**Calm in the Eye of the Storm**

By Gareth Byatt, Gary Hamilton, and Jeff Hodgkinson

Storm chasers are professionals (or should be) who watch for tornados and hurricanes during the summer months in the southern and Midwestern United States. Their goal is to get close enough to a storm to photograph and video it without incurring any harm to themselves. Some do it for the thrill, while others chase storms for legitimate research purposes. Though most are trained and experienced in what they do, they can in no way control the direction the storm will take (without warning, storms can often veer off in a new direction). One way to view the situation is as a high-stakes ‘cat and mouse’ game, with the participants risking injury or even death if they get caught in the path of the storm. To mitigate the risks, storm chasers rely on inputs (such as seismic data and weather predictions), using modern technology and expert judgment for the planning and execution of their work.

What does this have to do with program and project management? Well, aside from the obvious dangers that storm chasers face, one could say that these professionals deal with a high degree of complexity and ambiguity, much like many project and program managers. There is another similarity to which we will draw a comparison, having to do with the internal structure of the storm. Inside the tornados/hurricanes storm chasers are chasing, there is a calm environment known as ‘the [eye of the storm’](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eye_(cyclone)). As the program or project manager, you must hypothetically keep yourself and your team positioned in a calm environment, even if and when serious issues arise and various chaotic events are ‘swirling’ around you. What steps and actions can you take in order to shield your team from the chaos, and ensure they stay in the calm eye of the storm when times are difficult?

Although every situation on a program or a project is different, below are our principle suggestions for dealing with the difficult situations on projects and programs, garnered from our combined experience:

**Follow the plans**

At the start of the program or project, under your guidance, your team will have developed several project plans (Risk, Communication, Schedule, Success, Cost, Implementation, Iteration, Quality, Training, perhaps Safety, etc.) that, at the time they were created, were your team’s best assessment of the work to be done and how it should be performed. We also assume that your customers and stakeholders approved your plans so that you could begin to execute them. It is important to continually refer to those plans as your baseline for documenting gaps or deviations. Even simple things such as tracking Milestone dates and showing missed or updated milestones are important to managing the plans. For example, if a milestone is missed, keep it in the document but mark it as ‘~~crossed out’~~ and insert the new date beneath the original milestone, or rebaseline in the schedule to reflect both the previous agreed date, and the new. This approach will keep all parties aware of and in tune with the plan versus reality.

**Communicate Non-emotively**

It is widely agreed that communication comprises 90% of project management. We believe how communications are delivered (both the medium, tone, and expression) is just as, if not more, crucial as what is being communicated. When focusing your team and stakeholders, to remain within the eye of the storm, we believe it’s best to follow some key principles which we summarize below:

* Deal with facts, not opinions.
* Summarize the detail for appropriate levels of management.
* Keep it timely, accurate and of a high quality.
* Follow a pattern – get people accustomed to your updates.
* Present Program/Project impacts and alternatives to Key stakeholders. (Not just, “here are the issues.”)
* Don’t focus on blame if things go wrong – focus on solutions (i.e., options analyzed and the recommendation).

**Others Will Follow Your Example**

At all times, ‘Remain Calm’. If you as the leader of the team begin to waver or fall apart, it will have a ripple effect throughout your team. Further, your stakeholders and customers will continue to believe in the team’s success if confidence permeates team communications. Let people vent their emotions when necessary (when appropriate and in the right environment – negativity should be controlled). Allowing time for venting may serve no other purpose but to reduce the pressure or stress proportionally, but it will be appreciated later.

**Focus On the Key Milestone Dates**

‘Keep the eye on the prize’ (remember that the agreed benefits are the reasons your program or project exists) and continue to drive to the next milestone date. Getting there will increase everyone’s confidence and you can then do an impact analysis on the changes from baseline.

**80/20 Decision Making**

Don’t wait on all facts to make an informed decision. When you have sufficient information – act upon it. Yes, it’s a bit of a gamble but delaying action can also have the same negative impact. This is where experience, instinct, and ‘gut’ feel come into play. However things turn out in the end, it was the right action to do at the time. Sometimes mistakes may occur as a result, but you will learn from any mistakes made. By keeping focused on what you need to do, you will get there.

**Clearly Define Success vs. Time**

If the benefits change during program/project execution, advise the appropriate stakeholder and customers accordingly so they adjust their expectations. Ensure that they want to continue the effort. Accept discontinuation of the project if it gets to the point at which the costs (not just financial) outweigh the benefits. Always capture and record lessons learned, and agree on how to share them so that new programs and projects take them on board.

In conclusion, remember that, as the program/project manager, you are the leader and your team will tend to mimic your actions – particularly in a crisis or in times of stress. Follow the basics of keeping cool under pressure and maintain the ‘calm eye of the storm’ for your team. Remember, your program or project is a temporary endeavor and ‘it too shall pass’. We hope you take this short article and put a copy in your crisis or risk folder for reference if you ever need it. We would really like to hear from you if you have any feedback or a story to tell us. If so, please email us at [Contactus@pmoracles.com](mailto:Contactus@pmoracles.com).