

# Dealing with Stakeholders: A Historical Perspective

**By Jamal Moustafaev, BBA, MBA, PMP**  
**President & Principal Consultant**  
**Thinktank Consulting**



**General Alexander Yakovlev**



**Yak-3**

## PROLOGUE

In 1942 the Red Army suffered several disastrous defeats at the hands of Germans and lost close to 5 million soldiers. Around that time Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin summoned one of country's leading military airplane designers and his personal senior weapons adviser general Alexander Yakovlev to his office in Kremlin.

"Comrade Yakovlev", said Stalin, "The situation at the fronts is very tough. Our army is experiencing a critical shortage of airplanes. Furthermore, the ones we still have at our service are not very good when compared to their German counterparts. They are inferior in speed, manoeuvrability and firepower. Your assignment is to come up with a design of a new airplane and put it in full production. Of course, it has to be the best fighter plane in the world. You have three months ..."

After overcoming the initial shock, Yakovlev tried to explain the reality of designing and building fighter planes to the dictator. He had to choose his words carefully, since Stalin was notoriously intolerant of words like "order" and "impossible" being used in one sentence. Arguing with the tyrant was the surest way to get a one-way ticket to a prison camp in Siberia or to an execution chamber in the basement of the KGB headquarters located not too far from Kremlin.

"Comrade Stalin", said Yakovlev while trying to suppress his anxiety and force a polite smile on his face, "Designing a new fighter plane is a very complicated project. For example, it takes the Americans on average two to three years to put a new plane in full production ..."

Stalin stopped pacing the room and gave the general one of his famous menacing stares. "But you are not an American, are you, comrade Yakovlev?" replied Stalin sarcastically.

"No, Comrade Stalin, I'm definitely not an American"

"In that case, three months should be sufficient," stated Stalin ending the meeting.

By the way, the best fighter plane, Yak-3 was indeed designed and put in full production in three months. It became one of the most feared Soviet airplanes in World War II.

## THE CHALLENGE:

- Explaining PM methodologies:
  - Need for Risk Management,
  - Need for Cost-Benefit Analysis,
  - Need for Project Planning,
  - Need for Quality Assurance
- How to accomplish this?

## TYPICAL STAKEHOLDER

- Senior to very senior level manager
- Has medium to high level understanding of his/her business
- Has a low to medium understanding of project management methodologies
- Has low to medium understanding of technical aspects of the IT work.

## INTRODUCTION

The above story serves as perfect (albeit slightly exaggerated) example of the difficulties and obstacles project managers encounter in their lives. And while the conditions in the modern business world are a lot different from the situation described in the story, we frequently have to deal with customers who, just like the Soviet ruler, do not have a good grasp of project management reality. These people are usually referred to as “difficult customers” or “stakeholders with strong opinions”. The ability to deal with people like that is considered to be one of the most important soft skills in the project manager’s arsenal.

The issue that has been bothering many project managers is how to convince your customers that we follow project management methodologies for a reason? How to achieve at least a basic level of understanding with respect to such things as Scope document, Requirements Specification document and Project Plan? How to explain the necessity of change requests, testing and risk management? In my experience these problems frequently led to conflict, frustration, failed projects and even contract terminations.

## SOLUTION

Before we decide on how to handle this issue, we should probably determine the audience we are dealing with first. I hope most of the readers would agree that the typical profile of the customer in a large IT project is:

- Senior to very senior level manager,
- Has medium to high level understanding of his/her business,
- Has low to medium understanding of project management methodologies,
- Has low to medium understanding of technical aspects of the IT work.

Considering the specifics of the typical stakeholder profile, the only way out for the project manager is to educate his/her customers about project management. However, the education has to be subtle and interesting. It has to be subtle so that we don’t appear condescending and it has to be somewhat interesting because senior managers tend have short attention spans.

At the beginning of my project management career I used simple, easy-to-understand examples from everyday life to explain the specifics of project management methodologies to the customers. For example, I used to explain the difference between “high-level requirements” and “low-level requirements” in the following manner:

- A high-level requirement is when you tell me that you want me to build you a three-bedroom family home.
- A low-level requirement is when you specify how many power sockets you want in the master bedroom.

However, after some time I started to realize that the examples taken from history and/or real life (just like the story at the beginning of this article) are more interesting and intriguing than any fake scenario a project manager can come up with. Below you will find a compilation of some such stories I managed to dig out in my research. I hope they can help project managers in administering effective crash courses in our methodology to the executives.

## TOPICS:

- Project HR Management
- Project Planning
- Quality Assessment



King Edward IV



Edward's Banner

## TOPICS:

- Following the rules blindly
- Risk Management
- Quality Assurance



## Battle of Barnet (1471)

Battle of Barnet was yet another in a long line of bloody battles we know as the Wars of the Roses, staged between the houses of Lancaster and York as they struggled for the crown of England.

On April 14<sup>th</sup> 1471 Yorkist troops under Edward the IV were approaching Barnet, Hertfordshire where Earl Warwick "The Kingmaker" has positioned his army. Because of a thick fog covering the valley, cautious Warwick dispatched a reconnaissance detachment to verify and report on Edward army's location. Unfortunately Warwick's "commando" unit consisted of simple peasants who could not be considered experts in heraldry by any stretch of imagination ...

The problem was that Edward's coat of arms contained a depiction of the sun with several wavy rays. At the same time, one of Warwick's closest allies, John de Vere, 13<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford had an "étoile" (star with six wavy rays) on his crest. Unfortunately these emblems looked somewhat similar to an unsophisticated commoner. Therefore, when Warwick's men noticed an approaching detachment whose banner showed an "étoile", they assumed that it was king Edward's troops advancing towards them (keep in mind that uniforms did not exist at that time, and the only way to distinguish an enemy from a friend was by banners the soldiers carried). Of course the reconnaissance group rushed back to Warwick's camp and reported that the enemy was close. Warwick, being a very determined man, issued an order to attack. John de Vere who was operating under the assumption that he was being attacked by Edward's men ordered his soldiers to fight to the bitter end ...

In the meantime it took Edward only a short period of time to realize what was going on and, after thanking his lucky stars, he hit the Lancastrian troops with all his might.

Warwick "The Kingmaker" was killed on the field, and his forces put to the rout. Casualty figures are unreliable, but it seems likely that 500 Yorkist and 1000 Lancastrians perished ...

The first morale of the story from the project management point of view is that important tasks should only be delegated to people who are capable of completing them successfully. The second point is that one should always validate his decisions before committing to action or risk looking like an ass the next morning.

## Lost at Sea

In 1707 a British fleet under the command of Sir Clowdisley Shovell was returning home after a long mission in the sea. The convoy encountered a heavy fog upon entering the English Channel. The admiral gathered his officers and navigators to get a definite fix on their location. After a short consultation the officers reported to Sir Shovell that the fleet was safely off the coast of France. The admiral was about to issue an order to sail North to England when a sailor approached him and asked his permission to speak.

The sailor told Sir Shovell that he was keeping track of their position by using his own navigational equipment. He also informed the admiral that the officers were badly mistaken and that the fleet was much closer to English shores than they anticipated. Therefore, according to the sailor it was very dangerous to proceed to England at full speed since they were in danger of wrecking on the Scilly Isles.

Sir Shovell ordered the man ...hanged as a mutineer. Hours later, his



Admiral Cloudisley Shovell

flagship and three other ships of his fleet smashed into the rocks. He was swept ashore where, according to one of the legends, he was murdered by a woman who wanted his emerald ring.

By the way, the sailor has indeed, according to British Naval Law, deserved to be hanged. The danger of mutiny was a real problem on English ships due to bad living conditions, diseases and corporal punishment. Therefore only the officers were allowed to keep and use navigational equipment. Admiralty's logic was that if the sailors didn't know where they were, they would be less enthusiastic about rebelling against the officers.

This story was frequently used by historians to demonstrate the incompetence, stubbornness and, even pompousness, of some military leaders. However, in my opinion it also serves as a great example of how the project can go terribly wrong if the project stakeholders lack understanding of the procedures they have to follow, or if they are adhering to them blindly. It also shows how useful Quality Assurance can be. If only the Admiral had ordered his officers to recheck their calculations!

## TOPICS:

- Following the rules blindly
- Cost-benefit analysis
- Resistance to change



British "Redcoats"

## British Redcoats and American Rebels

Some historians (especially the American historians) tend to spread stories about the dumb British, who dressed up their troops in bright red uniforms and lined them up in rigid formations so that the brave (and smart) American revolutionaries hiding in bushes could shoot at them at their pleasure.

However, some historians contend that there was, after all, certain logic behind this "idiocy". They argue that brightly coloured coats and rigid formations were used to ... enforce the discipline and to improve soldiers' morale.

Firstly, they claim, if the troops are dressed up in red uniforms and lined up in a square or rectangular formation, it is very easy for the commander (positioned on some nearby hill) to see the soldiers deserting from the battle and to take proper actions after the battle is won.

If, on the other hand, the battle is lost, it is very easy for the enemy troops to find British deserters, again thanks to their crimson overcoats. Of course, the fugitive can always take off his uniform, assuming he has enough time (perhaps that was why they had so many buttons), but young men running around the countryside in their underwear are almost as conspicuous as soldiers in red uniforms.

Hence the British came up with an efficient solution to fight desertion. What is remarkable about this story is that the British lost the war after all!

So, let us consider this situation from the project management perspective. The red coats and rigid battle formations were ingenuous tools in fighting other regular armies. However, they were not fit for the realities of guerrilla warfare that American rebels were waging. What British, in my opinion, failed to do is to conduct a proper cost-benefit analysis of such strategy. At least one of English generals had to ask whether the percentage of casualties under old rules was higher than the percentage of soldiers that would have deserted if the red coats and battle formations were abandoned altogether.

## TOPICS:

- Risk Management
- Planning



Joseph Stalin



General Filip Golikov

## Soviet Intelligence Before WWII

Here is another story with a risk management context. In 1940 Soviet government was concerned that the country was in danger of German invasion despite the signing of the peace treaty with Nazis in 1939. On one hand Hitler maintained several dozen divisions on Soviet-German border; yet on the other hand, German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop insisted that those troops were preparing for the invasion of England.

Stalin needed reliable information regarding German plans and intentions. He delegated this task to Filip Golikov, the head of powerful and highly secretive GRU, the Chief Intelligence Directorate (Military Intelligence).

Golikov decided that he needed some certain indicators that will tip him off about the impending invasion. Firstly, all GRU operatives in Europe were ordered to keep a watchful eye on the ... sheep breeding industry. Specifically the head of GRU ordered to create a file on every large sheep breeder and on every market where sheep were sold. From that point on he would receive a daily report with prices of sheepskins and mutton from all major European livestock breeding centers.

Secondly, Soviet intelligence started paying a lot of attention to ... oiled rags discarded by German soldiers after cleaning of their weapons. These rags were gathered all over Europe (wherever German troops were stationed) and dispatched to Moscow via diplomatic channels. Upon arrival in Moscow the rags were transferred to the leading research centers for analysis.

Based on the “sheep memos” and the results of the chemical studies general Golikov regularly reported to Stalin that the Germans were in no way ready to attack the Soviet Union. Golikov also insisted (and Stalin agreed) that warnings from all other intelligence sources and even from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill should be ignored.

Let’s look at Golikov’s reasoning. He was convinced that any country that was considering invading Russia had to undergo a rigorous planning and preparation stage. For example, he contended that since the winters in Russia were extremely cold, the invading army would have to be supplied with warm overcoats. At that time the only overcoats that could withstand Russian winters were made from sheepskins. Hence, argued the general, if the whole German army of six million was to be provided with sheepskin coats, a lot of sheep would have to be killed. This will have a dual impact: the sheepskin prices will skyrocket and the price of lamb will fall.

Golikov also knew that German gun oil would freeze at the temperatures below -10. Hence, by the same token he assumed that Hitler would have to replace the type of gun lubricant his army was supplied with. In the meantime, as long as Soviet experts were reporting that the Germans were still using the same old oil, there was no serious threat of invasion.

The dual irony of this situation is that Hitler decided to attack the Soviet Union without any preliminary preparations for cold weather. Initially Soviets suffered several disastrous defeats and were able to stop the Germans only near Moscow. However, by the time German troops reached Moscow in winter of 1941, their soldiers were suffering from bitter cold and their weapons (including tanks, artillery and airplanes) were refusing to function properly because the gun oil would freeze and jam all the equipment.

This is a unique case because both sides made project management mistakes. Golikov’s approach was flawed since he overestimated the

combined intellect of all German generals and failed to identify the potential risk and prepare some kind of a mitigation plan. Germans, however, managed to surprise the Soviets initially, but did not plan their operation properly by failing to prepare for the cold weather.

## TOPICS:

- Risk Management
- Planning



William Wallace



Stirling Bridge

**THINKTANK Consulting**

**T: 778 995 4396**

**E : [info@thinktankconsulting.ca](mailto:info@thinktankconsulting.ca)**

**W: [www.thinktankconsulting.ca](http://www.thinktankconsulting.ca)**

## Battle of the Stirling Bridge (1297)

Military operations present an amazingly rich field to be studied by modern project managers. For example, every military textbook teaches future officers that crossing a river is a dangerous task for the army. The difficulty and, hence, the need for an even better planning increases dramatically if the enemy force is stationed on the other bank. And, by the way, the existence of a bridge does not necessarily make things easier ...

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1297 English army under the command of John de Warenne, 7th Earl of Surrey was approaching the town of Stirling in Scotland. William Wallace's (yes, **the** Braveheart!) troops were stationed across the River Forth in a wooded area.

Upon arrival on the riverbank, Warenne decided to cross the narrow wooden bridge and attack Wallace's forces. No reconnaissance was carried out. Despite the fact that Warenne advisers were telling him that it would take his army eleven (!) hours to cross the bridge, an order to move ahead was announced to the troops.

After about a third of English army amassed on the "Scottish" side of the river, Wallace's troops attacked from the front while some of his spearmen trapped the vanguard from the rear. As a result of their commander's foolishness Wallace massacred about a hundred English knights and several thousand foot soldiers.

The lesson project managers should learn from this incident is that proper planning (i.e. sending a reconnaissance team out) and risk assessment (what will happen if Wallace is on the other side, waiting for us to do something really stupid?) should be conducted prior to committing to serious actions.