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The Art of [Prisoners of] War

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The story of the Great Escape -- in which Allied prisoners at Stalag Luft III created a vast hand-dug tunnel system before making a mass bid for freedom in 1944 -- is one of the Second World War's most enduring tales. Already immortalized in a 1963 movie starring Steve McQueen (right), it now becomes, in consultant Mark Kozak-Holland's book *Project Lessons from the Great Escape*, a primer on the many hallmarks of great project management. We highlight five with the utmost currency today.

LEADERSHIP Great teams flourish under great leaders. The POWs at Stalag Luft III had theirs in Roger Bushell, aka "Big X." A lawyer by training and veteran of multiple escape attempts after his capture by the Germans in 1940, Bushell was said to possess "the correct mix of intelligence, arrogance, patriotism and daring" for wartime leadership, according to Kozak-Holland -- not to mention "a mind like a filing cabinet" and "a word that was pretty much law."

TACTICAL SAVVY The Great Escapers faced risks well beyond those that confront any modern project manager. The greatest: the possible discovery of their efforts. To reduce this risk, Bushell decided the POWs would build three massive tunnels -- code named Tom, Dick and Harry. He figured that the Germans would probably discover one tunnel but would never imagine that other tunnels of such scale could also be under construction.

RESOURCEFULNESS Basics were scarce in Stalag Luft III. The men used every possible resource. Bed boards were plundered to make braces for the tunnels. Red Cross packages were pooled to use as rewards or bribes. Rubber boot heels were carved to make "official" stamps for forged documents they'd need on the outside. On the plus side, the camp was a gold mine of human talent -- artists, engineers, tailors and tradesmen -- whose skills supported the escape.

ADAPTABILITY Myriad obstacles confronted the prisoners. For example, what to do with tonnes of easy-to-spot yellow sand from tunnelling operations? The POWs solved this problem by starting gardens, where the sand could be discreetly mixed with the dirt. On escape night, when they found their tunnel ended short of the woods they'd hoped to reach, the POWs improvised a signal system so they could exit without being seen. Dozens made it through before guards raised the alarm.

ABILITY TO LEARN Only three escapees made it to neutral countries. And, tragically, the episode ended with the execution of 50 of those recaptured. But the Great Escape did accomplish one key objective: tying up German resources at a crucial time (70,000 soldiers hunted for the missing men). But was it a success? Business is hardly war, but that's still a question every project manager must ask, says Kozak-Holland. Lessons learned can be just as important as the outcome itself.

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