

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Managing the Urgent and Unexpected

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Urgent work may be required unexpectedly by any organization, for instance to take advantage of a business opportunity or for protection against a sudden physical or business threat or to restore a severely damaged asset. So what is different from normal if a project is urgent and unexpected and so has to be started without prior study of its scope or how to deliver it? How is managing any urgent and unexpected project different from managing normal work? What are the lessons and ideas which may help?

To answer these questions we drew on twelve cases of urgent unexpected projects ranging from the launch of the Freeview television system in the United Kingdom to the sifting and removal of the New York World Trade Center pile of debris following the “9/11” terrorist attack.¹ The urgent unexpected projects we examined all achieved their sponsor’s objectives. They do not necessarily represent every possible surprise which may require immediate action. They did provide an opportunity to consider what was different in managing them compared to normal practice.

An emergency is defined as a sudden event requiring immediate action where there is thought to be a threat to life or property. None of the cases examined were emergencies in that sense, but four of them consisted of managing restoration and recovery work after emergencies. Four consisted of managing preventative work to forestall threatened emergencies. Two were new business opportunities. In their effects all the cases were the same in being triggered by a surprise event which demanded resources for urgent action.

If a project is unexpected and also urgent the result can be a crisis, what the dictionary defines as ‘a turning-point in progress’ or ‘a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent’ (Oxford English Dictionary) and medics say ‘when a change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death’. The word ‘crisis’ implies that the result will be bad, or at least undesired. This is not necessarily true. Two of the cases examined show that unexpected events can be opportunities. The crisis then can be in applying resources quickly enough.

Every project tends to seem unique to the individuals and organizations involved in it. An urgent and unexpected project may seem to those involved in it to be more unique than others. We looked for similarities and for differences in how these urgent unexpected

¹The *Advances in Project Management series* includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. This month’s authors are also the authors of the book: *Managing the Urgent and Unexpected: Twelve Case Studies and a Commentary*, published in 2014 by Gower. For information about the book, [click here](#). Information about the Gower series can be found at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement>.

projects were managed. To do this, we looked at how they were started; how they were managed; compared reviews of urgent and unexpected projects with normal ones; produced a check list with comments on how business and government organizations can prepare for future urgent unexpected work; and summarised what is different in managing urgent unexpected projects and also lessons for 'normal' projects.

The dictionaries tell us that 'urgent' means demanding prompt action, priority, of pressing importance and working faster than normal. Though many people might agree with this definition, they might vary in what they mean when they say something is urgent, or in what they understand when others use this word. In the way the word 'urgent' is used in practice there can thus be degrees of urgency which are open to different understandings. But they all agree it means working faster than normal, and that this usually incurs increased cost as indicated in the famous Barnes 'Iron Triangle'.² Just so. The value of delivering the work to be done was overwhelmingly greater than the likely extra cost of working as fast as possible. This gave the word 'urgent' a clear meaning.

The purpose of the case studies was to learn how managing urgent and unexpected projects is different from managing normal projects. An obvious difference of urgent and unexpected work compared to normal is that rapid decisions are required on scope and planning the work with the resources immediately available. Planning what to do and how to do it develop simultaneously. Established sequences of considering and evaluating choices before starting a project are compressed. Decisions on what to do when, how and by whom have to be made just as in managing normal projects, but made immediately.

Less obvious demands of urgency are the involvement of all levels of management and stakeholders, oral commitment to decisions and powerful project management to cope with the intensity of communications. If time overrides cost, the first decisions on what to do and how to do it have to be final decisions. To do this demands a unified team of expertise and authority combining all levels.

All these urgent and unexpected projects met their objectives. The reasons could contribute to the success of any project, particularly the following:

- Clear objective.
- Early recognition of managing work as a project.
- Dedication of full-time leadership.
- Involvement of stakeholders and the media.
- Close relationships between organizational levels.
- Dedication of resources.
- Concentration and continuity on the one project.

Conditions suggesting an emergency are commonly thought to be motivating and were sustained in several of the cases we examined. Close relationships between all organizational levels in the cases may have been helped by the 'Hawthorne' effect of evident top management interest and support.³ The general lesson may be that motivation could be maintained by this support in normal situations where urgency is not a stimulus. Reliance on oral commitment at meetings, particularly in the 9/11 pile case, was supported by discipline in clarifying decisions at the time that was remarked on as lacking in normal practice.

Lessons to be learned in each case about anticipating the precipitating events were beyond the scope of this book, but several led to additions to systems for obtaining and acting on warning signals. The result may be a set of questions for stakeholders and governments:

- Could and should condition reviewing predict any risk to an asset?
- Should we be surprised when external events damage an asset?
- Who sees the warnings?
- Who is listening for weak signals?
- Does trying to anticipate everything blind everybody?

A lesson in risk management is that stakeholders should not only analyse their known unknowns, but should also know that they risk unknown unknowns and to prepare for them by drawing on the value of lessons from unexpected projects.

Urgent and unexpected projects have to be rare in business or government to be economically and socially tolerable. The chance that any one person except those in the emergency services will ever manage such a project is small and it's not possible to know who should learn these lessons in order to be prepared. It's their organizations that can and should be prepared. The lessons should help private and public organizations plan how they should authorize and support future urgent work if unexpectedly needed to take advantage of new business opportunities or to protect or restore systems and services.

All the cases were outliers, exceptions to normal practice. They prove no rules. They do provide precedents. The cases include some valuable information on *how* those projects were managed, as well as *what* was done. They varied in their causes, the authorities involved, public concern, nature, scale, immediate resources available, uniqueness and location. They had in common that they demonstrated the potential value of developing the ability to manage surprises, what Weick and Sutcliffe⁴ called 'resilience'. Achieving success from surprises is increasingly vital, for instance to respond to unexpected business opportunities or the threats posed by rapid change in technology in the increasingly volatile commercial world; or to respond urgently to overcome damage, whether imposed by human error, systems failure, Nature or terrorist attack. Any of these may be unexpected and urgent, and so demand an immediate start.

Adapting the words of the Association for Project Management⁵ on corporate project governance, the provision and use of 'appropriate methods, resources and controls' for surprises should be agreed in advance. From studying losses due to natural hazards, Stretton⁶ concluded that false confidence too frequently followed belief that an emergency 'is something that happens to someone else'. That belief can reinforce reluctance⁷ to incur costs to prepare for unknown risks. Counter to that reluctance, Knight and Pretty⁷ showed that companies can gain in market value if thought to be able to manage crises.

To prepare for the unexpected, Weick and Sutcliffe concluded that organizations can develop managerial resilience by fostering a 'mindful' infrastructure which requires the capacity to hear and act on weak signals – the first signs of problems. In systems engineering this ability to detect the unexpected is rather unhelpfully called 'redundancy'. It's the organizational equivalent of the 'sixth sense' for human survival. Teams and organizations may suffer

difficulty in comprehending and dealing with surprises but to minimise this problem the lessons from the cases suggest every organization's culture should embed the following principles for managing urgent, unexpected work:

- A vertically integrated team will decide priorities.
- Urgency will be defined with operational meaning.
- Specific communications channels will be defined.
- The team will include business continuity planners.
- Decisions will be made where the knowledge sits.

Every year brings lessons from new surprises – known unknowns and unknown unknowns. Organizations need to be intelligent to respond. Resilient design and contingency planning could prepare infrastructure and services for mankind-made and natural surprises. In a study of achieving business continuity, Lienart concluded that a carefully thought-out plan made all the difference to relationships.⁸ Prior planning was valuable for understanding roles, resources and logistics and for establishing a common language for communications.

Such provisions for anticipating threats and crises could also be the understood basis for rapid response for new business opportunities. The advice on crisis management and preparing to ensure business continuity is written in terms of protection and recovery from sudden threats. What is needed to recover from disruption is no different to managing through any surprise that causes urgent unexpected work. The understood system for incident management observed amongst the twelve cases illustrated this preparation in some large organizations. They established strategic coordination combined with the expedient actions by the manager of the resources on the job.

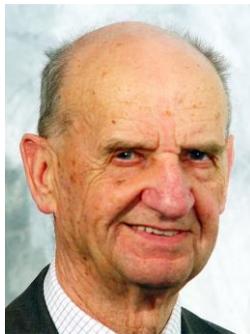
British Standard PAS 200:2011⁹ provides guidance on anticipating and managing business crises. It is similar to the advice on managing a project, particularly that plans for managing a surprise should provide a basis for an understood but flexible response. The plans should not focus on specific risks, as this may condition people to try to fit reality to expectation. The objective is to establish common understanding of how the organization will manage the surprise, but not fix what it will need to do. As Turner¹⁰ commented, the common lesson is that organizations need deliberate governance that provides 'the structure through which the objectives of the project are set and the means of attaining these objectives are determined'.

Coiner of saws George Bernard Shaw is reputed to have said 'we learn from experience that we do not learn from experience'. Perhaps more accurately we do not learn first time or fast enough. Or the form of lessons is not attractive or the lessons are not recognized. Notable failures in engineering have been due to not asking questions or not asking them early enough.¹¹ Lessons may be diffused among those with experience of events and those who extrapolate, but not drawn together for all. Many lessons from urgent and unexpected projects are there for those who look for them and are potentially valuable for those who think about them. As Ellis¹² wrote when summarizing lessons of crises, 'Be Prepared' is a mantra that can well serve individuals, companies, organizations and governments when seeking to manage urgent and unexpected events. The case studies and other examples used for our book illustrate 'why' the effective management of urgent and unexpected events can be critical and hopefully provide some lessons on the 'what, when and how'.

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