

So You're a Program Manager

Now What?

Alexander R. Slate



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To date, my articles have mostly dealt with aspects of program management that many would consider to be a part of the contracting function. This article, however, is addressed to program managers, particularly young PMs or those considering a career in the field. Program manager and project manager are synonymous in terms of this article.

Why Do We Have Program Managers?

The role of the various specialties or functionalities is fairly obvious. Engineers are responsible for systems design and the performance that results. Contracting is responsible for the official interaction with the companies that provide systems and services to the government. And so on. But what about the role (or roles) of the program manager? The nominal answer is that the PM is responsible for a program's execution of cost, schedule, and performance.

That sounds as if the PM is someone plonked on top of a program execution organization to oversee the program. If that's all, couldn't one of the specialists double-hat in that role and avoid the expense of a PM? Well if it were that simple, I would say yes. In fact, I have seen projects led by one of the functional specialists, most typically the systems engineer. For certain situations that may indeed be quite satisfactory (typically when a project is relatively small and simple). Most projects, however, are not simple.

Slate is currently working in a career-broadening assignment at Headquarters Air Force in the Acquisition Career Resources Management & Resources Division of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Acquisition Integration.

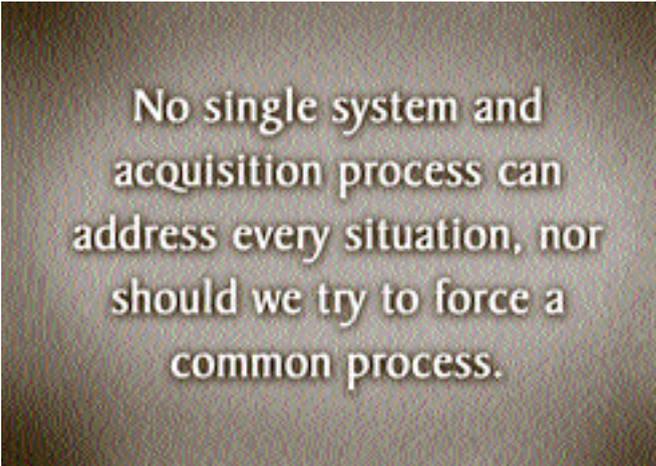
Three Basic Roles

As I see it, a PM has three basic roles. The first one, while important, is conceptually simpler than the others because it is a definitive role; it's the one likely to be described in a program management handbook. The others are more subtle roles, but are, in my mind, equally important as, or even more important than, the first. This is so because they are the basis for the success or failure of the first role.

First, and likely most obviously, the PM keeps track of progress and expenditures and ensures that the leadership and the customer are kept informed of progress and problems. It is the PM's responsibility to keep the program on course by meeting the standards established in the Acquisition Program Baseline. Now we move on to the roles that I feel provide the backbone of the program management function.

The PM is responsible for supplying the environment that allows the functional specialists to do their job (which includes providing the necessary tools). That means many things. The PM determines the level of formality—or informality—of team meetings. Does the team use set or informal agendas? Do communications flow from one specialist through the PM to other specialists, or do the specialists communicate directly with each other? Irrespective of the answers to these questions, the PM needs to ensure a proper audit trail.

Controlling group dynamics is the key to controlling the environment. Members of a team do not necessarily all have to like each other (though it may be helpful), but



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they do have to work towards a common end. How the communication flows is a tool to controlling group dynamics. Judging when and how much interpersonal tension to allow is an interesting balancing act. Some tension is necessary; it sparks creative thinking. Yet tension cannot be allowed to escalate to antipathy. One of the toughest things a PM ever has to do is to fire someone (or more properly, within the context of DoD programs, have someone reassigned and get a replacement).

This role is the essence of what program management really is: understanding the delicate balancing act of what is truly an art and not a science.

Between the first and second drafts of this article I was reminded by a friend and colleague, Patricia Tiner, of an interesting point. Controlling the group dynamics is made even more challenging when the PM is not the supervisor of the team members—or at least, of not all the team members. The best tools in this type of situation are good collegial relationships with the supervisors of the team members and an understanding on the part of those supervisors of what a PM needs to accomplish.

The other role that the PM plays is that of devil's advocate. A PM needs to know enough about the processes used by all the different functional specialists to be able to question all the assumptions and plans. It is the ability to embrace this role that helps to differentiate good PMs from outstanding PMs. In order to understand why this is a fundamental role for a PM, it is necessary to understand one of the biggest pitfalls that programs face.

Our Biggest Trap

All too often, teams fall into a process or checklist mentality. We try to cookie-cutter our way through programs. What worked on the last program will work for this program as well. There is nothing inherently wrong with processes and checklists. They are a good way to ensure that certain necessary requirements (such as compliance with laws such as the Clinger-Cohen Act) are met. But while process and checklists make great guides, they make

lousy masters. Organizations (and the Department of Defense is no exception) fall in love with systems and attempt to address all situations with a single system.

I've worked for the government for about 25 years, 10 of them as an 1101 acquisitions manager. The great bulk of the projects and programs I've been involved with have been Acquisition Category (ACAT) III. The side-effect of this is that I've been involved with an awful lot of different efforts, many of them from concept through fielding. Almost every one of these efforts has been different in some way from every other. Some of the differences have been small and some have been huge. I've been involved in at least five different types of source selections. The point is that no single system and acquisition process can address every situation, nor should we try to force a common process. Many of our policies and regulations address this, but many others choose to ignore it. Even the Federal Acquisition Regulation (which most people take to be a very inflexible document) states in Section 1.102 (Role of the Acquisition Team) "The FAR outlines procurement policies and procedures that are used by members of the Acquisition Team. If a policy or procedure, or a particular strategy or practice, is in the best interest of the Government and is not specifically addressed in the FAR, nor prohibited by law (statute or case law), executive order or other regulation, government members of the Team should not assume it is prohibited. Rather, absence of direction should be interpreted as permitting the team to innovate and use sound business judgment that is otherwise consistent with law and within the limits of their authority."

Avoiding the Trap

Avoiding the trap calls for creative thinking. Almost every time we attempt to determine a program strategy, we should address all elements of the strategy with the following questions: Why are we doing that? What are the risks, and what are the benefits? What are the alternatives, and what are the pros and cons of doing business that way? What are the assumptions we've made that are leading us to the course of actions, and how sure are we of them? And then we must document, document, document; including all of these analyses of alternatives.

Too often, I've seen teams go into acquisition strategy panels or murder boards and present a strategy. Then one of the gray-heads will ask, "Have you considered such and so?" The team members look around at each other (either not having considered the suggested alternative or not remembering having considered it); someone gets defensive, which quite often puts everyone's noses out of joint, and the team is frequently directed to go away and consider the alternative.

If instead, the team can say, "Yes we have, and here's why we chose not to go that way," or "We have, and

though we can't remember the problems off the top of our heads, we can send you our reasons for rejecting it in a day or two," the team usually ends up gaining acceptance for the plan. If someone can point out a flaw in your logic (including the basic assumptions) rather than your specific plans, then you had better go back and reconsider your plan.

Understanding Your Functional Specialists

There's another benefit to understanding what your functional specialists do. Many teams are staffed one-deep in the specialties. If one person gets sick, goes on vacation, or—even worse—gets reassigned before the replacement shows up, progress can come to a grinding halt. If you can at least take care of some of the missing person's responsibilities, then progress can continue forward, even if not at full speed. (In fact this additional benefit of cross-coverage is a good idea not just for PMs, but for all acquisition workers.)

The obvious question is "How do I prepare for that?" The simple answer is training and education in all of its forms. Take classes in the various specialties, not just those required for DAWIA certification in program management. Look at the training required for the various functionals and start taking those classes. It won't be easy to get into a lot of those classes, but keep pressing the point. Organizations also need to realize the benefit to this and be willing to expend budget on cross-training.

Don't forget informal education. Sit down with different functionals and find out what they do, how they do it, and why. And if you're reading this article, then you are already familiar with *Defense AT&L* magazine. Keep reading articles, even those that might not appear to hold interest at first. You never know where the next great nugget of information is going to come from.

Looking Beyond Program Management

Some day you'll probably move on. This may or may not be when the particular program or programs you are working on are complete, or even at a logical transition point. One last functional PM might consider is training someone on the team to take over when that time comes. Sharing information and building up good team relationships will make for a smooth transition. If you can find one or more people, then develop and mentor them so that the program will carry on as well as (or maybe even better than) when you were in charge. Do that and you've not only distinguished yourself as a program manager, you have made yourself a leader!

The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at alexander.slate@pentagon.af.mil.

strategies from which the improvement strategy will be selected.

The outputs and deliverables of this phase are a proposed strategy tailored to the specific commodity, a simple business case, estimated savings, and a decision brief.

Improve

The typical LSS tollgate milestones for the Improve phase are countermeasures to address root causes of waste and a future-state process map with performance targets.

The Improve phase of a Strategic Sourcing process converts an acquisition strategy into agreements; contracts; and tangible, streamlined procedures. Typical procedures use best practices to increase transparency between suppliers and end users, increase competition and/or partnering, and reduce transactions costs.

The outputs and deliverables of the Improve phase are new or revised contracts, data-capture improvements, forecast-sharing improvements, and updated procedures.

Control

The typical LSS tollgate milestones for the Control phase are planning for sustainable improvement, standardizing work for the improvement, establishing key process output measures and a measurement plan, and recording the results of any pilot studies.

The Strategic Sourcing Control phase is usually referred to as "managing performance" and includes monitoring best practices that were implemented to see if they are performing as expected. Continued communication and partnering with suppliers and customers insure that transparency is actually facilitating the avoidance of inadvertently driven-up costs. Spend analysis is used to monitor competition (in order to assure that prices do not creep up) and adverse impacts on transaction volume with its associated cost.

Improves Effectiveness

Traditional Lean Six Sigma is patterned on manufacturing where improved efficiency typically brings improved effectiveness as a by-product. The Strategic Sourcing variant of Lean Six Sigma shares characteristics with some other transactional processes. Strategic Sourcing improves effectiveness and, as is seen in many other transactional processes, generates efficiency as a by-product of effectiveness.

The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at lee.e.simon.ctr@usmc.mil.