

Tomato, TAMAHTO:

Different Definitions for Program Management Success

by Jim Foreman

Summary: All the differing dynamics in program management make for a very challenging consistent recipe to follow.

Defining the term “program” is like defining what makes a gourmet meal - it can vary according to the context, flavor and individual. While many use the term, not all use it in the same way. Often times, the management of programs describes large business efforts that have limited duration and defined sets of deliverables. In some cases, a program refers to an ongoing set of activities internal to the organization. In *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, the Project Management Institute (PMI) defines a program as “...a group of projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits not available from managing them individually.” This broad definition allows the inclusion of a wide variety of endeavors from different industries, including the government, under its umbrella.

Based on this fundamental, what makes a program? Many have broadly stated goals that are achieved by the completion of a number of related projects, which, in many cases, create separate and distinct end products themselves whose cumulative successes define the overall program's success. However, some large programs are simply focused on single end items. A number of programs are quite open ended, with loosely defined end points, while others have much more specific goals. A number are very specific roadmaps, such as the evolution of a family of computer processor chips, while others are more evolutionary, evolving from the success of early projects, such as a family of cleaning products. Many, if not most, programs have common characteristics, such as long duration, complexity, large budgets and expansive stakeholder communities. As you can see, all these differing dynamics in program management make for a very challenging consistent recipe to follow.

Going to the Cookbook: Program Management Definitions

In developing the Program Management Professional (PgMPSM) credential, PMI has begun to define a common frame of reference for organizations and professionals to use as a basis for validating and improving their specific approach to program management.

The PMI definition of program management identifies three key

process areas of *benefits management*, *stakeholder management* and *program governance* as essential areas of concentration for overall program management success. Handling these three process areas successfully over the life of a long-duration program can be and often is a significant challenge for program managers. These challenges are typical because the very bases upon which the program is originally defined often shift and slide as the context evolves. Additionally, the cast of stakeholders may not remain constant. Confronting these challenges requires careful attention to the following:

- When considering **benefits management**, program managers should bear in mind the conditions that justified the start of a program may not be applicable for the entire expected life of the program. Therefore, the program manager must work in close harmony with the business sponsors and stakeholders to continually validate the business case and potentially adjust the program to deliver an evolved set of benefits as the conditions change.
- Because the stakeholder community may evolve during long-duration programs, it is essential for the health of the program that an active **stakeholder management** program be designed and carried out for the full program life cycle. The stakeholder management program must identify the community of stakeholders, understand their roles and power and devise an effective communication strategy that takes into account needed information flow, periodicity and medium. Equally important is the consideration of who will deliver the program status information.
- Finally, the subset of stakeholders who have the authority for **program governance** and guidance directly must be identified, and the mechanisms for program control, evaluation and adjustment must be defined at the start and then maintained appropriately for the life of the program.

Other components of program management definitions consider how the program itself is born and the duration of its lifecycle. As is the instance for projects, programs are generally created and justified on the basis of a business case that looks at outlay as opposed to benefit. In many

instances, alternative investments are considered before a program is finally commissioned (chartered). Frequently, the program will find its place within a portfolio of other programs and projects. While some programs progress in a predictable lifecycle that bears a noticeable family resemblance to various project lifecycles, other programs can take on a more iterative nature and may resemble more of an IT iterative development cycle than a single-build cycle. The time component of a program must be clearly understood at all levels within its management.

Menu Ingredients:

Components to Effective Program Management

Successful program managers have a strong understanding of project management, with projects acting as the ingredients, or building blocks of the program. But program management success depends on at least two additional categories of competence. The first category includes understanding the significantly more macro view that is needed to run a program; one that includes the ability to appropriately execute the critical first steps of a program launch. These steps largely fall under the heading of *hard skills*, those skills that are quantitative and whose outputs are directly observable and measurable. To measure the critical ingredients that make up these hard skills, one must:

- **Define a clear business case** and identify the decision-making stakeholders whose initial and ongoing approval is necessary for commissioning and continuation.
- **Understand and manage the expectations of all key stakeholders** from the outset. In many cases, key stakeholders can be blockers even though they may not be approvers.
- **Define organizational structure** for program planning, implementation and monitoring and control to include all key stakeholders.
- **Develop a clear understanding of all resource requirements**, both initial and ongoing. The program manager should pay particular attention to demands on scarce shared resources and anticipate new capabilities not currently present, implying potential contracting or recruiting and training.
- **Investigate the lessons learned** from previous programs to help develop a comprehensive approach to risk management. At the conclusion of the program, any insights gleaned should be added to an official "lessons learned" archive.
- **Establish an effective ongoing program evaluation structure** to ensure that 1) the expected program benefits are in fact being obtained; and 2) to determine as necessary whether the base conditions have changed to such a degree that continued program activity cannot be justified, in which event program termination plans must be implemented.

The second additional category of competence is in the area sometimes referred to as *soft skills* or personal characteristics, those skills which are less quantitative and more people-centric. Knowledge, talent and ability in these areas can and should be developed and nurtured to ensure maximum effectiveness as a program manager. Invariably, the story of a successful program will sooner or later address the personal abilities of the program manager. Key characteristics that have been identified as common to such successes include:

- **Leadership.** The explicit ability to establish and communicate effectively the vision for a program. A program manager must inspire and motivate core team members, other direct contributors and the stakeholder community-at-large.
- **Achievement orientation.** A personal commitment to success. A program manager must demonstrate a never-quit attitude and a willingness to do whatever it takes to make the program a success.
- **Problem-solving ability.** The ability to understand complex problems.

A program manager must dissect them into workable components and then enlist the appropriate resources to effect appropriate solutions.

- **Influencing capability.** The organizational and political savvy to understand how to get things done. Sometimes, a program manager must persuade decision-makers with the appropriate logic and clearly present information at the appropriate levels.

The Proof is in the Pudding:

Examples of Differing Program Management Definitions

Recipe definitions and ingredient components aside, when stirring up an actual program, how do these program management elements actually cook in a real-world oven? When examined more closely, there are significant differences in the operational reality for programs in different industries.

For example, in the public sector, the U.S. Department of Defense uses the term program when referring to various major activities, including the creation a new fighter plane. This type of program operates within a lifecycle measured in decades and has as its goal the development, fielding and support of a single product - the airplane (notwithstanding the immense amount of associated training, logistical support and specialized equipment associated with the new plane). Achievement of the program goal in this circumstance cannot be accomplished without the coordination and completion of a multitude, possibly thousands, of individual projects, but the program has a single end-product as its primary measure of success.

Contrast this with another government example, that of a state road maintenance and improvement program. In such a program, also lasting many years, success is measured not by the completion of a single road, but by the sum total of the collective projects over a period of time. In such a program, individual road improvement projects may be on or off the agenda, reflecting the changing function of priorities, funding, stakeholder pressure or other factors.

Now, compare the above examples with a more specifically roadmapped program in the private sector, such as the evolution of a chip series. In this scenario, the program produces a series of chips (such as might be done by Intel, AMD or other chip manufacturers) with different speed being the key characteristic of each new product in the family. In this kind of a program, a pre-planned succession of projects to create the various products will typically be defined at the outset of the program, and sharing of specialized resources among the projects might be a particular challenge.

In each of these examples, with diverse definitions of a program, success requires the application of a common set of advanced personal skills.

The Finished Dish

When consuming the final product, program management success looks to all the variables and components described in this proven and preferred recipe. We have found that in order to be successful as program managers, individuals need skill development beyond that typically provided to project managers. Program management is akin to line management, and as such, skill development encompassing business and financial acumen, high caliber interpersonal communications, critical thinking and problem solving, effective leadership, and the management of business change is highly appropriate and extremely necessary. Good program managers can be grown if a careful program of professional development is designed and implemented. And when all is said and done, although tastebuds may be different, there is no arguing the success of a program managed and measured by these defining standards.

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