

Bridging the PM Performance Gap

Owen Gadeken



Ever wonder why so many program managers do everything they can to succeed but still fail? (As in, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”) One of the major challenges in program management is how much control PMs really have over their programs.

Defense acquisition policy dictates that a PM’s authority, responsibility, and accountability should be spelled out in a formally coordinated and signed charter—now called a program management agreement. The charter also outlines the resources the PM will have at his or her disposal to successfully complete the program. At least, that’s what the policy says.

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Most of us who have actually been PMs see a somewhat different picture. Yes, the charter provides direction, authority, and resources; but the balance is a little off. In most, if not all, cases, the direction and responsibility (what you need to do) exceed the authority and resources (what you have to do it with), giving rise to what I call the **gap**. This is illustrated in Figure 1, "The PM Performance Gap."

So why would a PM sign a charter that has such a mismatch of requirements versus resources? That is a very good question, and it will take more than this article to provide a full answer. But I will share some observations in the next few paragraphs, and then provide some potential solutions that can help PMs overcome the performance gap.

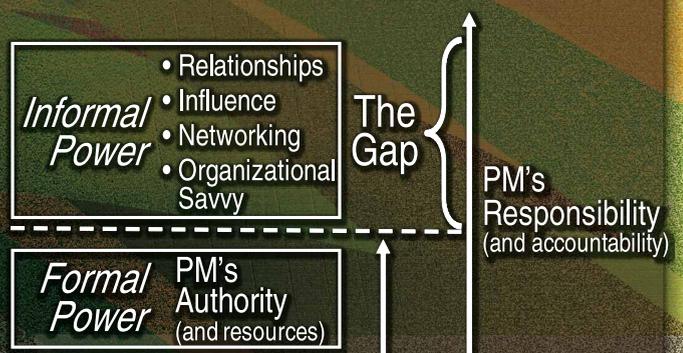


Figure 1. **The PM Performance Gap**

Facing Reality

One of the hallmarks of the military culture is the "can-do" attitude. PMs are inherently optimistic and are somehow led to believe that they can do the impossible, thinking it just takes a little longer to do it. Having

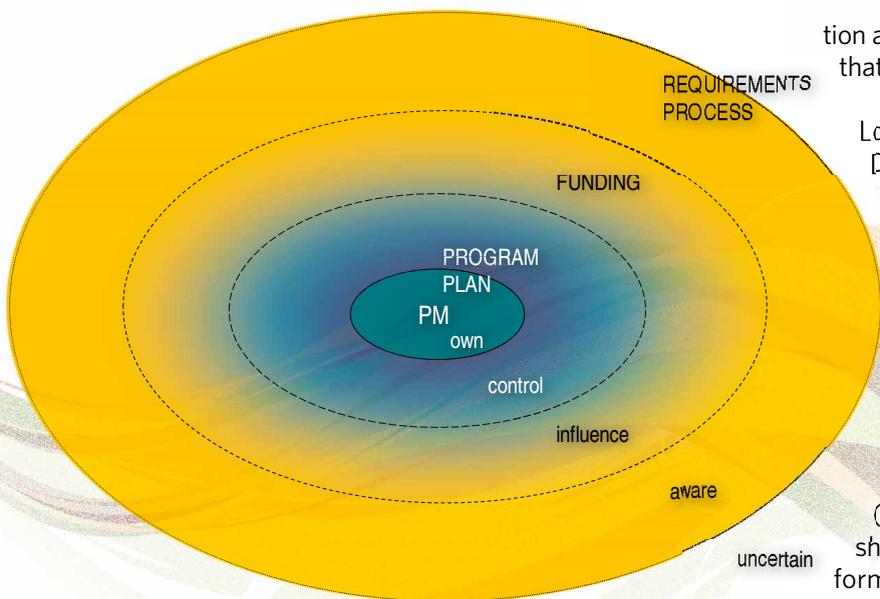


Figure 2. **The PM Span of Control**

a positive attitude is a key attribute for PMs and their teams, but when this attitude begins to depart from reality, then you may be in trouble.

When it comes to early program planning (scope definition), all the cards are stacked in the direction of minimization. The user already needs the system, so you just need to put a basic plan together, then refine and redirect as you go along—“ready, fire, aim.” Budget and senior management pressures also push heavily in this direction, as the smaller the scope and cost, the more likely the program is to be approved. And even the best plans are going to change. Many of those changes will be externally imposed, with the PM’s only option being to comply or adapt. That’s just part of today’s operating environment.

So in my experience, the combination of overestimating your and your team’s abilities (optimism), underestimating the full scope of the program (minimization), and the inevitability of change, make the requirements versus resources mismatch a reality on most programs. While we could work on reducing the trends of personal optimization, program minimization, and external change, I choose to leave this task for other authors. I view the process of changing trends as a long-term and possibly unproductive process. In this article, I provide ways to attack the gap using a near-term, pragmatic approach.

A Few Definitions

Before I provide some ways to overcome the gap, let’s establish a few definitions. According to Webster’s Dictionary, authority is defined as a “legal or rightful power; a right to command or act; power exercised by a person by virtue of his office or trust.” In the acquisition world, authority is the formal power bestowed on the PM based on his or her posi-

tion and charter. It is what the organization gives you that allows you to do your job.

Looking at the other side of the gap, Webster’s Dictionary defines responsibility as “the state of being responsible, accountable, or answerable, as for a trust, debt, or obligation.” In Webster’s, accountability and responsibility are synonyms. In the acquisition world, the PM fits the “buck stops here” definition, as the PM is the person answerable for program performance, cost, and schedule outcomes.

Facing the challenging goals that exist on most programs, PMs are caught in the requirements (responsibility) versus resources (authority) gap shown in Figure 1. Dedicated PMs can use all their formal authority and assigned resources, yet still come up far short of achieving their assigned goals. That’s because the bar is set too high for them to succeed without extra help.

What we’re really talking about here is a power mismatch. Going back to Webster’s again, power is defined as the “ability to act; the capacity for action or performance.” In simple terms, power is about getting something done and being able to achieve a result or outcome. Just as it takes a certain amount of mechanical power to run a machine, one could also say that it takes a certain level of human power to successfully run an acquisition program.

Personal power is a fascinating and complex topic. I will simplify it by dividing it into two categories: formal and informal power. We have already discussed formal power, and defined it as the authority and resources assigned to the PM by the organization. On the other hand, informal power can be thought of as the ability to get something done without formal authority and assigned resources. What that really means is that you are using other people’s authority and resources to help do your work and execute your program.

Interpersonal Relationships

The real basis of informal power is relationships with people. Effectively using this source of power requires an investment of time to build and maintain your relationships. Every acquisition program includes large numbers of stakeholders who are not directly involved in day-to-day program activities but nonetheless can have an impact on program success at key points in the program’s life cycle. Some examples are the requirements, budget, and test communities in your command or agency. Their support is often critical to moving a program forward, so effective PMs take time to develop relationships in all of those communities. Those relationships are more than just contacts. The best relationships are both personal and professional. And there is reciprocity in each relationship; a balance between giving and taking. Relationships that are all one way—either giving or taking—

won't last long enough or be strong enough to benefit either party in the long run. Developing relationships isn't something PMs should do *if* they have the time. It is something they *must* take time to do. It is a top priority.

One civilian PM I interviewed told a story of how he had to order his military deputy to walk out on the floor and get to know the people working in the program office. The deputy thought it would be a waste of time to have too many personal conversations with members of the program team. In a later meeting with the PM, the deputy was shocked at how much he learned in those supposedly idle conversations.

At the heart of any relationship is the ability to influence the other person to gain support for your program. The type of support will vary depending on the person and the circumstances. Such support could lead to additional people or funding, more collaborative work, a favorable decision, or even a situation in which someone refrains from taking action that could damage the program. Influence strategies are many and varied, from clearly stated requests for support with documentation to subtle cajoling or even threats. Influence is far more art than science, and such skills are developed from actual experience; from seeing what works and what doesn't.

I once had a project I was trying to get funded but was having trouble working my way up through our chain of command to present my proposal. Finally it hit me that I didn't have to be the one to sell my proposal. I arranged for a senior-level leader to brief the organization on the topic of my proposal and made sure the head of my organization was invited. The briefing was a huge success, and my organization head asked what we could do to follow up. I sent in my proposal, and it was funded immediately. My successful influence strategy was to ride the coattails of the senior leader's credibility.

Degree of Influence

Another important concept is the degree of influence that PMs have over different parts of their programs. This influence can vary considerably, as illustrated in Figure 2, "The PM Span of Control," which depicts the degree of influence as a set of concentric circles. The PM's influence spans a spectrum from total ownership to uncertainty. Using the example of an information systems program (from a recent case study I taught), the program plan was something the PM owned and controlled. The PM was able to influence the funding profile, but the requirements process for that particular program was managed by a technical standards body outside of the DoD. As a result, the PM had no control or influence on the requirements process, and the lack of responsiveness from

the technical standards body was putting the program's future in serious jeopardy.

If you use the diagram as a frame reference in this case, you can see that the PM had two choices. He or she could change the nature of the requirements process, moving it toward the center of the diagram where the PM would have greater influence. Or the PM could attempt to expand his or her circle of influence outward to reach the requirements process area on the diagram. Given the nature of the requirements process in this case (which was external to DoD and had many stakeholders), the PM would be much more likely to be successful in expanding his or her personal influence strategy to reach the existing requirement process. Lacking such an ability, the PM's likelihood of success on the program would predictably be very low.

The diagram in Figure 2 can be a useful tool for PMs to chart their influence strategy with respect to key program events and processes. The placement of events on the diagram would vary based on the unique circumstances related to each program.

Networking

Another informal power base can be built through networking with groups of stakeholders. Personal networks can offer a multiplier effect over individual relationships and influence strategies. Every PM needs to analyze and understand the value of personal networks.

The first network available to the PM is his or her program office. If that network is not well-connected, then some team building and goal alignment work needs to be done, with strong leadership from the PM. Moving outside the program office, the network opportunities are almost endless. They can include groups of PMs working on related programs (system of systems), functional networks (engineers, logisticians, testers, contracting officers, etc.), former programs the PM has worked upon, past organizational colleagues, and professional and industry associations. Careful attention needs to be paid to time spent nurturing each network based on that network's value.

Organization Savvy

The final informal power base that every PM should seek to use is organization savvy—in other words, "street smarts" applied in an organizational context. After working in an organization for even a few months, the savvy PM can quickly determine which processes work and which require workarounds; which rules are important and which are routinely broken or skirted; and most important, which people are movers and shakers and which are only figureheads. It may surprise you to know that

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sometimes the movers and shakers aren't even in key positions in the organizational hierarchy. In my experiences with PMs, I have found that organizational savvy is indispensable to PM success due to the inherent complexity of the DoD acquisition environment and related factors such as the vast number of stakeholders, cumbersome hierarchy, volumes

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of policies and procedures, and large number of programs competing for funding.

Applying social network theory in an organizational context, UCLA researcher Karen Stephenson has developed a survey approach and software tool called NetForm that can analyze and chart the informal networks in any organization. Using that tool, one can quickly identify which people are most vital to the organization and what social functions (hub, gatekeeper, pulse taker) they perform. Information like this could be of immense value to any PM.

The Path Forward

PMs face a predictable gap in their ability to control and achieve program results. The gap can be thought of as the difference between what PMs are responsible for and the formal authority and resources they are given.

Looking beyond their formal role, PMs have several informal strategies they can employ: relationships, influence, networking, and organizational savvy. These are tools or skills that can readily be developed and used with great success.

The key to the PM control dilemma is for PMs to understand the system they are in—including its flaws—and develop strategies that work within that system. PMs must understand and use both their formal and informal power bases to fully bridge the gap to successful performance and program results.

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redeployed. They also will not have to spend two weeks trying to reestablish e-mail contact. Trust me, with six-month rotations, gaining and maintaining contact is paramount for contingency contracting success, and it's a nightmare for vendors and the contingency contracting command when communication lines are broken.

You may advocate establishing a pseudo e-mail or "distribution" e-mail account that allows for e-mail to be sent to KO1@iraq.mil and then automatically be forwarded to john.doe@iraq.mil. The problem with that format is that John Doe will build his file folders and organize his own PST files under his own account. When he departs, his successor will have to start from ground zero and have only a PST file as a historical reference. Another concern with that approach is that as soon as John Doe replies to the inquiry forwarded from the KO1@iraq.mil e-mail account, the value of the functional e-mail address is lost. That's because most users invariably hit "reply," and the default e-mail address that loads into the message for the reply will be the name-specific john.doe@iraq.mil.

Yes, the contracting officer is going to get saturated by local nationals' e-mails once they get the duty-specific e-mail address. But that is no different from the situation in the United States when vendors reach out to get the contracting officer's attention once they get his e-mail address. Just copy and paste a form letter and refer the vendor inquiry to the Web page that hosts all solicitations and educates the local national on the contracting process or the local host national business adviser. And remember, you could have that junior contracting officer or PM share those tasks. If we stop getting e-mails from local vendors, then we have real problems.

An additional benefit of duty-specific e-mail addresses is operational security. How long do you think it takes before the local vendor population starts using the Army Knowledge Online or Defense Knowledge Online e-mail format once they have your name? The local vendors quickly learn that the address protocol is `firstname.lastname@us.army.mil`.

Failure is Not an Option

Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom are not the first, and they certainly won't be the last, to have contracting challenges. I've learned much from many different people during my experiences. This article merely present one man's opinions, and it provides a few rules of thumb and a path ahead.

Lastly, remember this: Chuck Norris never fights, he just contracts for private security. Those who have been down range will get this one. Those who don't get it, come on down; we're hiring. Keep moving forward; failure is not an option.

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