

# Developing Future Program Leaders: Part II

Timothy S. Kroecker

**P**art I explained that organizations need to capture the expertise of an aging, highly skilled workforce and to develop the next generation of program leaders; it explained the importance and reasons from an organizational and an employee perspective in terms of increased efficiency and individual engagement. Part I introduced a process to follow to understand the requirements of the program manager role; and it defined competencies, a key to understanding any role as well as any development effort. Part II addresses the challenges faced when defining program management, and details the process for creating a complete understanding of the program manager using a “success profile” structure with the required competencies.

## Challenges in Defining Program Management

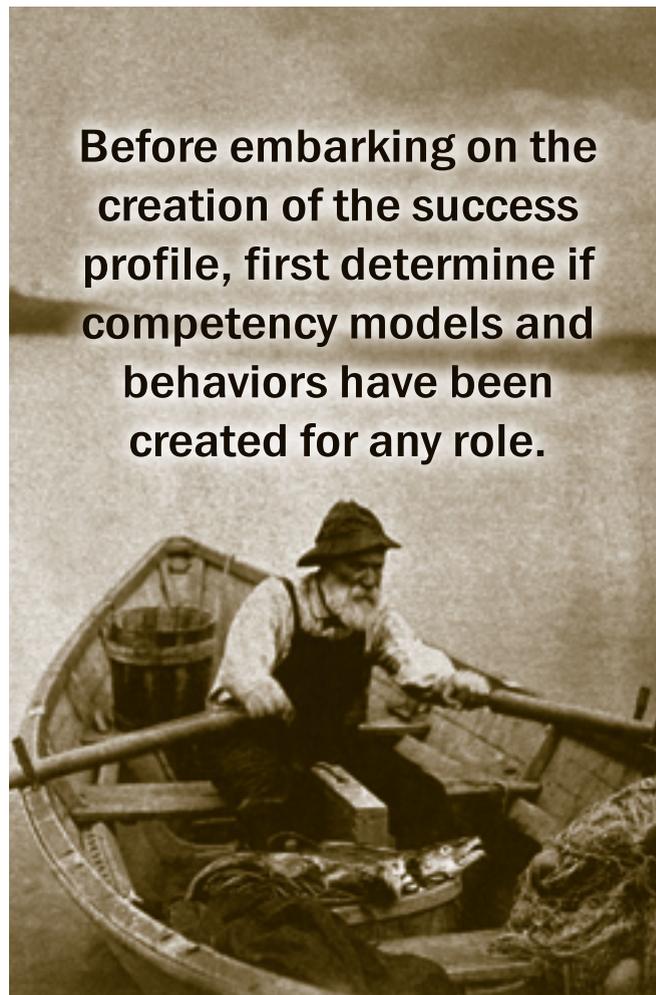
The following three challenges frequently occur when trying to understand the program manager role and competencies.

### Is it Project or Program Management?

The first challenge is to understand whether the success profile is for a project or a program manager or both. Does the organization have a clear distinction between project and program management? Many organizations do not put the necessary time and effort into clearly distinguishing between the two. In such instances, there is often a hodge-podge of titles and grade levels, so in one location or function, program managers have lower grade levels and work on smaller, more discrete initiatives than project managers in the same organization in other locations and functions. It’s important to have a clear concept in mind about the role in question when beginning the competency modeling process and to find those individuals who most closely align with that concept, rather than trying to work through titles, grade levels, or other potentially misleading information.

### Is There Organizational Function or Industry Specificity?

A second challenge is determining if the success profile and competencies (most especially, the practices) are the same across the variety of programs within the organi-



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zation. If the organization is fairly large and services a variety of industries, the responsibilities, tasks, and challenges may vary by the industry or function. If they vary, it is also possible that the competencies required for successful performance will vary. For example, how Earned Value is calculated may differ in the government sector versus private industry. As an example of an organizational functional distinction, information technology practices for program manager competencies may be intertwined with ISO 9000 processes [*ISO 9000 is a group of International Organization for Standardization standards for quality management systems*]; whereas human resources practices for program manager competencies

*Kroecker develops programs for the assessment and promotion of project managers to program managers in a variety of organizations and has a doctorate in industrial/organizational psychology.*

may be more influenced by Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines. In instances where competencies vary significantly, it will be necessary to capture the distinctions and make it clear as to when the competency (or practice) is and isn't appropriate.

### Is There an Existing Organizational or Leadership Competency Model?

Before embarking on the creation of the success profile, first determine if competency models and behaviors have been created for any role, but most especially for executive leadership roles within the organization. If so, these existing competency models are a significant resource to call on in the development of a program manager model. In addition, these other competency models can be used to create overlap to allow for a potential career path from the program manager role to senior executive or other roles within the organization.

### Creating the Program Manager Success Profile

The following are the steps for creating a Program Manager Success Profile with competencies.

#### Interview Senior Leaders and Stakeholders about Business Strategy

The first step in creating a success profile with competencies is to interview senior leaders and key stakeholders (who may include key customers). These interviews accomplish several things. One is achieving a perspective on the three-year organization strategy and understanding the program manager's role in the achievement of that strategy (e.g., he or she may play a key role in achievement of profit levels, strategic customer accounts, or the creation of new products or services). Another benefit is gaining an understanding of the stakeholders' perspective on the most important responsibilities and competencies of program managers to use as a draft outline of the job itself. Such an outline will also serve as a way of determining if senior leaders and program managers have the same ideas of what is important about the job. The third—and perhaps most important thing gained by interviewing senior leaders and stakeholders—is getting

Responsibilities	Challenges	Functional Competencies	Professional Competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply understanding of customer business</li> <li>• Build customer relationships</li> <li>• Communicate with team</li> <li>• Educate customer</li> <li>• Identify opportunities for improvement</li> <li>• Manage PLC process</li> <li>• Manage resources</li> <li>• Schedule and track projects</li> <li>• Translate customer objectives to strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving delivery to internal/external customers</li> <li>• Attracting, recruiting, and retaining good people for the program</li> <li>• Developing people (technically and non-technically)</li> <li>• Improving productivity (i.e., doing more with less)</li> <li>• Communicating across organizational boundaries</li> <li>• Managing a geographically dispersed workforce</li> <li>• Managing performance problems</li> <li>• Leading and managing change</li> <li>• Setting program and personal priorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earned Value Management</li> <li>• PM innovation</li> <li>• Risk assessment mitigation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analytical thinking</li> <li>• Business acumen</li> <li>• Communication skills</li> <li>• Customer focus</li> <li>• Decisiveness</li> <li>• Drive for results</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> </ul>

FIGURE 1. Sample Program Manager Success Profile

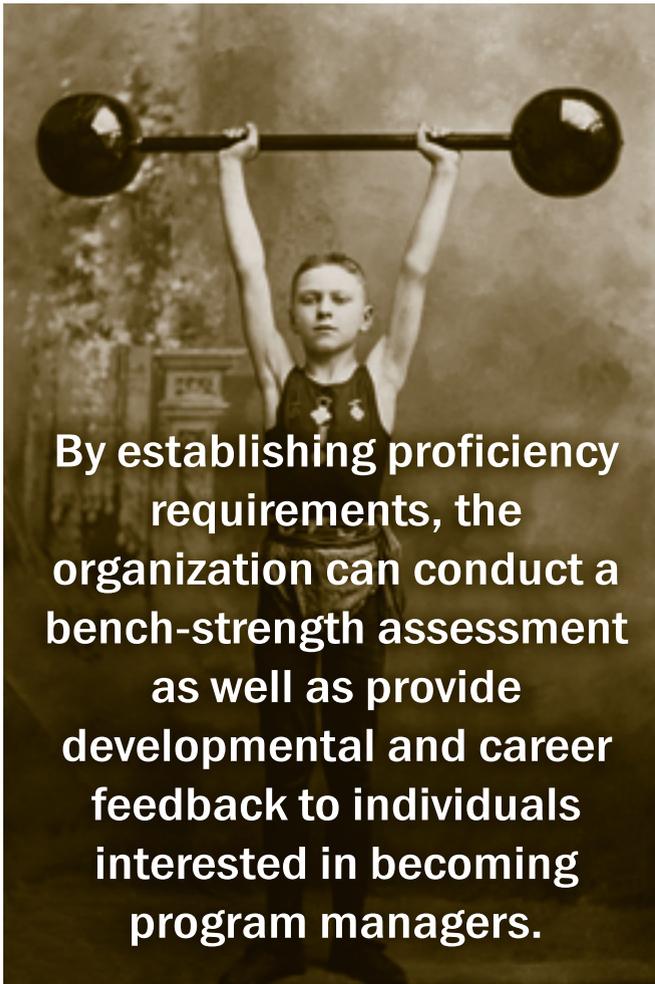
their support and buy-in to the success profile with competencies and to any resulting development programs. Few major initiatives within an organization are successful and survive without senior leadership input, support, and championship.

#### Identify High-performing Program Managers

The conversations with senior leaders and stakeholders are also used to identify high-performing program managers. These people will be the best of the best, the men and women you would want to have every program manager emulate. These stars may have varying styles, but they are the ones who are sought after to lead the most important and challenging programs and initiatives. In order to create a draft list of program managers to interview, try to combine the nominations from these interviews with information from performance ratings or human resources information systems. It is important to strike a balance between the nomination process and the use of human resources information systems and/or performance rating databases. If only the nominations are used, the resulting number of interviews may be too few. If only performance ratings or human resources information systems are used, it may serve up more individuals than would be useful.

#### Conduct Interviews with High-performing Program Managers

Once a pool of high-performing program managers has been identified, the next step is to conduct a standard-



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ized, structured interview with each of them. Each program manager is asked to provide a description of his or her key responsibilities and tasks, describe the major difficulties or challenges of the job, provide an idea of what competencies or skills contribute to success, and offer any insight into what sorts of development experiences helped him or her to develop needed skills.

A critical component of the interview is the key event or “war story” section. This involves asking the program manager to describe an event, project, program, or incident where he or she was either particularly challenged or where there were significant chances of failure, but he or she managed to turn the situation around. Using the story to ground the program managers in real situations allows for the capture of concrete examples of exactly what people said, did, and thought. That information can then be used to teach others how to best respond to, or avoid, similar situations.

### **Analyze Leader and Program Manager Interview Information**

Analyzing the leader and program manager interviews requires that patterns, themes, or categories be identified and written up at a high

enough level that they would be applicable and meaningful to all of the individuals in the role of program manager. Differences by geography, grade, or organizational level, functions, or other key demographics are also noted so that the competencies and success profiles can be customized where it is essential to do so. Compare what the senior leaders and program managers say about the jobs to make sure that similarities are acknowledged and significant differences are addressed.

### **Draft Success Profile and Competencies**

Once the data are analyzed and summarized, a draft Program Manager Success Profile with competencies can be created. The success profile is a one-page document that highlights the key responsibilities, challenges, and competencies for the program manager role (Figure 1 on the previous page). The competencies should be the most important and include behaviors that describe successful performance in the role: for example, analytical thinking; business acumen; communication skills; customer focus; decisiveness; drive for results; flexibility; innovative problem-solving; interpersonal astuteness; planning and organizing; self-confidence; skillful influence; strategic thinking; team building and leadership; vision and direction. Figure 2 gives an example definition of a competency and the behaviors associated with it.

### **Validate the Success Profile**

Once drafts of the competencies and success profile have been created, it is necessary to validate them with a larger group to ensure that they are well-defined and appropriate for the role. The validation process ensures that all of the key responsibilities, challenges, and competencies are identified and meaningful to the greatest majority of individuals in the role of the program manager. It ensures the success profile is clearly related to successful performance in the program manager role, and it enables use of the success profile as a training and development tool.

The validation process can use one or several methodologies. If the organization is relatively small, it is best to

**Vision and Direction . . .**

**Creates a clear view of the future that mobilizes people to focus efforts and work toward key goals on the program.**

- Communicates a clear and compelling vision for the program
- Provides clear goals and expected results to program team members and challenges them to determine how best to accomplish them
- Communicates positive expectations that challenging program goals can be accomplished
- Keeps team members focused on program vision and goals as they deal with problems, obstacles, or changes

**FIGURE 2. Sample Program Manager Competency**

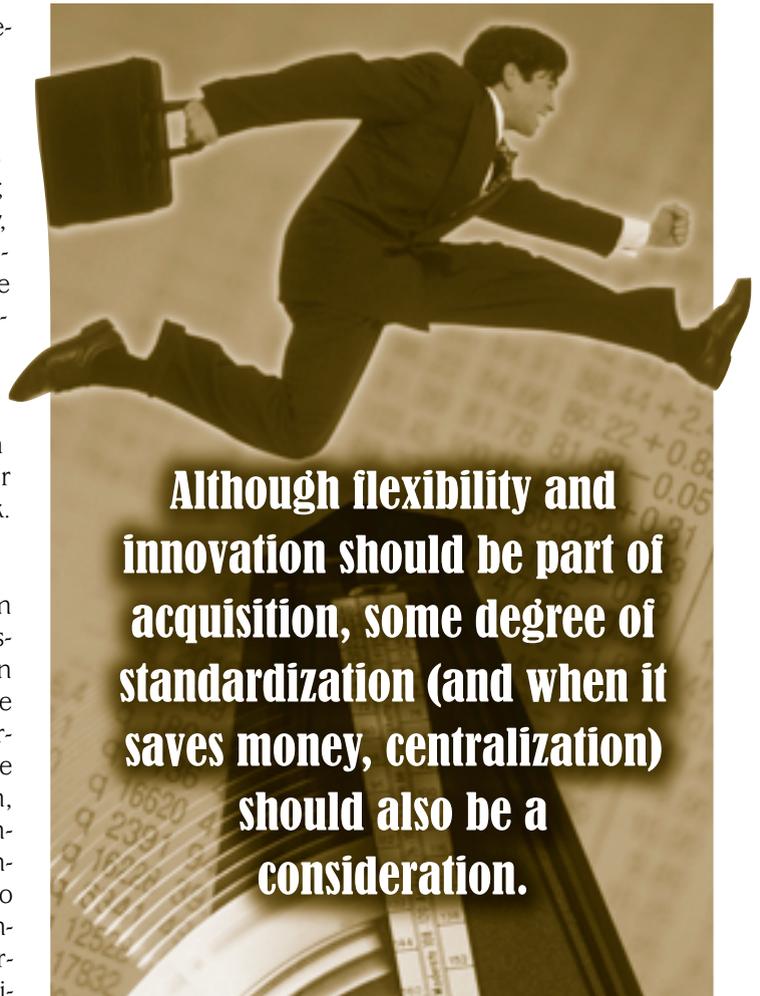
have individual conversations with senior leaders, stakeholders, a subset of interviewed program managers, and program managers who were not interviewed (but are still high performers). Including these individuals in the validation process enables the review of what has been summarized; demonstrates that they were heard; and allows for the clarification of any issue, controversy, or differentiation by level, function, or geography. Including high-performing program managers who have not been interviewed in the validation process helps ensure the findings apply to a broader audience. If the organization is relatively large, it is necessary to use a more structured process to validate the competencies and success profile—focus groups or online surveys can enable validators to review each component, rate it for accuracy or importance, and capture additional feedback.

### **Establish Proficiency Requirements**

Proficiency requirements indicate how skilled program managers need to be on different competencies. By establishing proficiency requirements, the organization can conduct a bench-strength assessment as well as provide developmental and career feedback to individuals interested in becoming program managers. To establish the proficiency levels, first determine the scale (e.g., high, medium, low, no knowledge or skill). Then use a consensus-driven focus group process (composed of high-performing program managers or their supervisors) to review each of the competencies and determine the minimum proficiency level required for successful performance in the role. The individuals providing the proficiency ratings need to use the full range of whatever proficiency scale is involved and assign high proficiency levels only to those competencies where it is truly critical for job success to have high capabilities. People in focus groups or those being interviewed will often state that it is necessary for program managers to be highly proficient in all of these competencies; but it is necessary for them to think through this process carefully so that the proficiency information will have meaning and can guide people's learning. For example, the competency of "influencing senior stakeholders" may exist in both the Program and Project Manager Success Profile, but in this instance, because program managers are more likely to need and use this competency, they would require a higher level of proficiency than project managers. Assigning the highest required proficiency level to only the most important or consequential competencies will create targeted training to develop successful program managers.

*The last article in this three-part series will explore the alternatives available when creating a program manager development program.*

The author welcomes comments and questions. Contact him at [tkroecker@cambriaconsulting.com](mailto:tkroecker@cambriaconsulting.com).



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*"Pendulum Swing" continued from page 32.*

There are acquisition boilerplates floating around and being reused, but they are often neither tailored appropriately nor current. The acquisition community needs clear guidance with logical updates, as well as boilerplates that are kept current by subject matter experts. The Department of Defense needs to make this investment before all those with the institutional knowledge have retired, leaving behind—at best—professionals guess-timating their way through the mysterious maze of acquisition. Although flexibility and innovation should be part of acquisition, some degree of standardization (and when it saves money, centralization) should also be a consideration.

In the end, there's never any mistake so horrible that we can't learn from it. So let's take a lesson from the past and never again swing the pendulum from one extreme to the other. Instead, let's strive to keep it somewhere in the middle, where acquisition is based on a balance of policy-driven processes and the accumulated knowledge and experience of many mentors.

The author welcomes comments and questions. Contact her at [lisa.kove@navy.mil](mailto:lisa.kove@navy.mil).