A Case Study on Third Battle of Panipat: What Not to Do as a Project Manager

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Abstract

The third battle of Panipat ranks as one of the significant event of 18th century and for more than two hundred and fifty years has fascinated countless generations. The stories of that fateful event happened to the Maratha Empire have been told and retold over the years; however, very few have examined the actual cause behind and how decisions made during that process directly contributed to their loss. This paper examines the battle from an entrepreneurial perspective and conclusively shows how gaps in the decision making, budgeting, strategic approach and lean processes, implemented during those circumstances left Maratha forces vulnerable to disaster. We could recognise these mistakes made by Maratha chieftains as classic management blunders.

Keywords: Budgeting, Decision Making, Entrepreneur, Lean Management, Maratha Empire, Strategic Approach, Third Battle of Panipat

1. Introduction

According to Dr Srinandan Prasad, wars are an acid test of the economic, social, technological and moral strength of a nation1. On the other hand the result of wars affects all fields of human endeavour. History of nations can well be understood as history of its wars. The Third Battle of Panipat fought in early 1761 between the Marathas and forces of the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali and his allies was one of the biggest and most significant battles of the 18th century in India & had its impact for the next century and a half2. Though the Maratha Empire was the most powerful amongst all of their contemporary counterparts across India, they have faced a huge defeat. The battle of Panipat was a turning point in the history of not only Marathas but whole of India. If we study this battle closely we could find out that causes of The Marathas during this campaign were classic project management blunders. Lessons learnt from this case will be very helpful to a project manager managing a typical project also it will guide him/her in various aspects for example, strategic approach, decision making anticipating potential failures, mitigating risks etc.

2. The Battle-A Brief Overview

The Third Battle of Panipat took place at Panipat, about 100 Km North of Delhi between a force of the Maratha Empire and the forces of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the King of Afghanistan, supported by two Indian allies—the Rohilla Afghans of the Doab, and Shuja-ud-Daula, the Nawab of Awadh3. The battle started in the wee hours on January 14, 1761. Towards the start of the battle the Marathas took a significant lead, but the tide of the battle soon turned against the Marathas and by the end of the day they were killed, taken prisoner or fled. Grant Duff includes an interview of a survivor of these massacres in his History of the Marathas and generally corroborates this number. Shiejwalkar, whose monograph on Panipat 1761 is often regarded as the single best secondary source on the battle, says that “not less than 100 000 Marathas (soldiers and non-combatants) perished during and after the battle4.
3. Retrospective Analysis of the Maratha Defeat

The Third Battle of Panipat saw an enormous number of deaths and injuries in a single day of battle. It was the last major battle between indigenous South Asian military powers until the creation of Pakistan in 1947. This defeat to Maratha Empire was nothing but an utter failure of project management. Major causes of this defeat are discussed in below-

3.1 Inadequate Resource Management

The Durrani army had clear advantage as they outnum-bered the Maratha army with almost 30,000 soldiers out of which 10,000 were reserve force. Marathas failed keep fresh infusion of fighting troops or bench strength. This situation landed them in critical risk of resource burnout at the time of battle.

Also the Marathas were carrying almost 30,000 non-combatants consists of pilgrims and camp-followers. This was clearly a blunder in terms of resource loading. They fail to get optimised resources of correct skills on the board.

3.2 Qualitative Disadvantage

The infantry of Marathas was organized along European lines and their army had some of the best French-made guns of the time, their artillery was static and lacked mobility against the fast-moving Afghan forces. The heavy mounted artillery of Afghans proved much better in the battlefield than the light artillery of Marathas. Factor of agility was certainly turned out to be a decisive factor in this battle. Maratha weaponry was old styled and was not up to the mark. Agility & use of right technology are always prove to be critical success factors in project management.

Also it took many more days for the Marathas to reach the North due to the constant halting of pilgrims at the places of worship. If not for these pilgrims, the Marathas would have reached the North in the scheduled number of days and would have been in a better position to face Abdali. It clearly shows Schedule Variance (SV) has heavily affected Maratha side. It is very important for you to keep your project on schedule. Not only does it help you complete your project on time, but it also helps you avoid unnecessary cost overrun due to slippage of schedule. Because as you go over the stipulated time, your costs start rising exponentially.

3.3 Lacking Strategic Associations/Partnerships

The main reason for the failure of the Marathas was that they went to war without good allies. They were expecting support from their allies- Rajputs, Jats and Sikhs, but because of continuous interference by the Marathas in their internal affairs, none of them supported Marathas in the battle. Partnerships provide the capacity to achieve what may not otherwise be achieved. A good partnership is created by individual parties believing they can better achieve their goals by working together. The Marathas failed to create an efficient association and fought alone in whole course of events while the Durrani had allies with many lords in Northern India.

3.4 Ineffective Leadership

Not assigning right person with appropriate experience and skills, to manage the project is very common mistake in business scenario. Leadership is a practical skill, regarding the ability of an individual or organization to “lead” or guide other individuals, teams, or entire organizations. Peshwa’s decision of appointing Sadashivrao Bhau as the Supreme Commander instead of appointing Malharrao Holkar or Raghunathrao proved to be a kind of unrest among the Maratha chieftains. Sadashivrao was totally ignorant of the Political and Military situation of North India.

The senior Maratha chiefs constantly bickered with one another and Sadashivrao Bhau couldn’t able to established control over them. Sadashivrao Bhau failed to motivate, his troops for fighting against a common enemy & failed to resolve conflicts in his troops. His ineffective leadership left Maratha side in frail health. Leadership is an important function of management which helps to maximize efficiency and to achieve organizational goals. The project manager and the project sponsor must insulate the team from politics and other such factors. Politics can force team members to lose their sense of direction on the project and performance can suffer. Also, team members that are not politically astute can get involved in areas where they have limited knowledge and make matters worse.

3.5 Supply Chain Vulnerability

Supply Chain Management (SCM) is an essential element to operational efficiency; hence a project manager should be very much conscious about this process area.
Continuous supply of optimal resources and funds are required to ensure smooth running of the project. Marathas moved too far from their baseline of Gwalior and Malwa region without any support from Poona and allowed themselves to be surrounded by enemy. They could not able to keep their supply chains open during war time. The Afghans continued to get the supplies they needed due to their agreements with a few north Indian kingdoms. But it was a desperate situation for the Maratha army who were expecting reinforcements from the south of the river Narmada instead of the neighbouring states.

3.6 Inefficient Planning and Coordination
Maratha army did not have any command structure and co-ordination in various wings. Maratha force consists of various battalions fighting for their lords instead of the Empire. Overall Maratha side was composed of smaller troop without clear goals and coordination. It is quite simply the absence of a clear objective and measures with which to identify success or failure. They lacked in tightly coupled communication which is very important part of project management.

3.7 Strategic Failure
Project managers must know what battlefield is right for them. The Marathas suffered due to inadequate strategic approach. Marathas had not conducted their traditional ganini-kava, or guerrilla warfare, although they have already used these in Punjab and they were considered experts in this model of warfare. At the battle ground Marathas lacked discipline and coordination. In the course of battle, many Maratha leader broke round formation of Maratha Army, blocking their own artillery fire line and simultaneously exposing defenceless core. Strategy execution is very important for any project as it will definitely provide a winning edge over competitor.

3.8 Ignoring Problems
All projects have problems. Inexperienced project managers believe that sufficient time exists to solve these problems only to discover that the costs of correcting these problems later on in the project life cycle was significantly more expensive than making the repairs in the earlier stages of the project. The Maratha leaders did the same mistake. They continue ignoring persisting problems like insufficient funds, resource burnout, and unfamiliar conditions, which eventually cost them.

4. Lessons Learnt
One needs allies; the need is even stronger when one is operating in a new territory/segment. Whether the company is doing an acquisition or is entering into a partnership, the agreement should try to be a ‘win-win’ one where the minority stakeholder should feel respected and heard. This will help the partnership flourish. Similarly, if a manager takes care of his team, his team rally for him in his hour of need.

One should learn from a setback and improve; one must have the determination to win. Sometimes, a better plan emerges that could increase the probability of success as in Abdali’s case, where he saw his troops decimated on the other side of the river. Similarly, one may need to take snap decisions depending on the situation. An individual with a good network and a company that has good market intelligence can get the latest information, which could be crucial in planning and providing competitive advantage. When the stakes are high, lack of intelligence can invariably prove fatal, as in the case of how Abdali crossing the Yamuna went unnoticed by the Marathas.

Empower and trust your team members. One should have complementary skills among the senior management so that the leader can tap into a breadth of expertise. Finally, decisions are taken by the leader but an environment that encourages different voices and dissenting opinions is more effective than the ‘do as I tell you to do’ attitude. This is what encouraged Najib to convince Abdali. Even though Najib failed miserably in the initial phase, Abdali continued to give him a chance to prove himself. Similarly, a manager needs to have faith in his team despite early setbacks, provided they possess the right skills; after all, every mistake is a learning experience.

One should not give up the fight till the last moment. The leader’s behaviour during critical times can either motivate to overcome the challenge or lead to a psychological defeat where victory was possible. It is also important to have a backup plan that can be used if the original one is not working, as Abdali did with the reserve troops and cannons on camels. The leader should be bold in making changes in the team to ensure that a fresh mind can look into the issue from a new perspective and provide a solution, instead of the same tired mind being stuck in the same track of thought.

To rise after a fall requires grit and determination. It is not sufficient just to learn from mistakes and take corrective action. Changing the mind-set of the team from being a
loser to having faith in itself is a must. Then the team will rise and face the challenge again with confidence. Projects that are failing or not doing well can be turned around by adopting this strategy. Don’t compromise on project management experience when it comes to critical project activities. If the project is a complex activity, don’t assign someone with zero technical experience. In theory, a competent leader should have the ability to execute across subject matters. In reality, successful leaders frequently have backgrounds in a specific expertise.

Project managers need full visibility into the skills and workloads of all of their resources, They need to know how to facilitate meetings, manage risk and handle a variety of different stakeholders-the business people who are looking for functionality. Project managers should have clear goals and success measures (e.g KRAs) for the team. He/She should set objectives which are doable, understandable, manageable and beneficial.

Project manager should understand that communication is the lifeblood of a project, so keep all communication channels open. Keep everyone updated with the latest project status, risks, issues and developments.

It is important to do ‘what if’ contingency analysis planning for various scenarios. This upfront analysis may trigger a resourcing loading plan. Sometimes, one has to provide new concessions to gain the required support and solidify one’s position. Both wars and projects can benefit from a deep multi-step scenario analysis.

5. Conclusion

“Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

Winston Churchill

History is basically a lesson. In essence, history teaches us to move forward, recognize our mistakes and learn from them, and ultimately create a better existence for all. The Marathas who were ruling the most powerful empire at that time, tasted a massive defeat. Their expansion was stopped in the battle, and infighting soon broke out within the empire. They never regained any unity. There is a verb in Marathi language related to this loss as “Panipat zale” a major loss has happened. This verb is even today used in Marathi language. I was totally fascinated about the overall impact of this battle for more than 250 years. I always thought that this defeat was failure of management rather than just a bad luck. In this case study I tried to find out what exactly went wrong in terms of project management perspective and what can be avoided.

6. References