

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’. 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 ‘~~erossed-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-emotionally

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.

Article Author Bios

<p>About The Article Authors, Their Roles Their Plans, And Their Goals</p>	<p>Gareth Byatt, Gary Hamilton, and Jeff Hodgkinson are experienced PMO, program, and project managers who developed a mutual friendship by realising we shared a common passion to help others and share knowledge about PMO, portfolio, program and project management (collectively termed PM below). In February 2010 we decided to collaborate on a three (3) year goal to write 50 PM subject articles for publication in any/all PM subject websites, newsletters, and professional magazines / journals.</p> <p>Readership of the articles is continuously increasing and we are fortunate to have assistance from people around the world who have taken the time to translate our articles into Arabic, Czechoslovakian, French, German, Indonesia, Italian, Korean, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian for their</p>
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	<p>readers. Our articles are published on websites in 30 countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, India, Jamaica, Jordan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Panama, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Trinidad, Turkey, UK, Ukraine and the USA.</p> <p>Our mission with these articles is to help expand good PMO, program, and project management practices by promoting the PM profession, to be a positive influence to the PM Community, be known as eminent influencers of good PM practices, and in earnest hope readers can gain benefit from the advice of their 66+ years of combined experience plus the expertise of co-authors who kindly write with us on particular subjects. As of May, 2012, we have been published over 600 times! Along with writing articles, each also champions a role in the overall writing program collaboration process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Gareth manages all requests for additional guest author collaborations → Gary manages the article development tracking and readership metrics → Jeff manages the article distribution and new readership demographics <p>Each of us can be contacted for advice, coaching, collaboration, and speaking individually as noted in our bios or as a team at: Contactus@pmoracles.com</p>
	<p>Gareth Byatt has 16+ years of experience in project, program and PMO management in IT and construction for Lend Lease. Gareth has worked in several countries and lives in Sydney, Australia. He can be contacted through LinkedIn. Gareth holds numerous degrees, certifications, and credentials in program and project management as follows: an MBA from one of the world's leading education establishments, a 1st-class undergraduate management degree, and the PMP®, PgMP®, PMI-RMP®, PMI-SP® & PRINCE2® professional certifications.</p> <p>Gareth is a past Director of the PMI Sydney Chapter, he is currently the APAC Region Director for the PMI's PMO Community of Practice and he chairs several peer networking groups. He has presented on PMOs, portfolio and program and project management at international conferences in the UK, Australia, & Asia including PMI APAC in 2010.</p> <p>Email Gareth: gareth.byatt@gmail.com</p>
	<p>Gary Hamilton has 17+ years of project and program management experience in IT, finance, and human resources and volunteers as the VP of Programs for the PMI East Tennessee chapter. Gary is a 2009 & 2010 Presidents' Volunteer Award recipient for his charitable work with local fire services and professional groups. He has won several internal awards for results achieved from projects and programs he managed as well as being named one of the Business Journal's Top 40 Professionals in 2007.</p> <p>Gary is the 5th person globally to obtain the six PMI credentials PgMP®, PMP®, PMI-RMP®, PMI-SP®, PMI-ACP®, and CAPM®. In addition to these, Gary holds numerous other degrees and certifications in IT, management, and project management and they include: an advanced MBA degree in finance, Project+, PRINCE2, MSP, ITIL-F, MCTS (SharePoint), MCITP (Project), CSM (Certified Scrum Master), and Six Sigma GB professional certifications.</p> <p>Email Gary: Gary@PMOracles.com or contact him through LinkedIn.</p>
	<p>Jeff Hodgkinson is a 33+ year veteran of Intel Corporation, where he continues on a progressive career as a senior program/project manager. Jeff is an IT@Intel SME and blogs on Intel's Community for IT Professionals for Program/Project Management subjects and interests. He is also the Intel IT PMO PMI Credential Mentor supporting colleagues in pursuit of a new credential. In 2012, he earned an IAA (Intel Achievement Award), Intel's highest recognition, with the team for work in implementing an industry-leading private cloud solution.</p> <p>Jeff received the 2010 PMI (Project Management Institute) Distinguished Contribution Award for his support of the Project Management profession from the Project Management Institute. Jeff was the 2nd place finalist for the 2011 Kerzner Award and was also the 2nd place finalist for the 2009 Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award™. He also received the 2011 GPM™ Sustainability Award. He lives in Mesa, Arizona, USA and is a member of Phoenix PMI Chapter. Because of his contributions to helping people achieve their goals, he is the third (3rd) most recommended person on LinkedIn with 590+ recommendations, and is ranked 33rd most networked</p>

[LinkedIn](#) person.

Jeff holds numerous certifications and credentials in program and project management, which are as follows: CAPM[®], CCS, CDT, CPC[™], CIPM[™], CPPM–Level 10, CDRP, CSM[™], CSQE, GPM[™], IPMA-B[®], ITIL-F, MPM[™], PME[™], PMOC, PMP[®], PgMP[®], PMI-RMP[®], PMI-SP[®], PMW, and SSGB. Jeff is an expert at program and project management principles and best practices. Jeff is currently focusing on gaining additional expertise in energy efficiency and home energy savings alternatives.

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