

Lessons Learned From Napoleon: What Went Wrong?

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Introduction

When I wrote the article ““Project Management According to Napoleon”, I attempted to demonstrate, using Napoleon’s own words, that his renowned military expertise was applicable to project management of any type.

The feedback I received was positive, and the one question that came up continuously was, “so what went wrong?” As my article demonstrated, Napoleon was a master at the art of project management in general, and military strategy in particular. So what did go wrong? How did a military genius such as Napoleon fall so quickly? What “lessons learned” can be extracted, so that we may apply them to project management? These are the questions that I will attempt to address in this article.

Lessons Learned from The Russian Campaign of 1812

To educate those not familiar with Napoleon’s downfall, I’ll offer the simplified version. In 1812, Napoleon led an invasion of Russia because it was apparent that the Russian Czar, Alexander, was not honoring a prior agreement to maintain an embargo on England. The agreement was part of a peace treaty between France and Russia (Napoleon offered peace in exchange for the embargo). Napoleon knew he was limited militarily against England due to the strong British naval fleet. His only recourse was the embargo. Russia couldn’t continue the embargo because it was hurting them economically. Both sides prepared for war. Thus began the disastrous Russian campaign that was the theme of Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture and one of the key campaigns in the War of 1812.

On the march to Russia, Napoleon began with 422,000 troops. He returned with only 10,000 troops. How did this happen? There were multiple reasons. First, on the way to Russia, the Russian summer began 2 weeks late, which meant fewer crops for the horses. Then the heat took its toll on the troops. Some troops, especially foreign troops from conquered and “assimilated” countries, deserted. Before arriving at Moscow, the weary and hungry troops engaged in several fierce battles with the Russians, culminating with the battle of Borodino. By the time Napoleon’s troops arrived at Moscow, they had only 100,000 men. To make matters worse, the Russians did something unexpected. They were gone. They had evacuated and left the city in flames.

Napoleon waited. He couldn’t accept that there was no country to conquer, nobody to surrender. After a time, upon realizing that they couldn’t stay in Moscow any longer due to lack of food and the approaching winter season, Napoleon’s troops began to return home. However, the Russian winter began 2 weeks early. The troops froze. Little by little, both men and horses died. Many froze in the Beresina River. Only 10,000 men returned.

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This famous and disastrous march to and from Russia is best depicted in a poster done in the late 1800s by Charles Joseph Minard, a French cartographer. Edward Tufte, the information design guru, includes this poster in his landmark book on information design, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, as an outstanding example of presenting complex data via a simple graph. The poster depicts the flow of the troops in and out of Russia, along with the number of troops at various intervals, and annotations as to the temperature at each interval. Tufte comments that, as one can see by the poster, Napoleon was defeated by “General Winter”. Tufte also includes the poster with his one-day workshop on presenting data and information. For information, see www.edwardtufte.com.

So what is the lesson from this failed march? Was it a lack of a contingency plan? Was there not enough risk analysis done? Was it a case of Napoleon being overconfident and ignoring his own valued principles? Before we answer, let’s explore these excerpts from J.M Thompson’s book, *Napoleon Bonaparte*:

Can it be supposed that Napoleon did not reckon with these difficulties? Was he so confident of an early victory that he was content with the massing of supplies ... and he had made no provision for the march of 550 miles from Kovno to Moscow? No: for his librarian Barbier had been instructed (December 19th 1811) to send him ‘some good books with the best information about Russian and especially Lithuanian topography, dealing with marshes, rivers, woods, roads, etc.’ He had specially asked for ‘the most detailed French account of the campaign of Charles XII in Poland and Russia’. Later he asked for ‘a work by the English Colonel Wilson on the Russian Army’ ...

No again: for he had with him in Russia – it was stolen from his carriage at Vilna – a 500-page document on the resources of Russia, which warned him against the badness of the roads and other difficulties, and said that his invasion was no more likely to succeed than the old inroads of the Scythians and Parthians.

He did not disregard these warnings. His food supply and transport arrangements were on a scale unprecedented in his previous campaigns. It was in the end neither the cold, nor the Cossacks, but the food shortage – sheer starvation of men and horses – which destroyed his army. He had not calculated on the Russians in their retreat drawing him so deep into the country, and eating or burning up their crops and provisions. He had not realized that in such a land and climate his transport would be unable to keep up with his troops. He had not calculated on the loss of horses, which disorganized his supplies, nor on the amount of sickness amongst his men, nor on the indiscipline, especially of his foreign troops, whose deserters and stragglers, even before the entry on Russian territory, disordered his communications, and consumed his stores.

From this, we can gather that the Russian Campaign of 1812, which was the beginning of the end for Napoleon, was partly due to circumstances out of his control, partly due to

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a blind ambition to succeed, and arguably due to insufficient contingency planning (even for someone as detailed at planning and risk analysis as Napoleon).

Some specific lessons to be learned are:

- Make your planning and risk analysis commensurate with the size of your project. This was a large project and, even though Napoleon did unprecedented planning, it still wasn't enough. Take the time to imagine what can go wrong, and develop solutions to address it.
- Know when to cut your losses if necessary. Don't let your desire to succeed be the enemy of good judgment. If Napoleon had left Moscow immediately, he may have returned with a salvageable army.
- Stop and think about why you're taking on a project, especially a difficult one. Be sure that the justification is there, and that your entire team is sold. The Russian march failed mostly due to arguably unforeseeable conditions, but partly due to undedicated foreign troops.
- Don't become over-confident, especially after many successes, and never attempt an unpopular endeavor in isolation. Always remember the basic project management principles, including those of professional ethics and responsibility. Napoleon began his career with strong ideals meant to restore equality to the people. He crafted the French Civil Code, which is a basis for all civil codes today. He started the Bank of France, and was responsible for much of the architecture you see today in Paris. However, he was ambitious to a fault, and total control became his focus. Power corrupts. Already the ruler of Western Europe, his power led him to the desire to conquer yet more countries. He made many enemies in the process, which ultimately led to his downfall, despite his talents. His power also blinded him into taking an extreme risk (the Russian march), which failed despite his unprecedented planning.

It's worth noting that there is a fine line between being overly ambitious and having confidence. One reader on the PBS web site for the *Napeoleon: Empires* series (www.pbs.org/empires/napoleon/) states:

Napoleon rarely wavered and in many instances, this was what secured him success. From this, we can conclude that it is better to be confident but not pompous rather than being overly modest and hesitant. Speed is also something he employed to his full advantage, and all of us should try to upgrade our speed at all things to which this principle is applicable.

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Lessons Learned from The Battle of Waterloo

As I stated earlier, ultimately, it was Napoleon's pompousness and hunger for power that led to his downfall – culminating in the Battle of Waterloo. Let's see if any further lessons can be learned from this final chapter in Napoleon's story.

By the time the Russian Campaign was over, Napoleon had made plenty of enemies. Britain, Russia, Prussia and Sweden formed an alliance. Austria even joined in (interesting, since the King of Austria was Napoleon's father-in-law at the time – his second wife's father). Determined to stop Napoleon once and for all, the allies invaded France. Napoleon, whose troops were grossly outnumbered, still fought the good fight, but after sensing the futility, renounced his throne and was subsequently exiled to the island of Elba, where he retained the title "Emperor of Elba".

After a few years on Elba, hearing that the allies had installed a weak King in France (Louis XVIII), Napoleon seized the opportunity, left Elba, and made a daring return to France, sneaking by the British fleet. Once on land, the French soldiers, shouting "Vive L'Emperor", immediately accepted him. At this point, the allies declared Napoleon an outlaw and war was once again inevitable. Napoleon knew his last chance was to drive a wedge between the British and Prussians at Waterloo in Belgium, and defeat them before the Austrians and Russians could arrive. It was risky, but definitely possible. Thus began the Battle of Waterloo.

The British, led by the Duke of Wellington were already in Belgium, waiting for the Prussians to arrive. Meanwhile, Napoleon's plan was to issue a frontal assault on the British while he sent some of his troops to intercept the Prussians. This was a good plan, except that once again, the weather wasn't cooperative. Storms arrived, causing sunken roads and hazardous conditions. Napoleon waited until the next day, and then waited longer for the ground to dry. Some say that Napoleon lost his confidence - that the old Napoleon would not have waited. Others say that he was applying a lesson learned from the failed Russian march, the dangers of inclement weather.

Whatever the reason, Napoleon waited, and this allowed the British to position themselves on a ridge and gave time for the Prussians to arrive. At that point, it is safe to say Napoleon didn't stand a chance. Yet, even then, he took a chance, issued a bold frontal assault on the British, ignoring one of his cardinal rules about not attacking an enemy that is on a hill, and nearly broke through. Ultimately it was the arrival of the Prussians that forced Napoleon to lose his center. Otherwise, he very well may have defeated the British. Once again, seeing the futility, Napoleon didn't push, and surrendered. This time he was exiled to a guarded volcanic isle, St. Helena, a prisoner rather than an Emperor. The isle was 10 by 6 miles and was surrounded by 2,000 troops. He lived there for 5 1/2 years, writing his memoirs until his death at 51.

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So what additional lessons learned can we take from the Battle of Waterloo? In his memoirs, Napoleon went on and on about what he could have done to win at Waterloo. There is much written about this subject. There are many Napoleonic scholars who maintain that this battle was winnable. I would argue that by this time, the damage was already done, and that Napoleon's defeat was inevitable, if not in this battle, then in the near future. He had built too many enemies, and his army was weakened.

So, to build on the last lesson learned from the Russian march, which cautioned about becoming over-confident and attempting unpopular endeavors in isolation:

- Beware of making enemies. You are only as good as your allies and your cause. Build and maintain relationships, with your team, with management, with customers and suppliers, and above all, with your peers. Be confident, but not so confident as to assume that you can't learn from others. This is the foundation for success.

Napoleon's inspiration, when it came to politics, was Machiavelli's *The Prince*. For those who view politics as manipulative and self-serving, there can be no greater guide. However, in today's day and age, the enlightened manager realizes that, while political savvy is necessary for anyone in an organization of more than one person, manipulative politics is bad politics. The best illustration of this is in Joel R. DeLuca's landmark book, *Political Savvy - Systematic Approaches to Leadership Behind-the-Scenes*. In his book, DeLuca breaks politics into a grid, with **action orientation** defined as one who **initiates**, **predicts**, or **responds** (going down vertically in the grid). Across those 3 categories, horizontally, there are people who view politics as **negative**, **neutral**, or **positive**. Each block in the grid represents a different management style.

According to DeLuca, the Machiavellian style falls under the **initiator-negative** category; one who assumes that organizational life is a win-lose proposition. The ideal style is the Leader, which falls under the **initiator-positive** category, defined as one who is a playmaker, an impact player. The Leader strongly believes in searching for the win-win solutions in which everyone gains something. So, another lesson learned is:

- Adopt Leader style politics, not the Machiavellian style. Look for the win-win.

Summary

There is no doubt that Napoleon was a military genius and dynamic leader, and many of his lessons can be applied to project management. One only has to read about his many successes, and stories of the dedication and admiration of his troops. However, it's equally important that we learn from his downfall. In the end, he failed not because of his principles and maxims, but despite them. With this in mind, I'd caution against throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

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To summarize the lessons learned from Napoleon's demise, mainly from the disastrous Russian march and the "last gasp" Battle of Waterloo, but also from the building blocks in the years that led up to it:

- Make your planning and risk analysis commensurate with the size of your project. For major endeavors, contingency plans are critical.
- Know when to cut your losses if necessary. Don't let your desire to succeed be the enemy of good judgment.
- Be sure that the justification is clear for your project, and that your entire team is sold.
- Don't become over-confident, especially after many successes. Remember the basic principles.
- Never attempt an unpopular endeavor in isolation.
- Don't make enemies. You are only as good as your allies.
- Adopt Leader style politics, not the Machiavellian style. Look for the win-win.

Finally, I invite others to share their opinions and any additional lessons learned that they have extracted from Napoleon's downfall, either from the information in this article, or from further reading.

About the Author

Jerry Manas is President of the Marengo Group, and author of *Managing the Gray Areas* (RMC Publications, January 2008) and *Napoleon on Project Management* (Nelson Business, April 2006). Through the Marengo Group, Jerry helps project and virtual teams achieve high performance using techniques and practices that result in greater alignment, leaner processes, and more strategic use of technology. Jerry is a founding member of *The Creating We Institute* (www.creatingweinstitute.com) and co-founder of *PMThink!* (www.pmthink.com), a popular project management blog site. Visit his website at www.marengogroup.com.