

Napoleon on Project Management

By Jerry Manas

(A book review by R. Max Wideman)

Introduction

By his own admission, author Jerry Manas has an affinity for history.¹ He believes, and rightly so, that there is much to be learned from history and, more particularly, by studying the great leaders of the past there is much to be learned that is applicable to project management specifically. After all, aren't all great project managers also great leaders? There seem to be two issues here. First, is it fundamental to being a great project manager that you also have to be a great leader? Second, was Napoleon really such a great leader, given his final catastrophic project? I'll leave it to our readers to debate, hopefully without prejudice to Anglo-French relations.

My first thought on picking up the book is that the title is a bit misleading. I doubt that in his day, Napoleon had even heard of project management. So what the book is really about is Jerry's view of Napoleon's activities from the perspective of project management – and hence what can be learned from those activities.

Napoleon's goal at the time was to salvage the French nation.

"When Napoleon took over as first consul, France was in a dreadful state. Over a million people had died during the French Revolution. France was beleaguered, surrounded by enemies, not least of whom were the expatriates who had lost power and clamored for a restoration of the old monarchy. The recently formed government was in a state of collapse, the economy of France was in a shambles, and another revolution was breaking out."²

In short, Napoleon had a serious people problem. Given that project management is largely about managing people and given all that has been written in the last half century about this aspect of project management, it is difficult to believe that there is any more to be learned. In fact, therefore, what Jerry's book does is to underscore the connections between Napoleon's "sheer brilliance, work ethic, and tenacity"³ and all that we know about the people side of project management in today's world.

For those who are comfortable with the idea that a project manager could or should be someone who is ready to conquer the world and who brooks no obstacles, this book is a great read. Even though ultimate failure is inevitable, as history has shown time and time again, there are important lessons to be learned. Not least of these is the work ethic and tenacity that I just mentioned. Through it all, the book that is, Jerry captures his key findings in two graphics, namely: "Napoleon's Six Winning Principles"⁴ and "Four Critical Warning Signs".⁵

Book Structure

Aside from peripheral sections, Jerry Manas's book contains fifteen chapters divided into three parts as follows:

*Foreword**Introduction*

Part 1: The Rise to Power

1. The Skills to Succeed
2. A Compelling Vision
3. Diplomacy and Networking
4. Lessons from the Great Campaigns

Part 2: Napoleon's Six Winning Principles

5. Introduction to the Six Winning Principles
6. Exactitude
7. Speed
8. Flexibility
9. Simplicity
10. Character
11. Moral Force

Part 3: The Downfall

12. What went wrong?
13. Lessons from the Russian Invasion and Waterloo
14. The Four Critical Warning Signs
15. Napoleon's Legacy

*Notes**Bibliography**About the Author**Acknowledgments*

Each of these chapters, except the last, concludes with a one- or two-paragraph Executive Summary and a section titled "Marching Orders". This latter translates the lessons to be learned from the current chapter of Napoleon's history into specific guidelines for the project manager.

What we liked

For those looking for a brief history of Napoleon's achievements and failures, but with a project management slant, this is the book for you. Because the real history of Napoleon is long and tortuous and encumbered with Machiavellian political intrigue, this is no doubt a very simplified and selective version. The objective of the book is, after all, to provide lessons in project planning, execution and leadership.

As Jerry says in his Introduction:

"There are lessons in the way Napoleon conducted extensive research before each campaign and in the way he organized his army for maximum effectiveness. There are lessons in the way he turned chaos into order and in the way he communicated to his troops, allies, and the general public. There are lessons in the way he motivated his soldiers, building fierce loyalty amid challenging times. And there are lessons in the way he kept track of all the activities in his vast empire, using simple and effective means.

Perhaps most importantly, there are lessons in the way he began his fall at the very height of his power."⁶

To this list, Jerry might have added that there are lessons in the way that Napoleon chose not to worry about the costs of his efforts either in terms of money or in terms of soldiers' lives, but we'll gloss over that aspect.

So Jerry draws on the history of Napoleon's exploits as well as Napoleon's memoirs. In fact, Jerry thinks that Napoleon was surprisingly candid in his memoirs. For example, Napoleon wrote:

"I could listen to intelligence of the death of my wife, my son, or all of my family, without a change of feature. Not the slightest sign of emotion, or alternation of countenance, would be visible. Everything would appear indifferent and calm. But when alone in my room, then I suffer. Then the feelings of the man burst forth."⁷

Jerry admits that this may be a great exaggeration, but as a lesson for the project manager, he suggests:

"It is important for the leader to show strength and confidence if problems arise, either with the project or with some external factor that could impact the team or the leader. Nothing can unravel a team more quickly than a leader who overreacts or becomes disillusioned. That is not to say the leader should display false bravado or inappropriate cheerfulness, but merely a solid, even temperament."⁸

That's good advice indeed.

And so Chapter 1 concludes with these "Marching Orders":

- Develop a good memory (through association, repetition, and use of a PDA or memo system.)
- Harness the power of mathematics (calculate – do not guess)
- Stay cool and collected (at all times)
- Go among the soldiers (be visible to your team)
- Understand the futility of tyranny (don't let positional power trick you into going it alone)
- Cater to popularity – within reason (listen to public opinion)

Subsequent chapters flow in a similar vein, each drawing on Napoleon's recorded history to make valid points for the project manager.

Part 2 of Jerry's book is devoted to "Six Winning Principles" that Jerry has deduced from the recorded history of Napoleon's activities. As noted earlier, each of these is described in detail in Chapters 6 through 11 that results in a further breakdown into some thirty detailed descriptors. The structure of this arrangement is recaptured graphically in Jerry's final Chapter 15.

For example, Chapter 9 deals with Simplicity. Jerry quotes Napoleon as saying:

"The art of war does not require complicated maneuvers; the simplest are the best, and common sense is fundamental. From which one might wonder how it is generals make blunders; it is because they try to be [too] clever."

That is a very good lesson for project management generals, too.

Part 3 of the book is devoted to Napoleon's downfall. This, Jerry ascribes to becoming overly self-confident following his successes on the one hand, and burn out of himself and his troops on the other. The fact is, his best human resources were not just burned out; they were slaughtered in the various campaigns. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned and Jerry deduces "Four Critical Warning

Signs", namely: Power; Overzealousness; Unbalanced Lifestyle; and Scarcity of Effective Leaders. These signs, too, are broken down into a dozen subtitles. The structure of this arrangement is also recaptured graphically in Jerry's final Chapter 15.

But you will have to read the book for the details.

Downside

Notwithstanding the project management lessons to be learned from Napoleon's history, it is important to understand that he was, after all, a very unique individual that emerged at a unique time in France's history. Of all the population born through out history, the number of such opportunistic people can be counted on a few fingers. Few people in project management can claim to be comfortable in the whole range of roles from visionary leader to detail administrator. Yet Napoleon appeared to excel throughout that range.

Napoleon also appeared to have some exceptional and useful talents. By his own admission, according to his memoirs:

"A singular thing about me is my memory. As a boy, I know the logarithms of thirty or forty numbers, I not only knew the names of the officers of all the regiments, but also where the corps had been recruited, had distinguished themselves; I even knew their spirit."⁹

From this we may deduce that Napoleon was also very egotistic. In his memoirs, he claimed other abilities and values that he felt made him successful, like:

"Developing solid skills, such as a good memory and knowledge of mathematics; upholding key values, such as calmness and predictability; being visible to those you lead; and understanding the nature of politics."¹⁰

Certainly, these are valuable attributes for the project manager to remember. But for those of us not born with the necessary or sufficient brain storage capacity, Jerry suggests:

"Since many of us are not armchair mathematics – it's useful to keep a list of handy calculations and algorithms, most of which are included in any Project Management Professional (PMP) exam study guide. Type the most useful calculations into your PDA or notebook, and you will be well equipped for success."¹¹

And, of course, if after passing the PMP certification exam you actually get to use those formulae on a project, that would be an added benefit!

Summary

This book is well structured and well written and for those who work in the field of project management and are also interested in history, particularly French history, this is a fascinating read. Author Jerry Manas succeeds admirably in his purpose, that is, as he states:

"The lessons from Napoleon's rise and fall can show us how to be successful in this [management-by-projects] approach both in our organizations and in our personal lives."¹²

Provided always of course that you follow the positive lessons and take heed of the negative ones.

For the most part, it will probably underscore what you already know. There is no question that Napoleon had extraordinary abilities that he exercised to the full at a time of chaos in his country.

Unlike most of us, he appeared to be as comfortable in developing a broad vision for his endeavors as he was in committing to paper the details of his Napoleonic code that formed the basis for law and order in France. Most project managers are comfortable at one end of the spectrum or the other. And whichever that is, the other end either appears to be tedious or it appears frightening. It's a question of personality trait and comfort zone.

As Jerry observes:

"His sheer breadth of accomplishments will probably never be repeated. Even his greatest adversary, the Duke of Wellington, when asked who the greatest general of his day was, responded: 'In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon.' Perhaps that is why countless military leaders throughout history have studied and benefited from Napoleon's principles and techniques, and why many modern leadership and marketing books quote Napoleon to this day."¹³

Well, we hope that readers and authors of future "modern leadership and marketing books" do not take that too literally, for Napoleon made two monumental mistakes. One was that he allowed his ego to take control such that his mission eventually ran away with his original vision and that led to his downfall. The other was that he allowed the basis of his code to be effectively backwards. That is, a person accused of a crime could be remanded in custody, i.e. imprisoned, for an indefinite period – leading to a de facto presumption of guilt. In France, as well as many other places, the Napoleonic code is still in effect today.

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Postscript

After completing a book review our practice is to submit the text to the author and ask them to check it to make sure that we have not made any errors of fact. In this case I had to admit to some struggle with my own personal biases regarding Napoleon as an historic figure, hoping that his would not adversely impact my review of Jerry Manas's book. In response, Jerry wrote as follows:

"I think you raise some good points. I completely agree that, in the end, his power superseded his original vision, and he lost track of his own principles. While Napoleon was far from perfect, as you've noted, my reason for writing the book was to address the questions, "How could someone achieve so many objectives so quickly against such insurmountable odds, create such a strong representative government built on equality (except of course for women, but I think that was more a product of the times), and then lose it all? And what could today's leaders learn from these strengths and weaknesses?"

"There were certainly many details I would have liked to include in the book (and in fact did originally), including his relationship with Josephine, his censorship of the presses, more details around his makeshift military court for the Duc D'Enghien, his neglect to address women and children's rights in his codes, and so on. Unfortunately, to keep the book concise and focused, I needed to edit out quite a bit. I probably cut out about a hundred pages. I did keep some of the material on my website in the Articles section in an essay titled: *The Truth About Napoleon*. You may find that interesting.

"I should add that I knew absolutely nothing about Napoleon when I began the research, aside from a rudimentary image of a short guy with a big ego. Then I began to see numerous compelling quotes from Napoleon in several books I was reading. To my surprise, the quotes didn't jive with my preconceived idea of Napoleon. They were thoughtful, introspective, and, dare I say, humane.

"That's what compelled me to write the book, and what launched me into years of researching some 30-50 books, mostly conflicting with each other. I tended to favor the books with more supporting examples and evidence for that reason. I grew to understand Napoleon as quite a complex and almost sympathetic character, a brilliant thinker with the most compelling of motives - to bring equality to Europe. Yet I would see other examples where he wasn't so sympathetic. A true anomaly.

"I must say that much (but not all) of the common negative view of Napoleon appears to be based on negative propaganda from the time. The book *Napoleon Bonaparte* by Vincent Gallo is extremely well researched, with examples of original letters and documents, etc., and that contradicted some of the other books that lacked the same evidence. If you ever decide to do further research, I found that book to be an eye opener. If it weren't for the supporting details, I would have just suspected he was a Napoleon sympathizer.

"For example, I've seen books and documentaries say how Napoleon abandoned his troops in Egypt, and again in Russia. In both cases, documented evidence showed that wasn't the case, and in both cases, there were meetings with Napoleon and his marshals where it was agreed that he needed to return to save France from being overthrown. Of course, by the end, even his marshals abandoned him, as they were sick of fighting and he just wouldn't give up. By the time he was ready to make concessions, the damage was done.

"Still, Napoleon clearly had his faults. I would say my number one challenge with the book was to make sure I didn't twist Napoleon's actions to suit my personal view on what management should be. I wanted to take the best he had to offer and frame it accordingly, and use his negative traits as warning signs. So, in the end, I guess it collectively served to illustrate my views. His words and principles were that of someone I could have admired, as were many of his actions. In the end, I'm not sure I would have liked him very much, especially once his power grew. Even so, I thought the lessons from both his rise and his fall have quite a bit to offer."

"Finally, if I had found through my research that he was the ruthless dictator that many made him out to be, I wouldn't have written the book, no matter how brilliant he was. It's why I refused to write a book on Caesar, even though people tell me it would sell. Looking at the whole Roman Empire, however, has many lessons from those who succeeded and failed, and I covered that in an article series. I may do that as a book one day.

"Meanwhile, my next book is called '*Managing the Gray Areas*', which is basically a book that promotes humane management and open thinking (as opposed to 'black and white thinking' and 'one size fits all' leadership). It should be much less controversial,

although it does pull lessons from history, science, and many other genres.

Jerry Manas"

¹ Manas, J., Napoleon on Project Management, Nelson Business, Tennessee, 2006, p268

² Ibid, p ix

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p257

⁵ Ibid, p258

⁶ Ibid, p xiv

⁷ Ibid, p9

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, p4-5

¹⁰ Ibid, p4

¹¹ Ibid, p8

¹² Ibid, p4

¹³ Ibid, p256