the day Bushell would meet the escape committee to go through the project as a whole and review all the collected issues. By this close daily update, Bushell could very rapidly respond to critical problems/showstoppers by putting the best minds to work.

Sometimes the communications became quite complex and were used on the Germans. For example, the head ferret became suspicious one day that tunnelling was going on. He started asking dozens of POWs the same question, related to tunnels at random, so that he could weigh their responses against each other. The escape committee

got quite alarmed and concerned that someone unknowingly could slip up. So they agreed on a single, consistent response to the ferret's question, and then proactively communicated this message out to all the POWs in the camp.

Conclusion

For Bushell and the escape committee constant communications were so important that they became part of the daily routine. Communicating was made more difficult because of the secrecy that was required and the fact Bushell could only address a small number of the 600 POWs at a time. Yet the approach was quite successful and, over time, practically the whole camp of 600 POWs was enlisted into the project.

Figure 2: Illicitly using the radio for listening to news. Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force Academy Library's Special Collections

Mark Kozak-Holland's latest book in the Lessons-From-History series is titled 'Project Lessons from the Great Escape (Luft III)' http://www.mmpubs.com/books-LFH.html. 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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