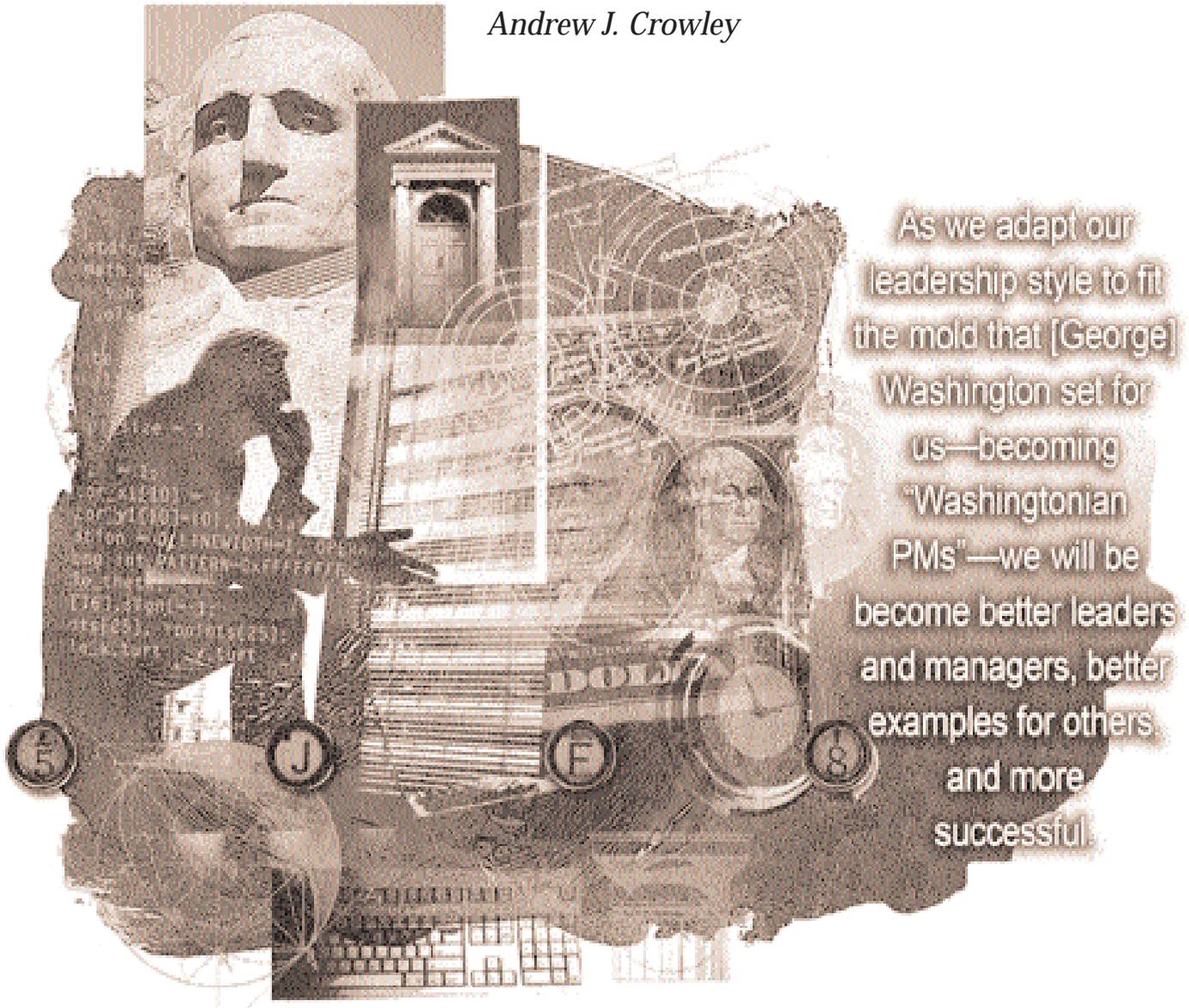


Washingtonian Leadership in Project Management

Andrew J. Crowley



As we adapt our leadership style to fit the mold that [George] Washington set for us—becoming “Washingtonian PMs”—we will be become better leaders and managers, better examples for others and more successful.

“I don’t consider myself a basketball coach; I consider myself a leader who happens to coach basketball.” With these words, Duke University’s head basketball coach, Mike Krzyzewski, sums up the self-knowledge and self-understanding that a project manager might need to be a quality leader.

Defense AT&L has printed a number of articles discussing various aspects of project management and what it might take to be an effective project manager. We’ve read about

ethics, leadership styles, management styles, and even personality traits of a good PM. We often refer to the need for PMs to be good strong leaders, but what does this really mean? How does one become a strong leader? Moreover, whom can we look to as an example of what a leader should be?

As a fan of Revolutionary War history and an admirer of the men who ultimately became our founding fathers and framers of the Constitution, I’m interested to know who

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they were, what made them tick, what motivated them, and ultimately what made them great. One who can certainly figure in this discussion is George Washington, the man considered by some as the first great American leader.

There is much that we, as project managers, can learn from Washington.

I'm going to focus on three of Washington's traits to illustrate how we can use his example to better our understanding of leadership and help us become better leaders. First, it is important that we know how to respond to adversity. Second, it is paramount that we understand how to deal with our failures without accepting defeat. Finally, we must learn from past mistakes—both our own and those of the people who came before us. As we adapt our leadership style to fit the mold that Washington set for us—becoming “Washingtonian PMs”—we will become better leaders and managers, better examples for others, and more successful.

Adversity in Project Management: The Winds of Change

Adversity doesn't discriminate and really knows no bounds. Just as adversity in life can strengthen who we are as people, it can also strengthen us as leaders in project management. Adversity can come in the form of a difficult team member or client, or even something as simple as a power outage or computer crash on the eve of a due date. Regardless, the project manager must be ready to adapt to the adversity thrown his or her way and press forward, regardless.

This certainly happened to George Washington over the course of his career and specifically during the Revolutionary War, where he was leading the charge in the fight for colonist freedom. Of Washington's performance in capturing Trenton and Princeton after the embarrassing loss at Ft. Mifflin, Abigail Adams said, “I am apt to think that our later misfortunes have called out the hidden Excellencies of our commander in chief. Affliction is the good man's shining time.” This sums an ideal approach to adversity in project management. One must stand firmly as a leader and not let adversity impact one's resolve to finish the job. As we, as project managers, are faced with adversity, we must act as Washington did and take it as our chance to shine.

Failure in Project Management: A Key to Success

The second key Washingtonian trait that project managers should adopt and practice is the ability to fail but not accept defeat. The defeat at Fort Mifflin was difficult to swallow and downright embarrassing for Gen. Mifflin. He lost the faith of many of his soldiers and witnessed many defections. The British leaders watched

from afar as he retreated, and they celebrated his failure. Washington, however, was nowhere near ready to give up; he was a living, breathing example of the idea that success is getting up one more time than you fall down. Washington *did* get up and planned a calculated attack on Trenton and Princeton, N.J.—and came out victorious. How incredulous the British leaders must have been when they realized that he had not given up. This is what we must do as well. We know that adversity will come; we know it may cause us to fail; we know that monkey wrenches will be thrown into our plans; but we also know that the ability to get up when we fall will show our team and our clients that we won't accept defeat—that we are true leaders.

Mistakes in Project Management: Learning Not to Repeat History

Finally, as project managers and leaders, we would be remiss if we didn't learn from the mistakes of the past. One of the observations that Washington made when he invaded Princeton was that the British commanders had misplaced their troops in a manner that would not allow them to properly defend the town if invaded. The first thing that Washington did when he took command of Princeton was to place his soldiers in the correct locations to defend the city. As project managers, we will have the benefit of drawing on previous projects we've worked on ourselves or witnessed, and our ability to leverage our past experience working for other project managers will be paramount to our success as leaders of projects when we are finally given the opportunity.

A common piece of wisdom—almost a cliché—that can be repeated in any number of contexts is “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” This especially applies to project management. Projects are often set up so that when they're over, the PM and the team can go back and list lessons learned so as to not repeat mistakes the next time around.

Responding to adversity, accepting failure but not defeat, and learning from past mistakes—all will enable a project manager to be more Washingtonian in belief and practice, and will ultimately make him or her a more effective leader. To paraphrase Krzyzewski, we should all aim to be leaders who happen to do whatever it is we do ... and that is especially true in project management leadership.

The author acknowledges the help of David McCullough's 1776 for some of the facts and quotations in this article.

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