

The Management of Unexpected Projects: an MPA

Seminar held at the Royal College of Pathologists, London on 12 June 2003

Participants

More than 70 participants attended the seminar and the following organizations were represented:

AEA Technology Rail, BAA plc, Balfour Beatty Major Projects, Balfour Beatty Rail Projects Ltd, Barhale Construction plc, Bovis Lend Lease, BT plc, CMS Cameron McKenna, Defence Procurement Agency, Denton Wilde Sapte, Halcrow Group Ltd, Henley Management College, IBM Business Consulting Services, Imperial College, Kellogg Brown & Root, Linklaters, Lockheed Martin UK Ltd, Ministry of Defence (RAF), Mott MacDonald, Mouchel, MTR Corporation, Network Rail, Northcroft, Office of Government Commerce, PA Consulting, Rolls-Royce Naval Marine plc, Rolls-Royce plc, Royal Academy of Engineering, Scott Wilson, Strategic Rail Authority, Taylor Woodrow Construction, Templeton College, Trade Partners UK, University College London, Washington Group International, Willis Construction Risks, Willis Ltd, WSP Group

MPA events are confidential, although this summary has been compiled so as not to breach confidentiality. Full proceedings and entry to MPA events are available only to members.



The Queen Mother's funeral was a major event, involving over 1,700 military personnel, and the lying in state was attended by 200,000 people. A million people lined the route and 200 tons of scaffolding was used. Cherry pickers were used by the cameramen (illustration above).

Unexpected projects can arise in any sector. They may be crisis projects, where swift action has to be taken to mitigate a disaster, or they may be opportunity projects, where a market opportunity suddenly arises and must be seized. A project may be wholly unexpected or it may be foreseeable but unpredictable as to its timing and scale.

Common features

Unexpected projects are time-driven and event-driven and often take on a high profile.

The front end of the project is accelerated as compared to normal projects and the project demands a rapid switch of resources. Just who the "client" is may not be clear at the start.

Staff with the required creativity and skills may not be immediately available, but rapid decisions have to be made.

In a wholly unexpected project, project definition follows the decision to proceed and there is a lack of clarity at the outset. And there may be few formal processes and little in the way of planning.

Even when an emergency project can be anticipated, the circumstances on the day rarely replicate the scenarios that were planned for.

Whatever the project, a well-led, well-resourced team must swing into action and be allowed to short-circuit the normal procedures, often in a freewheeling, creative project management style, as the team develops the right response.

Lessons: pre-project stage

Carry out as much contingency planning as is possible, in particular set up relationships with those you are going to have to work with.

Engage stakeholders: if you do, you will have experts available and the essential element of a cooperative venture in times of "emergency". Conversely, beware poor communications with stakeholders.

Risk assessment: you need not only to make assessments but also to understand what the potential effects may be of any given risk. It may be necessary to put aside resources or even have a "standby force". Of course, ensuring consultants or contractors are available will cost but the risk assessment will answer the economics of the question of whether it is better to have a standby force or to bear the cost when the time comes.

The World Trade Center recovery project Events of 11 September 2001

- 8.45 A hijacked passenger jet crashes into the North Tower
- 9.03 A second hijacked airliner crashes into the South Tower
- 10.05 The South Tower collapses—a massive cloud of dust and debris forms and slowly drifts away from the building
- 10.28 The North Tower collapses, releasing a tremendous cloud of debris and smoke
- 17.20 Building 7 collapses

Following these events, the scope of the cleanup work was not known at an early stage but the devastation of the lower Manhattan area was clear. This included the Mayor's office of emergency management. Fixed-line and mobile telecommunications were damaged, as was the main power substation. The entire area was covered in 5 inches of ash, together with bodies and body parts. Fire and smoke made it difficult to see.

The contract was based on the one used for the Yankee Stadium emergency response. Four contracts each worth \$250 million were let, covering time and materials. From 12 September 2001, 1,700 men worked 24 hours per day, 7 days a week. Decisions were made at twice-daily meetings, and then acted upon. Recovery of victim remains took priority over productivity. During recovery 1.5 million tons of debris was removed, mainly by barge, to Staten Island. Steel was sold for scrap.

Working in such conditions made it virtually impossible to comply with legal safety requirements. New protocols were worked out for the conditions in partnership with the Occupational Safety & Health Administration. Repeat offenders against the new protocols were removed from site. Food and drink was provided by the Red Cross and Salvation Army. Progress of fires was tracked by satellite, using thermal imaging, so that if the fires spread to sensitive areas, there would be time to evacuate the site.

When called by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to give an opinion on the cleanup operation, the Corps of Engineers stated that there were few opportunities to improve on the operation.

Responsibility was handed over to the Port Authority on 30 May 2002. The Westside Highway was re-opened on 29 March 2002 and the Subway Lines 1 and 9 during November 2002. The final cost was \$700 million.

Legal implications must be considered—an issue of particular moment in litigious societies.

Identify those who are good at coping in an emergency. They may not be those who cope best in a mundane, routine run-of-the-mill project.

Lessons: once the project has started

Select the right team, composed of the right people, to run the project. And make sure the team is well led.

Senior management must be engaged to ensure the team has the necessary resources and backing so that the project manager can, if there are holdups, refer those involved to senior management.

To ensure you get the management of the media right, engage in media training. There is a balance to be struck between the media's being intrusive on the one hand, but being used to advantage on the other. Bear in mind, however, that the media give the project a high profile which ensures the engagement of senior management.

Make certain that you do not over-task the team. Commitment can lead people to put in too much effort. Then decisions may not be made in the best way.

Once the urgent problem is under control, it may be better to move back to standard everyday project management practices.

Lessons: after the completion of the project

Carry out an honest appraisal, whether the project is a success or a failure. If you omit to do this, all the same mistakes will be made again.

Disseminate the lessons to inform a wider community of managers. Changes may be necessary in the light of experience gained. Techniques developed under the pressure of an unexpected project may yield benefits for normal working.

A successful and valuable seminar

Internal motivation alone may be what counts in unexpected projects, as none of the speakers mentioned the rewards of success.

Most notable was the enthusiasm of the speakers, who all had an impressive story to tell.



*The World Trade Center recovery project:
Demolition and stabilization on building 5*

Topics covered in the seminar:

- What is different about unexpected projects?
- The London Millennium Bridge: fixing the wobble
- Handling the foot and mouth crisis
- Recovery from 9/11 in New York
- The launch of Freeview: carpe diem
- The funeral of HM The Queen Mother