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Napoleonic project management

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Keith Armstrong, Cherry Clough Consultants, www.cherryclough.com

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When I started work as the leader of a design department for a GEC company in the mid 1980's, they sent me on a management training course at their college buried deep in the English countryside near the little village of Dunchurch.

The course included a wide variety of material, and I found most of it very interesting at the time. It was also quite hard work – there were tasks to complete in our own time every night, but luckily the bar was open until the wee small hours (and some learned some more lessons from that, too).

These days I can't remember the details of much that was taught on that course. I claim that this is because I have internalised its good advice and forgotten the stuff that was not so useful, but privately I worry that I might have simply forgotten.

However, one session entitled "Napoleonic project management" has stuck in my mind, and I have found it to be very effective indeed, both as a project manager, and when dealing with senior management.

In preparation for writing this article, I googled 'Napoleonic project management' and found hundreds of references, and all of the links I followed referred to a book with a similar title by Jerry Manas. I don't have a copy of it, and neither do I intend to purchase one, but it is clear that this book covers a much wider range of Napoleonic thought than what I was introduced to at Dunchurch.

Of course, EMC Journal readers, being well-educated and classical sorts, will be very familiar with good old 'Boney' – as Napoleon was derisively called by the British (not his best friends). We know old Boney as the famously successful, supposedly diminutive, French General, although it seems that his claimed lack of stature might just have been another aspect of British propaganda of the time.

According to Wikipedia, 'Boney' later morphed into 'Bogey' and then into 'Bogeyman', the infamous frightener of naughty children in Victorian times. Parents would tell their children that if they were naughty, the bogeyman would cut their throats while they were sleeping, and some artists would enliven children's texts with graphic illustrations of such punishment.

Anyway, what I learned, sitting awestruck at the feet of my trainers 20+ years ago, was the following....

When fighting a battle, Napoleon insisted that if any of his subordinates had a problem that they brought to him for his decision as their General, they had to provide him with not just a statement of the problem, but also *three practical solutions*, with the solution they favoured indicated as such.

Napoleon would generally choose one of the three solutions offered. He said this was because the man on the spot could see the problem much more clearly than he could from his hilltop a mile or more away, from where he had the whole battlefield to look after and of course could be unaware of local details.

Although the man on the spot had the details, he could not know as much as his General about the 'big picture' of the battle, logistics, overall planning, etc. So from time to time old Boney would not choose any of the three options provided, but would modify one of them or come up with a different plan.

Of course, our original Bogeyman had never heard the term "project management". He would probably be insulted to be compared with a project manager in a modern organisation, who generally does not have the authority to send thousands of people into battle. Nevertheless, his clever technique is very relevant in our world.

The project manager is rather like a military General, sitting in an office with PERT and GANTT charts on the wall providing him with an overview of the battle – sorry, project – employing various clever strategies and tactics with the aim of winning the fight against competitors, the clock, or the budget (often all three).

Lower in the management pecking order, are the other people employed on the project. But this does not mean they are lesser beings, even if they are paid less and don't get an office to themselves or a dedicated parking place in the car park.

These people know their stuff, and they know that they know it better than their project manager. It is not unusual for them feel a little miffed that – in a typical organisation – pay grades (and parking spaces) relate to the number of people 'under' you in the management structure, and not on how much the success of the project and hence the very organisation employing you depends on how much your subordinates know, and their expertise in applying that knowledge.

The resulting annoyance of the subordinates means that when they have a problem that needs a decision from their General – I mean project manager – they tend to dump it in his/her in-box and expect it to be solved for them.

Their manager earns so much more money than they do, they argue, and is obviously thought of more highly by their organisation, so obviously they must be the best person to solve the problem in the best way. Let's see them earn their inflated salary, or (more likely) laugh behind their backs and feel superior when they make mistakes that we think we would not have.

All of us who have been working in the real world for more than a couple of years will recognise this situation, and a few more years experience shows us how, at best, it wastes a lot of time – and at worst, it results in non-optimal solutions (sometimes very much so). Neither outcome benefits the employing organisation, or its employees.

The Napoleonic method I have described above – as faithfully as I can be to the memory of my Dunchurch trainers (some of whom have now gone to that great meeting room in the sky, where there are always those little biscuits with the jam in the middle to go with the tea and coffee, and the PowerPoint presentations and discussions are never boring) – cuts right through all this natural human stupidity.

It acknowledges that the people working on some aspect of the project will be the ones who know the best about what they are doing and what they need and how to achieve it. So obviously they should be the ones to suggest three solutions to the problem they have identified, and indicate their personal preference.

(I'm sure I don't need to point out that of course the proposed solutions should be professionally worked-out, and provide at a glance all the data the manager

needs to be able to choose, including costs and timescales. A project manager should immediately dismiss less-than-thorough work and insist it is done again, only professionally. (And yes *of course* it's more work, that's part of being successful as a professional. And no whining about needing time with your family, this is war!) Efficient functioning of the project team, to turn investors' money into a lot more money, which pays salaries and overheads such as pleasant working environments and the latest tools, is what it is all about.)

So the myth that the manager higher in the organisation's structure is somehow *better* than people lower in the structure – which some managers have even been known to believe themselves – is exploded. This goes some way to offsetting the annoyance at the differences in pay and car parking spaces.

But of course the project manager *does* have the big picture (on larger projects, they often have nothing else) so *must* be the one to choose which solution to accept, or choose to do things differently.

Everyone is so busy these days that it is almost a foregone conclusion that a manager will simply heave a sigh of relief – choose one of the proposed solutions – and feel very grateful to have such professional personnel on the project. Such emotions can't hurt, at pay review time.

If you are a project manager, I strongly commend this 'Napoleonic' method to you. If instead you are working for a project manager who does not use this method, you will almost certainly find that acting as if they do will work to your advantage, as well as that of the project.