

Program Management— Overcoming Obstacles to Success

Real-life experiences which can contribute to a better understanding of how programs can be successfully managed

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Executive Summary

Formal program management is becoming a more widespread initiative to help better improve concurrent project management processes. Although the management of multiple projects under one roof has been around for a long time, program management has become more recognized for the effective consistency it brings to the process. Recognizing it officially as a structured process provides project and program managers with a set of standards and controls that contribute to success.

This article is not about what program management is. The published authority of that process is documented in PMI's *The Standard for Program Management*. This article is, instead, a piece about real-life experiences that can contribute to a better understanding of how programs can be successfully managed. While this article implies that formal program offices with well communicated and monitored processes help avoid typical program challenges, it intends to describe general challenges and appropriate solutions that often exist in an organization without strong program office controls.

Programs are composed of several individual projects, each with a project manager and team that is accountable for delivering a product according to standard project management guidelines. Projects are grouped together in a program because an organization perceives that each of those projects exist to achieve the same strategic objective for overall organizational benefits.

Any and all projects that are part of a program can be very successful in and of themselves. Yet, the overall program as a whole can fail. The most recurring reason for this failure is not viewing the program as a project in itself and not building a strong process for integrating each of the sub-projects within it.

It is very easy to combine multiple projects on a single project schedule, identify the cross-project dependencies, manage that one schedule as a program schedule, and still fail. That is because a program is not simply a set of projects that are combined for a single goal. A program is challenged by the fact that each of the independent projects are generally viewed and managed as

just that - individual.

This “individual” view of projects is a natural phenomenon. Each project manager is accountable for ensuring the deliverable for which he or she is assigned. There is often little interest or time spent in worrying about the other projects in the program. That is not because each project manager isn't conscientious or aware of the other projects. In most cases, it's simply because program management hasn't been formalized, documented and communicated to the project teams sufficiently to allow for each team to understand how they fit into the overall program.

Relating Project Management to Management of Programs

Processes from *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)* have been historically well applied to projects. Programs and their respective management teams, on the other hand, often suffer from a lack of the same processes. Project teams are frequently thought of as administrative functional units, watchdogs or auditors. These teams generally are not considered to

have the detailed kinds of structures and processes in place as projects do. They are often viewed as managers managing and not producing.

PMI's *The Standard for Program Management* describes how those assumptions are not the case. It explains programs as having three themes—*benefits management, stakeholder management* and *program governance*—which are implied background to this paper's objective. The first two themes are generally easier to achieve and often follow processes for benefits and stakeholder management in a similar way to how projects manage these processes. Program governance, however, generally

their organization at the same time they are doing project work, it becomes increasingly difficult to do so when they are assigned as equal participants on many projects within a program, all vying for the one individual's contribution.

Second, organizationally team members have reporting relationships that may have several supervisors, including project managers and organizational management team members who have their own departmental interests to consider. The cross relationships and impacts of multiple project teams vying and/or competing for management's attention and buy-in becomes more complex.

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becomes a challenge because of the tendency for separate projects to prefer to govern themselves. They particularly become more difficult to manage when it comes to the knowledge area processes of Human Resource Management, Quality Management, Communications Management and Risk Management.

While several, if not all, of the nine project management knowledge areas apply to program management, this article focuses on principals and techniques relevant to the four specific knowledge areas noted above, as they lend to overall improved program management and specifically in relationship to program governance.

Human Resource Management—Challenges and Solutions

One of the biggest challenges to program management is the managing of resources. This challenge is generally related to time management, reporting relationships, and team interaction.

Within an organization, it is often difficult for personnel to dedicate their time to a project, even if assigned full-time, and still not be side-tracked by their “day jobs.” Within a program, it is even more complicated when the same individual is required to perform on multiple projects at the same time. For example, an organization may have only one database administrator, or one security officer, one change control specialist, one department manager, etc. And while these individuals can often more easily support

Third, team interactions are often more challenging. Project teams within programs sometimes tend to silo themselves. They do this to “protect their turf” from overall program controls. They also do it to form closer team relationships that are simply easier to manage than relationships that cross over to other project teams. Often, other project teams have completely different objectives, products, timelines, budgets and attention than another project team. That often leads to this isolationist stance.

At a program level then, it becomes necessary to pay greater attention to the Human Resource process assets that form the program plan. These actions will help bring success:

- ▶ Formalizing and validating individual project organization charts as part of the overall program chart is important. This organizational representation also needs to include management teams and external entities.
- ▶ Creating detailed position descriptions that describe program as well as project activities needs to be included. The positions must be described in a way that allows the individual to understand that their role and commitment may be different based upon how they interact on the various projects.
- ▶ Accountability (RACI) diagrams that include a dimension for the program as aligned with a project responsibility should be applied. An

example is shown in Figure 1.

Position	Program Level	Project Level
Project Manager	R	A
Business Analyst	I	A
Subject Matter Expert - HR	I	A
Subject Matter Expert - Finance	C	A
Subject Matter Expert - Billing	C	A
Program Manager	A	R
Communications Lead	R	C
Technical Support	C	R
Business Leader - HR	I	A
Business Leader - Finance	C	A
Business Leader - Customer Service	C	A
Organizational Change Management	A	R
Training Coordinator	A	R

Figure 1: Program/Project RACI Diagram. R=Responsible; A=Accountable; C=Consult; I=Inform.

- ▶ Ground rules need to be documented at the program level and become part of the quality review process from an organizational asset perspective. A good way to ensure uniformity in this technique is to staff the program with a full-time organizational process or change management resource. This role is crucial in not just resource management, but in terms of communication within and external to the program team.
- ▶ The organizational process/change management resource can also be instrumental in ensuring that teams “meet and greet” on a regular basis through planned activities, both professional and personal. A rewards program as part of this process is also effective, given that every team member is aware of how the program operates and what behaviors and deliverables are expected.
- ▶ Early and repeated communication of program-level expectations and the relation to project benefits is crucial. Every team member must be continually reminded that they are part of a larger organizational effort.
- ▶ Fully documented mapping of individuals and their outputs to project/program benefits realization must be shared. Program resources need to participate in program meetings or events to help further this objective. These

meetings should not be limited to just the project managers, but include all levels of project participants when beneficial.

Quality Management—Challenges and Solutions

Project teams, especially when delivering different products using different tools, often consider themselves free to ignore program guidelines or rules. The isolationist stance described under the challenges of Human Resource management often contributes to this view. In many cases project teams, especially if composed of vendor third parties, are quite comfortable with their own way of running a project and have no interest in going along with the “program way.” Teams that have a history together, either as performing groups within the organization or as product teams, see themselves as experts in their own process. While all of this may be true in a way, when viewed from a program perspective, deliverable and process quality can be at risk.

Quality standards, especially when related to project processes and deliverables, need to be more highly standardized on programs. Recognizing that all the projects contribute to the overall benefits expectations of the program, quality standards need to be consistent across projects so that those benefits can be equally delivered. Deliverables that look different can create confusion to the end user. Processes such as testing, user manuals, etc., that are developed with different templates, content, approach and tone create different levels of quality.

To ensure success, quality standards need to be designed and documented at a high enough level so that they can be easily mapped to deliverables and processes that contribute to expected benefits. A program quality plan should be written during the Program Initiation process that identifies what quality standards will be applied, how they will be applied and monitored, and how they link to the expected benefits. This plan should serve as input into each project's Planning Process Group activities (see Figure 2).

In addition to the quality plan, it is often convenient to set up a library of templates and process descriptions that are designed in such a way that they can be used by any project team without having to redesign the tool. For example, a testing plan template can be created that defines the expected testing processes to be

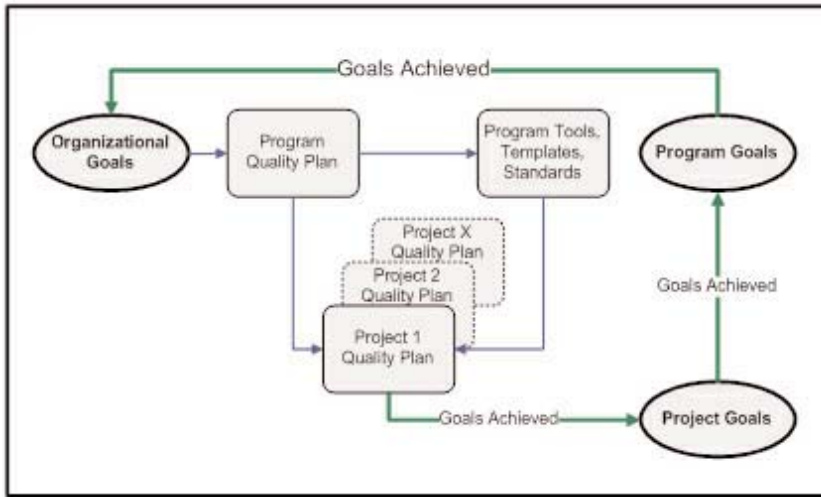


Figure 2: Linking quality between organization, program and project goals.

applied to all projects and how those testing processes are rolled up into program testing. The use of standards, templates, instructions, resources, software and other components should be considered.

The library should also serve as the program repository for all work in process and final deliverables. It should be organized in a way that allows both project specific documentation as well as program level standards to be easily accessed, stored and applied. Figure 3 shows just one example of how such a library can be designed. This approach assumes a high-level structure based upon the overall program. Within the Execution Process Group, each project has its individual project set of documents and deliverables.

Communications Management—Challenges and Solutions

Project communications are not often given the attention they require since most project teams focus on getting the “task list” done first. Communication, therefore, tends to be centered around team meetings, steering committee updates and occasional newsletters. While that in itself is a typically limiting approach for communications, it is compounded on a program level when multiple projects within the program not only operate that way but exclude other program participants from even those processes. This communication is related not simply to stakeholder communication, but program/project communication related to issues, status and other communications.

Project teams tend to document their own meetings, create their own issue lists, and send e-mails to their own team members. These activities all have a place. But missing from that approach is the need to understand and communicate how a single issue on one team may impact another. Or how a resource need on one team is assumed as just fine, without communicating to other teams if there are schedule conflicts for that same resource.

In some instances, public communications in newsletters, company websites, payroll stuffers, lunch-and-learns, broadcast messages and elsewhere can sometimes negatively impact another project within the

program without the initiators realizing it. A particular communication may send the exact opposite message that a different team is trying to communicate, creating confusion to the reader.

From a program perspective, communications must be very deliberately formalized and recognized as the single source for key messages. A specific resource on the program team needs to be assigned a communication role. That individual needs to develop the communication plan

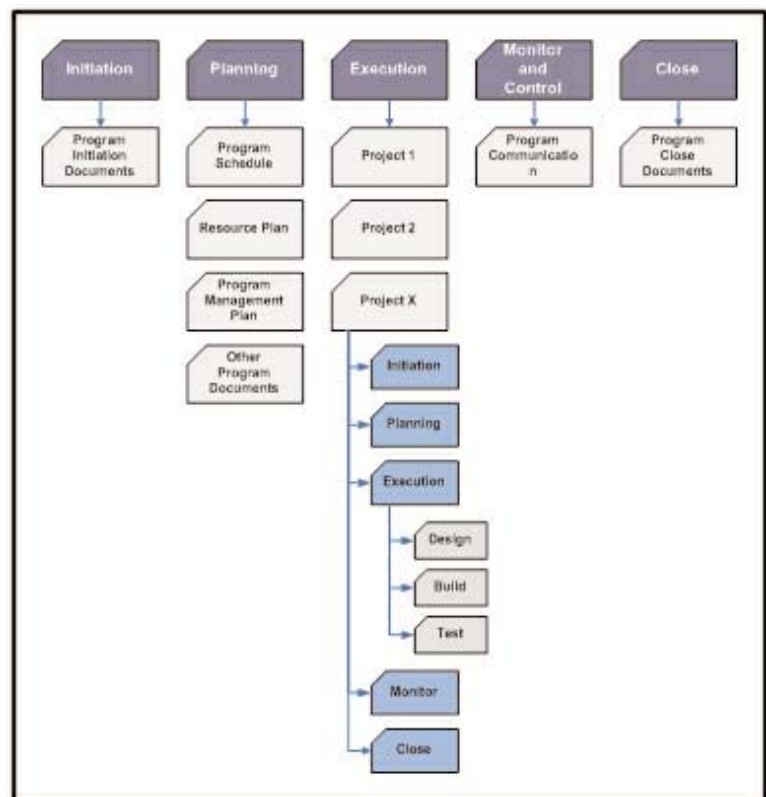


Figure 3: Sample project within program document library.

from a program perspective and include specific project communications within that plan.

The program communication plan needs to be designed to ultimately focus on the communication related to the original program benefits. It needs to strategically relate each project's contributions and their statuses in a way that communicates those benefits to all stakeholders. Approaching it this way allows the listener or reader to hear a consistent message. Additionally, those messages should be sent with a consistent tone, style and language that the listener will more easily recognize over time. This will contribute to less confusion and misinterpretation by the listener.

Program focused communication further tends to be perceived as more “official” within organizations. These communications are often aligned with an organization's formal communications office, which contributes to a more prominent position overall. Using this advantage effectively however, means that the program communications lead must work very intimately with each of the project teams to fully understand their role, their objectives and their outcomes. That will allow each of the project teams to successfully communicate what is necessary without feeling left out.

All project teams need to be coached to consider communications a critical and sometimes sensitive process along the path to project completion. Team orientation sessions should include specific instruction for how project communications will be handled within the program. A copy of the program communication plan should be given to each project team member as they roll on to the program.

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Additionally, while some program communications may simply reflect information from only one of the projects within the program, it should still be shared with each of the other project team members. Although it is possible that many individuals will ignore communications that they do not perceive as relevant to what they have been assigned to do, more communica-

tion versus less will ultimately reduce miscommunications in the end.

Finally, while each project team will still bear its own responsibility to communicate within the team for the majority of project-related information, standards for those communications should still be applied. For example, all team meetings should have published agendas and published meeting and to-do notes. The list of actual-versus-planned attendees should be included. Meetings should be posted to a shared program team site with the intent of allowing any program member to attend as a “listener.” It is key here that non-project attendees understand their role as listener versus participant in order to make the meetings more efficient and not get bogged down with unrelated questions.

Lastly, regular status reports (weekly, bi-weekly) should be published by each project team using a consistent format and consolidated by the program team for program-wide distribution. This allows team members to quickly get “up to speed” on the program without having to attend meetings or read through other deliverables.

Risk Management—Challenges and Solutions

Program risk can have impacts across the program, including scheduling, deliverables quality, design considerations, testing, and other areas. *Scheduling* risks typically start during project planning. In many cases, projects within programs often have different start and stop schedules. This is generally done to reduce the risk of a big bang, to spread out resources more evenly, spread out the program budget over a longer time period and simply account for the actual length of the individual projects. While this approach makes sense overall, there are risks associated with it that need to be carefully managed.

One of the significant risks associated with this approach is integration of cross-over features or *cross-project design*. In a system implementation, for example, the separate projects, each with separate products, are often intended to be integrated to some degree. For example, a customer service system may integrate billing information into a separate, non-integrated financial system. Design decisions made within one project may have a significant design impact on the other. Further, if two projects are working from different schedules, and more significantly, if one project finishes before another starts, then there is potential for risk. Even though separate project teams within a program may communicate status to each other via program reports or program meetings, that form of communication does not always mitigate design

impact risks because of a lack of participation of teams at the detail level.

Another risk relates to *integration testing*. A fully, complete system integration test for all projects in a scenario such as the example above is necessary to ensure that all components work together. While separate project testing events are obligatory, programs often limit cross-project integration testing to “interfaces.” As cited above, when different projects have different go-live dates, it's often impossible to conduct cross-project integration test. While regression testing certainly is an option to use to mitigate such a risk, it often is too late in the program to make changes to design if the go-live is already past on the first project and regression testing exposes a significant error or design change.

Programs often attempt to address this risk by scheduling all projects to end at the same time, even though there may still be staggered starts. The impact here, however, is that a slip-page in any one of the multiple projects will impact the delivery of all the other projects within the program. That creates cost and schedule overruns for on-time projects unnecessarily.

Integrated Design Risks

Solutions to address integrated design risks typically are often ignored in actual programs, simply because there is a perception that any alternative to a project's normal start and stop costs more and takes longer. Often teams employ a cross-project subject matter expert as the eyes and ears for the program. However, in terms of risk mitigation, a more unusual approach may actually cost less in the long run and provide a more thorough validation result.

An effective way to plan programs to reduce design risks is with a “single start-multiple continuation” approach. At the beginning of the program, all project teams start at the same time. They conduct analysis and design sessions concurrently, validating As-Is processes, functional and technical requirements, and To-Be visions simultaneously. Deliverables from this starting point then become input into a unique program phase-cross-project comparison. What this implies is a formal process that compares the results of each project and specifically looks at design or build situations that could negatively impact each other. The program teams then proceed to resolve the exceptions and agree on the final approach for integration.

This unique phase is not limited to system or process design. It also can be applied to other processes with projects such as training, post go-live controls, communications, licensing, con-

tracting and other components. The agreed-upon conclusions from this phase then become the starting point for all projects going forward. At this juncture, it is not necessary for all project teams to proceed together. A new start-stop plan can be applied with reduced risk and rework.

Integrated Program Testing

While the “single start-multiple continuation” approach works well for reducing initial cross project design risks, this integrated testing cannot easily be applied later on in a program if the separate projects have already started but end at different times. This then becomes a significant risk to quality and rework. It becomes especially difficult if the end dates for some projects are near to each other. The timing for integrated testing will ultimately impact one team's schedule and cost.

The only strategy to eliminate this risk is to view each project similar to a new “release” and perform exceptional system, regression and performance testing as part of the second team's objectives. This will likely eliminate a program benefit but in the long run, create a more quality result.

Conclusion

In conclusion, program management is a solid, beneficial way for organizations to manage groups of projects. When consistent and integrated processes are applied to each of the projects within a program, risk can be reduced and quality improved that contributes to the overall objectives of the initiative. The sample controls noted within this article are the start for any consideration of program management, and when applied to other program characteristics, can be considered a success for all.

About the Author

Diane Haubner, CISA, PMP, is a veteran management consultant with over 19 years experience in the design, development, implementation and support of strategic business initiatives and information systems in a variety of industries and environments. She has over 15 years experience as a project manager. She also has experience in strategic planning, technology assessment, best practice implementations, business process re-engineering, portfolio-program-project management office design, application development, information system audit and controls and IT organization. Her consulting experience has ranged from Fortune 500 companies to start-up companies across multiple industries, including manufacturing, health care, insurance, the public sector, higher education and professional services.