

Resilience as a Project Management Tool

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You have just been assigned your next project to manage. The details fill you with excitement but mixed with more than a bit of trepidation, but that's to keep you sharp, right? The project is in a deep hole. The project sponsor is not happy and demands a plan to get things back on track. Sounds familiar I bet! It's not only familiar but almost cliché, but yet a fact of life on so many projects. In these situations you will need all your project manager skills along with a good dose of resiliency to get and keep the project on track.

We don't usually think of resiliency as a project management skill or tool. In the scenario above imagine telling the sponsor that the team will use resiliency to turn things around. Say what! I don't ever recall seeing it directly referenced in any project management training materials or mentioned in any seminar. Rather it falls into the category of the personal or soft skills a project manager brings to a project. Even at that it may be a more of a personal trait than a skill, think perseverance.

I had an experience with an IT project where perseverance and resiliency were the underlying factors that helped myself and the project team not only survive but to thrive. We were a new team formed to provide ongoing support for a just completed application released to production. I use the word 'completed' loosely. Many pieces were partially completed and needed more refinement. In fact the project would not be accepted until a long list of items was addressed. However since the project was over budget and its release had already been delayed, it was pushed into production. Still the application's functionality was far from what the sponsor ultimately wanted, and felt they had paid for. So the challenge for our Support Team was to fix and further develop the application to the sponsor's requirements while providing ongoing support. This was a very tall order with the list of enhancements and fixes being quite extensive. No knight in shining armor was coming to the rescue. Nor was there any silver bullet that would solve a great deal of problems. Our team was in it up our necks, and survival called for resiliency by each team member and a resilient project management and sponsor communication approach.

Our sponsor communication approach was essentially to take a licking and keep on ticking. At our sponsor status meetings we reported our steady progress with pride. We focused on what we had completed not on what was left to be completed. However from the sponsor we mostly got an earful of complaints about how the original release's features were lacking, the trouble it was causing and that we needed to do something sooner rather than later. Never mind that the priority of what items to work next was ever changing. That's what made it fun! Our response

oozed resiliency; yes ma'am, may I have another, that was terrible but we will get it fixed, we'll get right on that today. The key to our success was our ability to remain unfazed by the storm going on around us and stick to our approach; to slowly but surely address all items required for project acceptance. Eventually our sponsor recognized this cooperative stance, as well as the steady progress, and became more cooperative. With the passage of time our sponsor saw significant progress and eased back on the complaints. I mean you can only beat somebody over the head for so long before you and your mallet begin to soften.

We tailored our resource plan to work the lists of enhancement and fixes tightly and smartly. Items pertaining to a particular sub-application were grouped together and assigned to the same developer. This way they could see the whole sub-application's needs which lead to some fixes correcting multiple problems. It also helped in determining design decisions for some enhancements. If an enhancement was done in a particular way it also eliminated a required fix. As we dug in our heels and started to knock items off the lists, it dawned on me that our execution approach was shaping up to be the relentless pursuit of one step at a time, resiliency personified. We could not solve all the problems in one day or a week, so on a given day we focused and executed on what we could accomplish. We did that consistently over an extended period of time and eventually saw serious dents in the lists and even a few grudging smiles from the sponsor. Working from lists was a blessing in disguise. Yes, it reminded you of the big hill to climb but striking items off the list proved to be very therapeutic and provided a constant reminder of progress.

Our project was evidence that resiliency can have a long term nature to it. At the beginning we did not consciously decide we would adopt a resilient approach. We were not resilient overnight but rather with the passage of time we adapted to it. It was almost like it was out there waiting for us to embrace it. Nor did we make any brilliant technical or project management breakthroughs. We saw the volume of work and applied basic project management practices to complete it. The trick was our resilient and ongoing response to the adversity we faced. But to retain this mindset and execute to plan over an extended period we had to believe our approach was correct even before we saw its benefits begin to trickle in. As we progressed, we realized that not only are we doing the right thing, but it was the only thing that had a chance of success.

The resilient management approach we adopted filtered down to the developers. I reviewed the list of work and accomplishments with the developers on a regular basis, almost daily. This consistency encouraged matching consistency in their daily work approach. There was no doubt what they should be focusing their work upon. You could see the pride when they reported a problem was corrected and then another and another. We enjoyed striking items off the list and eventually seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. It was a joyous day when that light first appeared. It

was proof that our resilient and consistent approach was working. It encouraged us to remain steadfast and keep up the relentless pursuit of one step at a time. At this point we had time on our side, a big thing we could count on.

There was another aspect of seeing that light at the end of the tunnel worth noting. It's easy to lay out a schedule calling for all items to be complete by a certain future date. But a schedule at its definition point can have a hollow aspect to it, since it only calls out what you will be doing. But as you approach the end of the schedule and see the light of completion appear, the hollow feeling is replaced with pride and a burst of energy to complete the slaying of the dragon.

As a final note, I warn practitioners to be careful in their approach with reporting the light at the end of the tunnel to their sponsors. How I framed it to one of the sponsor's lead subject matter experts went over like a lead balloon. I drew circles on a whiteboard with each inner circle representing how we were getting closer to our goal or target in the inner most circle. This archery visualization was met with a response of don't show me circles, show me results! Yes, the diagram showed results, but perhaps it is best to leave it to the sponsor to visualize results in their own way.

About the Author



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Ron Look has over 25 years of experience as a project manager in the IT sector. He has 9 years' experience managing in-house projects for a national insurance company first as a team lead and then as a group manager. He has 11 years managing projects as a Senior Consultant for an international IT consulting firm specializing in IT application outsourcing and project development. He has spent the last 5 year managing projects for an international retailer. He currently is managing infrastructure projects for an international insurance company. He has project management experience from the perspective of both a buyer and supplier of IT services. His writing has been published in *PM World Today* and *PM Boulevard*. Mr. Look can be contacted at ronlook@comcast.net.