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Our Daughter's Wedding
by Raju Rao, Subhashini N Rao
Case Study

Our Daughter's Wedding

- a case study

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Introduction

Setting the context

This case study is based on a personal project - our daughters' wedding. Since one of us was formally certified as a project management professional it was but natural that we ensured that all copybook processes of project management were deployed as part of the planning process. This included a WBS, scheduling where required, resource planning, risk management and procurement. In that sense, it was a well planned project and one week before the wedding we were pretty relaxed. Little did we know what was in store for us! The wedding dates were on 6th and 7th Dec and heavy rains struck Chennai in India from 1st Dec and its disastrous effects continued till 8th Dec (2). In the midst of all that we had to conduct the wedding. It was done against all odds considering that many weddings during the period were postponed or even cancelled.

Exhibit 1 – The Chennai Floods

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The Challenges

■ **Phones/ Internet / Electricity** - Most mobile phones stopped working as mobile towers were either in water flooded areas or had become inaccessible. Communication became a nightmare. Many parts of the city went without electricity for extended periods - 5 to 7 days. This was we believe a precautionary measure by the Electricity board to avoid mishaps due to short circuit. Due to lack of electricity even internet worked intermittently and sparingly.

■ **Transportation** - Radio taxis and Public transport (buses) stopped plying. Only those on the road were private vehicles / taxis, emergency vehicles, ambulances and auto-rickshaws. Petrol was unavailable and those who did have them had filled up outside the city. Airports remained closed due to flooding of the runway. Movement into the city was also impossible because many bridges and roads had been washed away by the swirling waters.

■ **Food** - Due to transportation bottlenecks, essentials like milk bread and vegetables became unavailable or were sold at exorbitant prices. Panic buying due to the crisis situation only added fuel to the fire.

■ **Banks** - Many banks stopped working. ATMs had inadequate or no cash. Some of the bank servers were in areas which were affected by the flooding and so the entire banking system became dysfunctional.

■ **Media hype** - TV and Social media played havoc by painting a doomsday picture all around. In reality problems occurred in pockets (example one road or street or area would be flooded whereas that adjacent would be bone dry). The one flooded road became the icon of that area!!!

■ **Special challenges in a wedding** - many establishments, contractors or vendors wanted to be paid in cash either because that was the normal practice or because credit/debit cards were not working. Some of them would not be accommodative because of the unprecedented situation and did not accept payments through cheques or deferred payment.

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Interesting Observations

- **It pays to be 'un-smart'** – Ironically all the so called 'efficient' private institutions - example banks , radio cabs, private service providers etc did not work with the exception of auto-rickshaws. State Bank of India - usually considered 'not efficient' because it being a government bank, was one of the very few that were functioning though there was some delay in processing. Since ATMs were not functioning, those who distrust technology and usually keep large amounts of cash at home based on the older practices were 'smarter'. It only proved the point that technology is good only when everything is normal, otherwise good old manual systems are more robust and foolproof particularly in crisis situations.

- **Surprise of surprises** - The acrimonious behavior of auto-rickshaw drivers in Chennai is legendary. During this crisis the much maligned auto rickshaws were the only vehicles plying and taking passengers through even the most flooded areas (unless it was practically not feasible). Very surprisingly they did not over charge by exploiting the situation but only asked for a nominal premium. Most of them were also very helpful and courteous providing tips to the passengers about what areas to avoid and how to circumvent the flooded areas.

- **A crisis brings out the worst or best in people** - The true indicator of capability or intent comes out very well in a crisis situation. Examples could be found with some of the persons, contractors or organizations we were dealing with. Some were very helpful and went out of the way to accommodate the special situations while others refused to understand the crisis and change their modus operandi.

- **Management and Leadership styles** - Within our own team of family members who were managing the wedding, different styles were visible. There were some who would step up and take charge of a situation, some who were very good in high level planning and strategizing but hardly able to get down to execution and some who were not leadership material but good followers and could execute the given task with detailed instructions.

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What went off well

Exhibit 2 – The Wedding

- **Collaboration -** Considerable effort was put in from both the bride and bridegroom's side to get to know each other's families. Therefore the wedding became a good example of collaboration. Most of the events e.g. deciding on the venue, fixing the caterer, discussions with decorator, making purchases etc were done jointly with active participation by both the parties. The bonhomie generated helped in managing contractors and skills and resources could be deployed jointly wherever required. This was a significant change from traditional weddings in India (e.g. Tambrahm) where the bridegroom's party always came as guests for the wedding.

- **Transportation & accommodation management** - It was well planned and executed with results achieved as expected. It included allocating people based on priorities / requirements, luggage tagging, grouping in rooms based on requirements of family / senior citizens.

- **All religious rituals** - They were conducted as required, none of ceremonies were left out and this was by itself a significant achievement considering the crisis situation. This could happen because it was ensured that all the priests could attend even at early hours (the official wedding function started at 4 am) and ad hoc arrangements were made for some of the materials which could not reach on time because of the flood situation in parts of the city.

- **Decoration** - adequate decoration was done though not same as envisaged originally with the vendor and the outcome was pleasant and satisfactory.

- **Food quality** - Though the menu that was finally provided at the wedding was not as originally contracted, the quality of food was very good and this happened in spite of the difficulty of transportation, availability of people and other resources.

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■ **Beautician** – the person contracted for the job did her job exceptionally well particularly considering that the work had to be done in the wee hours of the morning and she had to come from one of the worst flooded affected areas – as early as 3 am.

■ **Help from unexpected quarters** – Cabs & mini-buses and which could have been a major hurdle in emergency circumstances, were fortunately very supportive. They stepped up services during the wedding days by providing drivers and vehicles for pick up and drop in-spite of adverse conditions.

Best Practices and Learnings from Case study

■ Form a leadership team or core group for quick decision making which meets often, many times during the day on ad-hoc basis.

■ Review fall back plans (Plan B or C), alternate vendors and resource persons.

■ Consider options of Must have / Good to have / Nice to have requirements in prioritizing for all that needs to be done.

■ Practice 'Managing by Walking Around' since most likely technology and systems may not be working.

■ PLAN, PLAN and PLAN! While crisis management necessarily occurs during execution phase, adequate planning is the backbone.

■ Generally in organizations procurement departments have a best practice of considering at least 3 vendors for material or services. This on hindsight is not only for price comparison or selecting the best option. It is also beneficial for risk management as a fall back plan and ensures that alternative options are readily available. In this project, some vendors and services did not rise up to the occasion and having other options was extremely useful since quick decisions had to be made in very short time.

Theoretical Constructs

Various models and framework could be considered to describe the phenomenon which occurred during the one week period. Disaster or (Emergency management) is one, the other being Crisis Management. An emergency is a situation that requires immediate attention, but is usually small in scale. A disaster is like an emergency, only much bigger and major that causes serious misfortune for a company, a city, or even a large region, and its people. A crisis is an event that is expected to lead to a dangerous situation and can be confined to a small population, like a family, or a company dealing with a very serious problem (3). It can be due to an emergency or disaster and can happen when projects are implemented in the normal course. Crisis management can be considered as a response for dealing with an emergency or disaster.
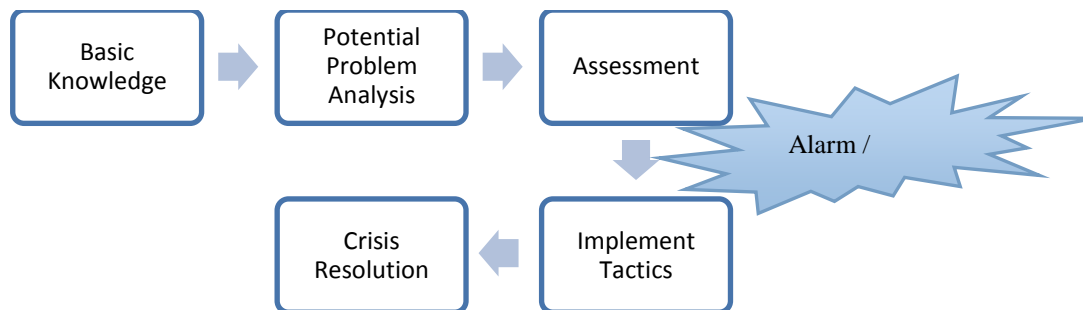

Exhibit 3 – Crisis Management Control Model – Adapted from (3)

Considering life cycles, the analogy would be an overlap of standard project life of a project with that of disaster (emergency) management particularly at the execution phase.
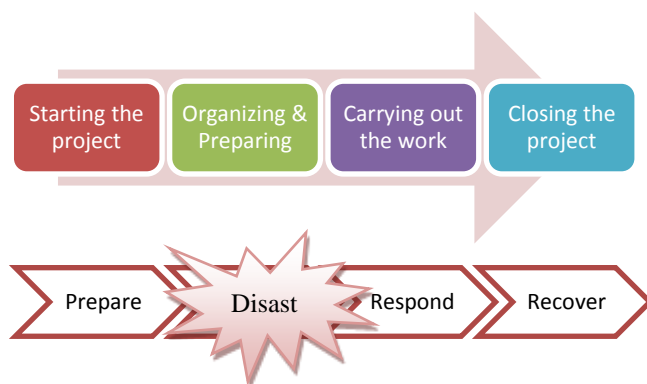

Exhibit 4 – Project Life cycle overlap with Emergency management life cycle

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In this project, the event that occurred seems to be similar to a crisis situation resulting from a disaster. In terms of language of the PMBOK (1) guide this would mean an input due to 'Environmental Factors' which will require action from a crisis and change management perspective during execution. From the perspective of Risk management, what occurred was due to uncertainty and since the risk was unplanned, action would have to be taken as part of a risk monitoring and control process. Though the risk of rain was considered and adequate provisions made for it, the extent of the problem that occurred due to flooding was not anticipated and therefore corrective action was taken largely through workarounds and fall back plans.

Conclusions

■ Conducting a wedding in midst of a disaster can be visualized as an example of a project with a crisis resulting from an emergency situation.

■ The problem could be solved by effective crisis management. The principal prerequisite for this is effective planning.

■ Planning need not be done explicitly expecting a crisis or disaster. Usually in a project this one may not expect a crisis to happen in a project in the normal course. Instead of planning for a crisis specifically or in a dedicated way, it will be better if we practice project planning in a routine course more rigorously. This by itself would be very helpful when handling crisis situations. This is a major lesson learned.

■ The change management component of crisis management would be more informal than formal due to less time availability for decision making and short implementation periods.

■ In order to handle crisis situations flexibility and agility is of great importance. There will however be greater challenges for obtaining positive outcomes when crisis occurs in larger projects.

■ Some of the lessons learned were significant e.g. collaboration, importance of planning and need for flexibility/agility. They could be of great value in managing similar projects particularly events.

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Subhashini N Rao is a Senior Teacher & Head of Dept of English at P S Senior Secondary School, Chennai. She has 30 years of teaching experience in schools in India and the Middle East. She has been a Board examiner for the CBSE grade 12 examination and a Master trainer for CBSE's Assessment of Speaking and Listening skills (ASL). Though formally not trained or certified in project management, she followed many of the principles in planning and executing the wedding. Subhashini can be reached at sbalaraman.rao@gmail.com