

Programme Management: Taking the General's view

Over the last six years, David Walton of programme and project management company Bestoutcome, has successfully managed major programmes with a total budget of over £175 million. Each programme was different and generated its own particular challenges. In this paper he outlines his experience and offers some effective approaches that have led to highly successful outcomes. In particular he looks at a fundamental issue: how much detail should the programme manager become involved in if a successful outcome is to be achieved?

Why is a programme different from a project and is this important? In short, programmes are 'big things' that are typically large, complex and made up of many inter-dependent projects and sub-projects. They are designed to bring about a major business change.

A programme manager faced with multiple projects, many resources and often hundreds of activities must be selective about the crucial areas upon which to focus: those key factors that will make or break the desired outcome and where most value can be added or gained. Fully understanding and getting involved in every activity is unrealistic and if attempted, critical programme issues are likely to be missed altogether. The challenge is to identify when to drill down into 'at risk' areas of the programme that need sorting out. After sorting it out the manager needs to return to a strategic view of the programme.

A simple analogy would be the battles generals fought a few centuries ago. The general would plan the encounter, retreat to high ground and watch the conflict unfold. With his panoramic gaze he could see the whole battlefield and quickly spot where problems were developing in his troop deployment. His officers would then be dispatched with new instructions and ride out to the area that was in crisis. With the crisis averted, he would turn his attention back to the whole battle and decide on the next priority.

The general would not try and intervene in every area, as chaos and defeat would inevitably result. This is not much different to today's programme manager who has marshalled his resources to deliver a programme – although some of the situations I have witnessed resembled the carnage of a battleground. In other words, the programme manager needs to take the high ground and only intervene when necessary. Let's leave the analogy there as with all analogies they start to break down if you take them too far. How then can the programme manager take this metaphorical high ground? In my experience there are a number of ways this can be achieved.

The outcomes imperative

First, ensure that project managers and their staff fully understand the programme's desired outcomes. Delivering a successful change programme is more than achieving overall objectives to agreed time, quality and cost criteria; for a change programme to be genuinely successful it must first and foremost achieve its desired outcomes.

My dictionary defines an objective as 'an end-point that is sought or aimed at'. In contrast it defines an outcome as 'a result; a consequence; a visible effect'. There is an important difference here. In project management terms it is the distinction between the basic objective of 'delivering the system, or service, or product proposed' and the outcome of 'realizing the business benefits proposed'. For example, 'to automate customer relationship management' is an objective. 'To increase sales by increasing customer brand loyalty' is a strategic, beneficial outcome.

And here's the point: as far as the typical project manager is concerned, success is often defined as achieving the (main) project objectives (tolerably) to budget and schedule; but all projects in the programme could achieve this and the programme may still be a failure. It will be so if it fails to achieve its desired outcomes, or business benefits. Change this perception by making sure the desired outcomes of the programme are clearly understood by the project teams at the outset (and ideally, reward them for achievement). Ensure they check throughout the lifecycle of the programme and its projects that outcomes are likely to be delivered. If an issue is identified, appropriate corrective action can be taken. Specialised approaches and methodologies exist for doing this, aided by software tools.

In a programme with a financial services company that was integrating a new acquisition, the focus of the programme team – mostly concerned with IT – was to migrate systems and integrate infrastructure. One of the desired outcomes in the initiation document, however, was to reduce IT running costs by integrating and streamlining the IT organisations.

One year into the programme and this outcome had been largely forgotten. Why? Because the published programme plans focussed more on the IT migration and less on necessary organisational change. A review nine months before the end of the programme revealed that successful systems integration would be achieved, but not the real outcome, the real point of the programme - reduced running costs – unless drastic action was taken.

As a result the programme team was restructured with the organisation change workstream elevated to the right level in the programme. In future, each programme plan highlighted all desired outcomes and regular checks were made to ensure desired outcomes would be delivered.

Beware of wishful thinking

Second, create a climate of support and remove any presence of fear. Countless times I have run programme health checks that resulted in a critical diagnosis or a RED delivery status. Yet the programme manager cheerfully told his sponsor that the programme was fit and healthy, i.e. GREEN status.

In a recent health check conducted for a major retailer's new eCommerce project, it was clear that the GREEN status being reported by the project manager was a

misrepresentation of the true state of the programme. He maintained that his project plan was 'doable' and on track. But his key lieutenants had told him on many occasions that it was not achievable in the timescales. Yet it was clear from looking at the plan, scope and recent progress, that it would take a miracle to achieve it. In reality, the project manager knew this, but thought that if he worked hard enough (intervened in the details) it could be done. It is possible to get away with this 'wishful thinking' approach in a small project, but not a sizeable programme.

Sometimes this happens because the programme manager fears appearing incompetent, or being judged too optimistic. Often it is because 'we can't tell the sponsor it's red'. This 'emperor's new clothes' denial of never reporting red status (until a problem that could have been rescued erupts into a major crisis) often pervades the whole programme. It can result in issues that will suppress the desired outcomes. But with this mistaken approach there comes a point when corrective action is impossible.

Alternatively, if the programme culture is honest and supportive, any risks to realising desired outcomes may be flagged to the programme manager, or steering committee, for help and resolution in a timely manner. This requires the delivery status of the programme or project to be as far as possible objectively defined, not a matter of subjective opinion. Contrary to what many project managers think, most project sponsors, directors and stakeholders will, in fact, take bad news; what they cannot take is late bad news.

Act on the right milestones

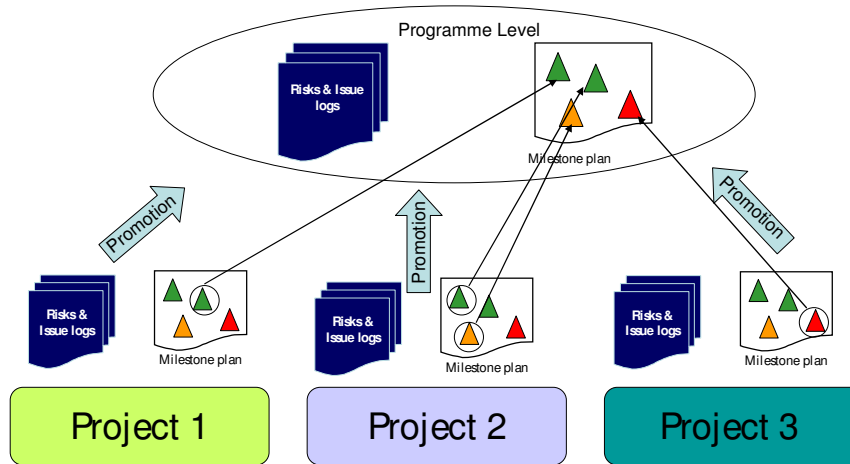
Third, highlight and track key programme milestones, risks and issues. For a programme manager to know what is going to threaten the delivery of desired outcomes, he or she will need help from the project managers. These individuals will know, in conjunction with the programme manager, what project milestones are crucial. If these key milestones slip they will have a wide-ranging impact on the programme as a whole. There is no algorithmic way of doing this; it is a matter of judgement.

In the programmes I have run, we have used a well-proven and systematic process. This approach entails jointly agreeing with project managers the milestones that need to be promoted or escalated to a programme level. For example, in a recent head office relocation programme, if a particular software pilot failed it would have serious consequences for the success of the programme. The relevant milestone was then escalated to the programme level to monitor its progress closely.

The promotion of key milestones was also carried out for all projects. It resulted in a programme plan containing promoted milestones and other programme-level milestones, (e.g., approval of a business case). The promotion did not pass accountability from the project manager to the programme manager, it remained with the project manager.

If a milestone in a project slipped and it was a promoted milestone, then the slippage would appear on the programme plan. It would be a signal for me to 'drill down' and get more involved. Similarly, I had programme risk and issue registers that contained programme level risks and issues as well as promoted equivalents. When one of these risks was not being mitigated or an issue not being resolved, it would signal my need to get more involved and take corrective action before it was too late.

Milestones, risk and issues



Based on this advice, your programme should not resemble a battlefield. Instead it will be well planned, structured and most importantly, you will take the general's strategic view of your programme and only dive down into the battle when it is essential. However, if you constantly get involved in hand-to-hand fighting, it will be the programme manager who is likely to be the first casualty.

ENDS

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