

A Project Manager's Story of Hanukkah – December 2010

Briskin Consulting is honored to support the PMI Olympia holiday celebration. Briskin Consulting helps people deliver successful projects. For my yearly holiday sponsor talk, I try to support our monthly PDU by offering an educational and holiday oriented message. Last year it was a thought useful for starting new project management relationships “Proudly Offer Excellence & Get What They Mean” reduced to the acronym POEGWTM which also means “Peace On Earth, Good Will Toward Men.” This year, more in keeping with my heritage, my message will be about Hanukkah.

Celebrating Hanukkah is remembering a great victory and a great miracle. This year I was pondering its history and realized that it's also a story of successful project management. So, let me share with you a story about Hanukkah and project management that might have happened.



Here's a little Hanukkah background to get started. The Jews of Judea and Jerusalem had, for hundreds of years, been ruled by different empires that were more or less tolerant of their religion. About 170BC, a new king decided that Jews practicing their religion was a sign of loyalty to the previous king, so he drove the Jews from the holy temple, destroyed the altar, and desecrated it with unholy acts. The Jews, led by a rabbi and his five sons, mounted a rebellion. In 165 BC they won back the holy temple. They cleaned and rededicated it. The temple's alter held a continuously lighted lamp that burned with holy olive oil. But only enough oil was found to last one day. The Jews lit the lamp and, miraculously, it stayed lit for eight days until new oil could be made ready. The victory and the miracle are celebrated as Hanukkah, the festival of lights.

So, let's go back to that moment in time. Imagine the cleaned and rededicated temple, the leaders of the Jews gathered there, and the moment they realized that they had only enough oil for one day. They prayed for guidance. The most senior rabbi, who was a project manager before becoming a rabbi, stood up and spoke to his followers:

“We've worked so hard to get to this point. We have to light our altar's perpetual lamp and reopen our temple for worship. It will be a miracle if the oil in the lamp lasts until we can make more. Only God can make a miracle. We have to do our part to help make this miracle possible.”

“What's our part?” asked his followers. “Our part is a project” said the Rabbi. “I will use this menorah with nine candles to explain.” The rabbi picked up a candle and placed it at the highest point of the menorah. “This is the shamash, the giver of light” he said. “It is lighted first and lights all the other candles. For our project, it represents our shared faith and vision for what we are about to do. Without shared faith and vision, we cannot succeed.”

“The next candle represents all that we must accomplish. First, we need a miracle. That will come from God. Second, we will pray to God for this miracle. Finally, we will make more holy oil to keep the lamp lit. This candle is for the scope of our project.”

Then the rabbi picked up another candle and said “This candle is for time. Time is a gift and we must

use only what we need. How quickly can we make the new holy oil?" The oil maker said "God willing, new oil can be ready in eight days." So the rabbi said "Our time to complete this project is eight days." He placed the second candle, the candle for time, in the menorah.

A leader in the group asked "Rabbi, who will do this work and what things must we have?" "That is the next candle" replied the rabbi. "We must find people who will gather olives and presses and filters to complete the oil. We must be certain we have considered every task and need. This is the candle of resources."

An old man in the temple who had seen much in his life called out "But something will go wrong, Rabbi, it always does." The group's spirits darkened. The rabbi said "You are right, we face many risks. That is why we must think now of what may go wrong and apply extra efforts and resources to be ready for problems." Heads nodded as the rabbi placed the candle for risk management in the menorah.

Then the rabbi said "The fifth candle tells us that we must work together for our cause, not for ourselves. We must all be committed and supportive of one another, each do our part, and be ready to help do whatever is needed just as the five fingers of a hand must work as a team to lift a heavy stone. The fifth candle is for teamwork."

"To work together, we must also talk together" said the rabbi. "Every day we must start by talking about what we will do. At midday we will review our progress. We will converse all day to support one another. At day's end we will share what we have done so we can prepare the next day's plans. Before sleep, we will pray. This is the candle of communication."

Then the rabbi looked at each person in the room. "There is one more candle we must have before we start" he said. "We must do our best work on every task as each task supports the next. We must be sure that our work each day leads us a full step closer to our goal. The quality of our efforts will lead us to success. This is the candle of quality."

The entire group smiled and nodded, and turned to start their work confident that they had what they needed to successfully deliver the project. The youngest among them turned and called out "Rabbi, what about the last candle?" The rabbi smiled and said "The last candle will wait until we have completed our project. At the end, God willing, we will celebrate our success. We will tell our stories and write down the lessons we have learned so that the miracle we pray for and the project we complete can always be celebrated and remembered. We will call the celebration Hanukkah, the festival of lights. And the candles we light, especially this last one, will remind us of God's greatness and the lessons we learned."

"Can we have a pizza party?" the young one shouted. "No" said the rabbi, "no pizza in the holy temple. But if you make enough oil, we will make potato latkes and donuts."

Happy Hanukkah and, to all, good project management!