

Milestones to Efficiency

Factors that Influence Program Management Success in U.S. Federal Agencies

OVERVIEW

Government agencies must implement rigorous project and program capabilities to successfully deliver their initiatives. Yet PMI's 2014 *Pulse of the Profession: The High Cost of Low Performance* reveals that only 52 percent of government strategic initiatives meet their original goals and business intent. And just over a third of government agencies report that they fully understand the value of project management. While that should be cause for alarm, there are government agencies that execute project and program management with notable results. This document provides a summary of three such programs.

In 2013, PMI® research revealed that government organizations risk US\$148 million for every US\$1 billion dollars spent.¹

Project and Program Management in Government Leads to Greater Success Rates

Although formalized project and program management practices have yet to be embraced with equal rigor across all government entities, data reveal that implementing *Organizational Project Management (OPM)* leads to higher rates of project and program success. To identify the success factors that will serve to inform other government entities, and ideally lead to greater adoption of OPM, PMI initiated three case studies to illustrate what successful OPM looks like in government.

These case studies explore program management within the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). This report summarizes the high-level findings and common themes that emerge from these studies, with implications for greater adoption of OPM practices to improve project and program management across government agencies.

¹ PMI's 2013 *Pulse of the Profession™: The High Cost of Low Performance*

SUCCESS FACTORS

Each of the case studies examines a different aspect of program management within government:

- **The SSA:** the value of a career development program to develop highly skilled, trained and qualified program managers
- **The BIA:** the successful implementation of project management in a program to reduce violent crime, and
- **The FAA:** a solid project/program management foundation to provide the necessary experience and skills to streamline the creation and implementation of new air-safety technology.

These case studies illustrate the value of OPM to realize program benefits across disparate programs and government agencies. Each also illustrates how OPM aligns organizational goals. And, while on the surface, these case studies appear to have little in common, they share certain project and program management attributes that led to success for each. These attributes include:

Strong Leadership Capabilities

In all three programs, the program manager was hands-on and involved at every level of the operation, but especially at the implementation level. His focus on the benefits kept the program on track.³ He understood the importance of educating others, even mentoring where possible. He kept in constant contact, monitoring progress (or hurdles) closely, and followed up regularly with his colleagues. He also served to provide coordination between the various stakeholders and other parties and often had the clout to get others to listen. In some cases, he was also quite vocal about

PMI's OPM framework provides specific knowledge activities... which an agency can build upon and custom fit to its needs.²

individual successes, serving to increase camaraderie and self-confidence within the team. And, lastly, he "had their backs," and proved to be a strong supporter and believer in the program.

"The lead program manager... provided his internal workforce, as well as external partners and stakeholders, with a clear roadmap that would not accept anything short of success."

[Transforming Air Traffic within the US National Airspace System. P. 9]

Commitment to OPM

Each of the leaders, as well as many of the individuals, assigned to the programs had project or program management experience, and many had formalized training with certification. They understood the value of a standardized organization, or situation-specific, approach to project and program management, including the value of formalizing principles and practices. For the SSA, the commitment was institutionalized through various guidelines, regulations and generally accepted practices.

² Using PMI Standards Framework to Improve U.S. Federal Government Capital Investment Outcomes. John D. Driessnack, Olde Stone Consulting, LLC. Pg. 18.

³ In all three (3) case studies the program/project leader was male.

In the BIA program, the commitment and expertise was brought in from another agency in the form of a lead project manager. The practices he introduced to the program proved so successful on the day-to-day workings of the department that they remained in use after completion of the program.

Executive and Senior Level Support

Executive and senior level support brought continued investment in training — essentially guaranteeing that training remains a priority through the project/program. When needed, executive leaders also leverage their influence to call on agency heads or local leaders for cooperation that someone of lower title may be unable to secure. Meanwhile, this level of support conveyed a strong sign of commitment to lower echelons, the ranks of which were more likely to express buy-in for the project/program. Senior management support could be essential in granting time off for formal training and classwork.

Effective Training Programs, Ongoing Coursework and Certifications

Training, coupled with experience, leads to a clearer understanding of project and program management. In one case, the training focused on certification in program management (SSA). For the team involved in the BIA program to lower violent crime rates, Indian Country police officers received sensitivity training. This training familiarized them with Indian cultures and customs, helping officers to avoid cultural missteps. This in turn helped promote acceptance of the program.

Transparent and Effective Communication

A commitment to regular, effective communication proved essential to the success of the three programs. Communications included weekly meetings, or calls, and site visits as well as less formal, impromptu meetings.

“Program Management has been institutionalized for decades. It’s just becoming more formalized, forcing people to follow [guidelines], be more diligent about doing everything you’re supposed to do.”⁴

“A critical factor in whether an initiative succeeds or fails is the executive sponsor — and his or her level of engagement. More than 90 percent of respondents in an IBM survey cited ‘top management sponsorship’ as the factor that makes change successful.”⁵

⁴ Program Management Development Practices within the Office of Systems, Social Security Administration. P. 5.

⁵ IBM: Making Change Work. 2008

Because transparent communication builds trust, problems could be pre-empted or their existence signaled in sufficient time to reduce the likelihood of escalation. Regular communication to all stakeholders — including business developers, project sponsors, and executive level administrators — promoted understanding and cooperation, increasing the likelihood of program success.

Teambuilding and Stakeholder Engagement

Although discussed in part in the communications section, team and stakeholder engagement from the planning stage leads to a sense of ownership, a shared sense of responsibility, and a vested interest in program success. Other benefits include an increased understanding and respect among parties, which helps avoid resistance and misunderstanding that can lead to delays.

“56 percent of unsuccessful projects fail to meet their goals due to ineffective communications.”⁶

Communications are impacted when different stakeholder groups use different jargon and language. This communications issue can also lead to different expectations for a project, which ends up impacting the bottom line.⁷

⁶ PMI's Pulse of the Profession® In-Depth Report *Executive Sponsor Engagement. Top Driver of Project and Program Success*. P. 9.

⁷ PMI's Pulse of the Profession® In-Depth Report *The High Cost of Low Performance: The Essential Role of Communications*. P. 2.

COMMON OBSTACLES

While the majority of obstacles that threatened success were specific to each context and could not be broadly applied, two threats that emerged were the challenge of limited funding and a lack of understanding on the part of some to the value of project and program management.

Hiring of additional staff in the BIA case, for example, would likely have resulted in even lower violent crime rates but also a larger capacity to educate officers about Indian culture and affairs — ultimately increasing acceptance of the program within the communities involved.

Limited funding

Even with executive level support, agencies have a finite amount of funds to disburse across a portfolio of projects and programs. This impacts head count as well as program success. For example, as senior program managers retire, a lack of funding for their replacement threatens the growth of project and program management to increase the efficiency of federal projects.

Lack of familiarity with project and program management leads to resistance. Some less familiar with project/program management resist working with a project or program manager, as they fail to recognize the value of that experience and training. Fortunately, education and exposure to program management success increases acceptance, hence the importance of raising awareness of each success.

“If you don’t have officers on the street, you are never going to make an impact because you are never going to do progressive law enforcement. You’re being reactive not proactive.”⁸

“While all strategic change happens through projects and programs, there is a misconception among lawmakers and government agency executives that strategy and projects are not linked. Some have a mind-set that strategy is done at the higher levels, while projects are something separate that belong to another part of the organization, and project management is a technical competency.”

– Mark A. Langley,
President and CEO,
Project Management
Institute

⁸ A Case of Project/Program Management Success with the Office of Justice Services, Bureau of Indian Affairs. P. 5.

LESSONS LEARNED

Because other agencies may not feel lessons from one specific project or program are particularly germane, the goal is to find common denominators — lessons that can be understood and applied regardless of objectives or context.

An outstanding example of this is the Program Manager Community of Practice (PMCOP) developed by managers in the Social Security Administration to share lessons learned more broadly. Other managers talk about less formal methods, such as mentoring outside agencies.

In the case of the BIA, although relevant statistics had never before been reported in a uniform manner, the project established a baseline understanding for reporting, records and definitions. Ultimately, this resulted in a Best Practices Handbook to instruct other reservations on the application of fundamental project and program management principles.

LESSONS LEARNED BY AGENCY

- **SSA:** Project and program career development benefit the entire organization.
- **BIA:** Project and program management practices can be implemented to fight crime and promote better understanding between police and the community, thus creating efficiency and lowering the violent crime rate.
- **FAA:** Greater reliance on standardization of processes transforms program management at the FAA.

Beijing | Bengaluru | Brussels | Buenos Aires | Dubai | Lelystad | Mumbai | New Delhi
Philadelphia | Porto Alegre | Rio de Janeiro | Shenzhen | Singapore | Washington, DC

PMI.org

Project Management Institute
Global Operations Center
14 Campus Blvd
Newtown Square, PA 19073-3299 USA
Tel: +1 610 356 4600

©2015 Project Management Institute. All rights reserved. "PMI", the PMI logo
and "Making project management indispensable for business results"
are marks of Project Management Institute, Inc.



*Making project management
indispensable for business results.®*