

Article

Hurricane Katrina...A Lesson for Project Managers

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The recent devastation of the gulf region captured the attention of most Americans. As I watched the continuous stream of unimaginable images, I found myself wondering how such an event could possibly occur. What forces came together to create the “perfect storm,” and why weren’t we better prepared to manage them? The hearings currently being held in Washington to explore these questions remind me of the lessons-learned phase of a project. This begged the question; can the response to a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina be considered a project? If so, what lessons can we learn from such an event?

We define a project as a sequence of unique, complex, and connected activities having one goal or purpose that must be completed by a specific time, within budget, and according to specification. Let’s put each of those defining characteristics to the test.

The response to Katrina was clearly unique; we have never before experienced such wide scale destruction from any one storm. The geographic scope of the event challenged federal, state, and local resources. Mother Nature has the uncanny ability of producing unpredictable and unique scenarios!

Complex; of course, but the complexity of the response has been greatly overstated. The formula for managing such an event remains consistent; life/safety issues are always addressed first, followed by scene stabilization and then protection of property. The sequence of these events never changes, so the complexity of the response should have been manageable.

As is true of most projects, there were many connected activities, some sequential and some consecutive in nature: rescue of personnel, medical triage, distribution of food and water, the establishment of an incident command system, and the important task of planning for the recovery phase of the event.

We think of projects as having unmovable end dates; realistically, projects are scalable and more fluid than we might care to admit. Katrina presented a unique challenge; how do we define success? Is it the rescue of stranded citizens, the deliverance of food and medical supplies, the restoration of services and utilities, or the rebuilding of the City of New Orleans? Are these individual tasks simply milestones along a critical path, or do they, in and of themselves, constitute completion of the project?

The principal of delivering a project “within budget” may well be the most challenging aspect of the response to Katrina. How does one propose a budget for such an event? FEMA leased three cruise ships from Carnival Cruise Lines for the purpose of housing workers and evacuees. The cost was Two-Hundred and Thirty-Six million dollars over six months. Would that be considered “within budget?”

Last but not least, to fit our definition of a project, the characteristics we’ve discussed thus far have to come together for the purpose of achieving one goal. Despite several catastrophic failures, it was clear that restoring the region to its prior level of normalcy was the overriding and mutually agreed upon goal of “Project Katrina.”

Why did we fail?

So, did we pass the test? Can we deem the response to Katrina a project? I'll leave that up to you the reader to decide. We do know this; several of the defining characteristics of a project seem to be present. We also know there was even a response plan in place; in fact, a scenario eerily close to the story of Katrina had been practiced in 2004.

A question then remains as to why that plan failed at so many levels, during so many phases of the response? We had warning, we had resources, and the risk involved had been anticipated and analyzed for years prior to the event. What could account for such a failure? The answer is simple; projects are managed by humans, and humans, by nature, are flawed. Despite years of training and experience, we have not found a way to overcome the recurring human characteristics that cause us, and ultimately our projects, to fail. As project managers, we need to continually examine how these recurring failures impact our ability to lead and deliver successful projects.

It's a well documented fact that there are "3-C's" that fail at every major incident: command structure fails because most plans are written for every-day operations...communications fail because systems are quickly overwhelmed, and/or communication protocols are poorly constructed...and cooperation fails because humans tend to be territorial creatures, making their personal agenda the most important agenda. If this sounds a little unsettling, and all too familiar, it should; these are some of the same issues that cause many projects to fail.

The command structure required to manage an event of Katrina's magnitude was noticeably absent in the gulf region. Relationships had not been developed or identified prior to the event itself, and the assertive leadership required to manage challenging situations was non-existent. The absence of leadership led to an absence of critical decision making, which in turn led to an absence of response. This is often true in many failed projects as well. It is critically important that project managers clearly identify the leadership structure for their project, including the various roles and responsibilities of the subject-matter-experts involved.

Communication failure may well be the number one causal factor contributing to less-than-successful projects...it was certainly a pivotal role in the case of Katrina. Knowing how to effectively communicate, when to communicate, what to communicate and to whom to communicate is critical to the success of any project. When in doubt, make the call...communicating sooner than later is almost always your best bet! In the case of Katrina, the use of virtual event management software might well have made the difference between success and failure...or life and death. While the consequences of most daily projects may not result in the personal loss of life, they may well equate to the life or death of an organization. Ask yourself whether or not your team is communicating effectively...the success of your project may well depend on an honest answer to that question!

The final "C," cooperation, is a challenge for every organization. Katrina required the coordination and cooperation of numerous federal, state, and local agencies; global projects often require the same. Each agency, organization, and individual team member brings a respective talent or required discipline to the table, but the age-old axiom is true; "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Without a sense of coordination, cooperation, timing and discipline, the resources at our disposal count for little, until or unless we join together as one to achieve the agreed upon goal of the project.

In addition to the "3-C's" described above, Katrina revealed several other recurring challenges associated with the human factor components of project management. A lack of training and experience contributed to an inadequate response. In selecting and recruiting resources for your projects, are you seeking and attracting experienced resources? Are you providing the cross-functional training that leads to a deeper, more versatile pool of resources for future projects?

One of the more noticeable failures, and this was true at every level, was the failure for individuals and organizations to be held accountable for their actions. As a project manager, are you holding your team accountable for their performance, behavior and deliverables? More importantly, are you holding yourself accountable to your team?

There is one important human factor component that we have not yet discussed, and it, more than anything else, contributed to the disastrous response and catastrophic failures of Hurricane Katrina. I'm referring to the overwhelming sense of denial that prevented officials from mounting an adequate and coordinated response to an expected category five hurricane. Politicians denied that New Orleans' levee system could be breached by even a category three hurricane...citizens denied that flooding could be so wide spread and all-encompassing...law enforcement denied they could lose control of the city...and the rest of our country denied citizens could be left to fend for themselves and die in a major city of our great country. But it happened...all of it...proving once again that denial can be fatal.

What can we learn?

My point in sharing this story was not to answer whether or not a category five hurricane can, or should be considered a project. What I did hope to convey was the fact that we need to be constantly learning, and life's lessons can sometimes occur in unusual venues.

As project managers, and project leaders, we must continually seek opportunities for sharing our knowledge. What better way than to work with federal, state, and local agencies in delivering professional, coordinated and perhaps even life-saving project management services.

If there is a silver lining to the devastation of the gulf region, it's the fact that we can always learn from our mistakes, providing we make the conscious effort and decision to do so. The same is true of our work as project managers. If the past is prologue...and I believe it is, we will be better prepared for the next "Katrina" if we remember the following:

- If we fail to plan, we can plan to fail.
- Dare to think the unthinkable...it's always best to be prepared.
- Building relationships prior to an event will insure a better outcome to the event.
- It is generally better to over-communicate than under-communicate.
- Leave your ego at home...if you're all wrapped up in yourself, you're overdressed.
- When you're feeling challenged...It's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.
- Place the well-being of others first and you'll almost always make the right decision.
- If you say it, mean it...if you don't mean it, don't say it.
- Whatever decision you make, or action you take...make sure you are willing to own it.

There is a widely accepted concept that the teacher comes along when the student is ready. Mother Nature can be a powerful teacher...we can insure our future by making sure we are all willing students!