

Project Management can save the World

*Why Project
Management is
more important
now than
ever before*

by Mark Reeson

In a world where natural disasters fill the front pages and the headlines of the day seem to trawl from one bad message to another, the world of project management has the potential to make an impact more so than ever before. Armed with the skills they possess and the techniques project and programme managers have been taught and refined through continuous experience, they can make a major difference. Whilst all around work is needed urgently, it still requires coordination; making today's project and programme managers the ideal candidates to help in times of disaster and destruction.

World disasters are indiscriminate

Disaster can strike anywhere and at anytime, these calamities can sometimes be predicted and prepared for due to the time of year or a change in atmosphere, yet mother nature with her majesty and mastery, has been and will be able to surprise the greatest minds when they least expect it. It is at the time when disaster strikes that people look directly or indirectly for guidance and support. It is at that time that the project or programme manager is at their best.

To place this importance into perspective and to give a general view of the scale of the situation that we are now addressing, a quick overview of the first three months of 2011 paints a dark picture of what is happening and what continues to harm the environment and the population of the world.

With a count of fourteen earthquakes covering the globe, averaging a measurement of 6.7 on the Richter scale, two tsunamis with immeasurable damage and with flooding, disease and hunger rife throughout the world, the biggest question has to be what can we do next? Nothing is beyond human capability and nothing should be beyond a future role for project management in relief and disaster zones.

Much as the message is typically passed through industries that select their products and projects to gain profit or success, the same rules apply in this more emotive environment; you still need to handle the right disasters, with the right people, using the right approach.

Benefits of PM Skills through Phases of Disaster

To best explain now how the project or programme manager would suit the disaster environment and the work involved, it is best to break down the skills and the appropriate use through the phases of the disaster much as a life cycle of a project. To do this I have chosen to use the Faulkner Disaster Lifecycle to overlay the project management skill sets and tools for each stage.

The first of Faulkner's stages is the **pre-event** stage which is the period when planning and preparation are to be done. What could be more natural to a project or programme manager than to prepare a generic approach to disaster prevention dependent upon the region and the type of disaster? The identification and the analysis of the potential risks or the issues that exist within the environment and within the recovery of the incident make up the fundamental skills of the project and programme manager. This need not always be a technical stage but in actual fact, by having local knowledge and an understanding of the demographic, something as simple as an action board explaining the approach to any incident can be handled as a pre-planned checklist of procedures. In addition, the opportunity at this stage to design and create overview plans to each of the

proposed disasters can be written. The suggestion that in the quiet times is when we best prepare for disaster is so true. Preparing and having a plan gives you, the project manager and those around you (the locals, the government officials and the team members, yes stakeholders) the greater confidence that should this project have to be implemented, there is a route map to survival and success to follow in the early days when so much more is going on around you.

When it is recognised that certain events lead to certain occurrences, this overview plan can be made more formal so allowing a methodology or process map to be drawn that gives greater credence to how and who will do what and so where the dependencies on actions and services relate.

The good preparation in stage one, should have given you a sense of control and confidence in both yourself and your team as the second stage begins.

Second stage – unavoidable disaster

In Faulkner's second stage, the **prodromal** stage, it becomes obvious that a disaster is on the horizon and unavoidable. Having done the analysis and the planned responses to a set risk or issue, this triggers the change in the circumstances and the requirement to put in final preparations for the impact of that said risk or issue. Here all the preparations for the quantification of the disaster or comparison to the expected damage can be put in place and then any final work that might be able to minimise the impact of the disaster, if possible, can be put in place.

Having now called together the preparation and emergency services in to stand by, the project manager now has to start the initial formulation of his or her team. No different than understanding the roles that certain groups or individuals play on a routine project, now it is important that those selected are briefed and as necessary, refresher trained on what they will be doing once the imminent occurrence happens. This identification of key posts and the levels of authority that these individuals and groups have can make the project or break it even prior to impact. Having those in charge understanding how they will direct and affect the impending situation and having them understand the impact of their decision making and the leadership they must possess is critical. Having the right role aligned to the right individual in the right situation makes for a more successful team. Once the team leaders and the key posts have been briefed then the project manager must ensure that there is a good clear and direct line of communication throughout and beyond the team. A project's success is based on good communication and in a potential situation of disaster and devastation this is never truer. So can a project manager manage in such a situation and under such pressure? Of course they can, it is more about adapting to the situation and relating those skills of stakeholder management and leadership that keep focus on communication forming their bedrock to achievement.

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Emergency action

Faulkner's third stage is the **emergency** stage. Disaster and what was the pending incident has now occurred and the event, whichever of the emergencies is now unfolding or is immediately following impact; this stage is usually characterised by sights and sounds of search and rescue and emergency medical relief activities. Making sure that the right responses occur in the most efficient and effective manner is paramount and the cybernetic or instinctive thinking process to make decisions on the ground makes this the ideal environment for a project manager.

What is needed in relation to the event is an understanding of the requirements of the situation and then capturing this information so that it can be more clearly understood and key decisions can be made at such an early stage is vitally important. The skills once again of bringing together those people and groups that know the answers, your team, your stakeholders and then evaluating that information for the next steps forward relieves the pressure on the workforce and the people affected more effectively therefore potentially lessening the impact. Once this information is gathered and the full extent of the event has been established, at this point the project manager truly initialises the project and starts to develop the original action plan into something with greater detail and also with certain accountabilities attached to them. The well known method of **rolling wave planning** is highly effective in this environment focusing on what is happening now but with the view on the next stage so that control is established but also so that structure remains integral to the project moving forward. In many places it is said there is no time to plan only to act, but this is not and has never been true.

No matter how long or short a period or breather in the activities, time to think through the next steps is time well spent. The key resource at this moment in the event or project is **time**, so using this resource valuably is a main factor in success. This stage is generally one of the shortest although the most devastating and the project manager should never lose focus on the fact that tomorrow will come and that on that day he or she will still be asked to lead and deliver. Whether it is the overall coordination of the emergency services or the rescue and recovery teams, keeping a sound and level head at such a key stage is imperative to the project manager.

After all, when the devastation has impacted and the calm settles, it is the project manager that people will turn to and ask, 'What do we do now?' He or she must now be ready to move into the fourth stage with a robust and sustainable plan.

During the fourth, or **intermediate**, stage, utilities are beginning to be restored and efforts are being made to return the community to normality as quickly as possible. By identifying the key benefits to the restoration of the facilities and utilities the project manager will gain greater understanding of the prioritisation of the work ensuring that every ounce of energy leads to the greatest gain for the area that has been affected.

Getting to grips with the full portfolio of projects and work packages that exist now in such a devastated area needs more than just one person. It now requires a full team to understand what specialisms exists in the region and how much of that resource is available at any one time. One of the most effective and yet simplest methods still holds firm today and as long as parameters defining

the levels of the discussion, is the MoSCoW theory. The simplest of all the approaches, understanding the MUST DO, SHOULD DO, COULD DO and WON'T DO helps the whole team understand and appreciate the order selection. The MUST DO implications could be determined by loss of life or supplies that if they are not re-established could lead to further harm or potential diseases. By setting that as a category parameter it becomes clear to see the highest priority work that needs to be done and why. Just as in the business world situations and perspectives change and so the project manager should be ready to amend and to redeploy their team or teams as the situation improves or worsens.

Rebuilding

Faulkner's fifth stage, **long-term or recovery** is characterised by rebuilding, reflection, and analysis. It is during this stage that the community has an opportunity to redefine or reposition itself, and can start to make changes to the local environment. Often, these changes are made with regard to a more sustainable development and reducing any further environmental impact. By trancheing or phasing in the redevelopment work and by planning the schedule of these activities in relation to the three typical constraints, the project manager can then communicate how the local area will change and improve and to some people, when this change and improvement is likely to happen.

Being able to understand the community moving back into the area is essential to this being a real success. Focus turns to cost and to quality. Understanding the community's needs and wishes and what they want to make of their home is fundamental to returning the community back to the values it holds and the traditions it wishes to maintain whilst also moving the area forward to gain the most out of the disaster. Once the understanding is in place, setting out an implementation plan in tranches or stages will advertise and communicate how the community will return to normal life again.

Whether the priority of the people is their church or their businesses, they can see when things will start to appear and how they can be involved in making the area regain its previous state. One lesson that seems to have been constantly missed throughout many incidents is to understand the effect the incident and its impact has had on the mental state of the victims. On many occasions emergency staff have reported dealing with the physical injuries at the early stages and not until much later, asked how the mental scars can be reduced or treated. These scars will affect the response to the changes made by the project team and so any early indication of community unrest or individual behaviour outside the norm, should be helped, supported and assisted at the earliest opportunity. This stage has no time limits, it takes what it takes to rebuild the area and its community; however once established the community can once again grow.

Chaos to restoration

The final stage in Faulkner's disaster lifecycle is **resolution**; routine business has been restored and a new, improved state may have been achieved. At this point, this typically becomes a handover and closeout phase, the project manager is now required to clear up the final elements of their project and to ensure that whomever has now taken back responsibility for the local environment and the businesses therein reclaims ownership in a structured and formal manner to try and create a sustainable and safe environment for the future.

Once departed, the project manager needs to ensure that all that occurred and all of the lessons learned during the entire incident, are well documented. Since you have been keeping a log since the start, you can now ensure that each lesson as small and insignificant as it seemed at the time is recorded, so as to take forward to other projects and other disasters, helping to protect and then to repair in the future in a more effective and efficient way.

Summary

Project management is an activity that we do every day in our lives, most of the time without a second thought, so with a little structure and the human instinct for survival bringing these two elements together seemed natural. A simple structure and sense of planning can help in our individual and combined future.

Understanding that the right people need to do the right jobs in our work place seems natural and so it is important, possibly vitally important, that when disaster is upon us, we are prepared for it and we do what we can to prevent and then defend against it. There is certainly no one right way of doing this and no golden charm or silver bullet that can solve these problems, but with time, with thought and with proper planning, the future for us, our children and the rest of the world can be safer and a more secure place to live.

When a disaster strikes, those affected are thirsty for leadership. The project manager is the man or woman that steps in, inspires confidence and leads those that are affected, so the initial impact is minimized and eventual recovery is maximised.



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