

Programme Management: Taking the General's View

David Walton - January 2008

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Over the last six years, I have successfully managed programmes with a total budget of over £175 million. Each programme generated its own challenges that needed addressing and in this series of articles I will outline some ways of working that will lead to successful outcomes for programmes of change.

This first article looks at the issue of detail: *how much detail should the Programme Manager be required to understand to deliver a successful programme?*

First, let us remind ourselves of why a programme is different from a project. In the Office of Government Commerce (OGC's) Managing Successful Programmes (MSP), it emphasises the difference between projects and programmes.

Programmes are different from projects in that it is their outcomes that matter, not their outputs.

Programmes are initiated to realise benefits through change, whether to do things differently, to do different things, or to do things that will influence others to change. MSP distinguishes between Outcomes and Benefits.

- *Outcome - the result of change, normally affecting real-world behaviours or circumstances.*
- *Benefit - measurable quantification of improvements resulting from change. Not always measurable in financial terms, but should be capable of at least 'observable' measures.*

The bottom line is that programmes are 'big things', i.e. they are typically large, complex and are made up of many inter-dependent sub-projects. They are designed to bring about a major business change.

Faced with multiple projects, many resources and often hundreds of activities, the programme manager must be selective in the areas of the programme on which to focus and on which most value can be added. Fully understanding and getting involved in every activity is not realistically possible and, if this is attempted, critical programme issues are likely to be missed altogether. The challenge for the programme manager is how to identify when to drill down into 'at risk' areas of the programme that need sorting out. After the 'sorting out' has occurred, the programme manager needs to return to a more strategic view of the programme.

A simple analogy would be the battles generals fought a few centuries ago. The general would plan the battle and then retreat to some high ground and watch the conflict unfold. With his panoramic gaze he could see the whole battle and quickly see where problems were developing in his troop deployment. His officers would then be dispatched with new instructions and ride out to the area of the battle that was in crisis. When this crisis was averted, the general would turn his gaze to the whole battle again and look where next to intervene. The general would not try and intervene in every area of the battle as chaos and defeat would inevitably result. This is not wildly different from a programme manager who has marshalled his resources to deliver a programme - although some of the programmes I have witnessed did resemble the carnage of a battleground! The programme manager needs to take the high ground and only intervene when required. We will leave the analogy here, temporarily, 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:

1. *Ensure that project managers and their staff understand the desired outcomes of the programme.* Delivering a successful change programme is more than 'just' achieving the programme's 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' and defines an 'outcome' as 'a result; a consequence; a visible effect'. There is an important difference here: in project management terms it is the difference between the objective of 'delivering the system/service/product proposed' and the outcome of 'realizing the business outcome proposed'. 'To automate customer relationship management' is an objective, 'To increase sales by increasing customer brand loyalty' is an outcome. As far as the typical project manager is concerned, 'success' is defined as achieving the (main) project objectives (tolerably) to budget and schedule; but all projects in the programme could achieve this and the programme will *still* be a failure if it fails to achieve its desired outcomes. If the desired outcomes of the programme are clearly understood by the project teams (and, ideally, they are rewarded on achieving them) they can check throughout the programme/project lifecycle that these are being delivered and then, if necessary, take action to ensure that delivery of these desired outcomes is achieved.

In a programme with a financial services company that was integrating a new acquisition, the focus of the programme team - that was mostly 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. The published programme plans focussed on the IT migration and organisational change was sidelined. After conducting a review nine months before the end of the programme, it became clear that although the systems were going to be successfully integrated, the outcome of reduced running costs would not be achieved unless the programme manager took drastic action. The programme team was restructured with the organisation change workstream elevated to the right level in the programme. All future programme plans highlighted *all* desired outcomes and regular checks were made to ensure that the programme's desired outcomes were being delivered.

2. *Create a culture of support and remove any climate of fear.* I have lost count of the number of times I have run programme healthchecks which have resulted in a critical diagnosis or a **RED** delivery status only to find that the programme manager has cheerfully told his sponsor that the programme is fit and healthy, i.e. **GREEN** status.

In a recent healthcheck, that I 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, for example, that his project plan was 'doable' and on track. His key lieutenants had told him on many occasions that it just wasn't achievable in the timescales. And, it was clear from just looking at the plan, scope and recent progress, that it needed a miracle to happen for the plan to be achievable. In reality, the Project Manager knew that it was not achievable, but he thought that if he worked hard enough (intervened enough) it could be done. You may get away with this 'wishful thinking' approach in a small project but not a sizeable programme.

In some cases this is because of the programme manager's fear of appearing incompetent or naivety or just wildly misplaced optimism; in many cases it is because, 'we can't tell the sponsor it's red'. This 'emperor's new clothes' denial culture of never reporting red status (until a rescueable problem has erupted into a major crisis) often pervades the whole programme resulting in issues that will adversely affect the desired outcomes being suppressed. There comes a point when these issues cannot be suppressed by which time it is probably too late to take effective corrective action. Alternatively, if the programme culture is honest and supportive (and the delivery status of the programme/project is as far as possible 'objectively defined', not just a matter of opinion), risks to realising desired outcomes can be flagged to the programme manager or steering committee for help and resolution in a timely manner. Contrary to what many Project Managers believe, most Project Sponsors, Directors and Stakeholders *can*, in fact, take bad news; what they *cannot* take is *late* bad news.

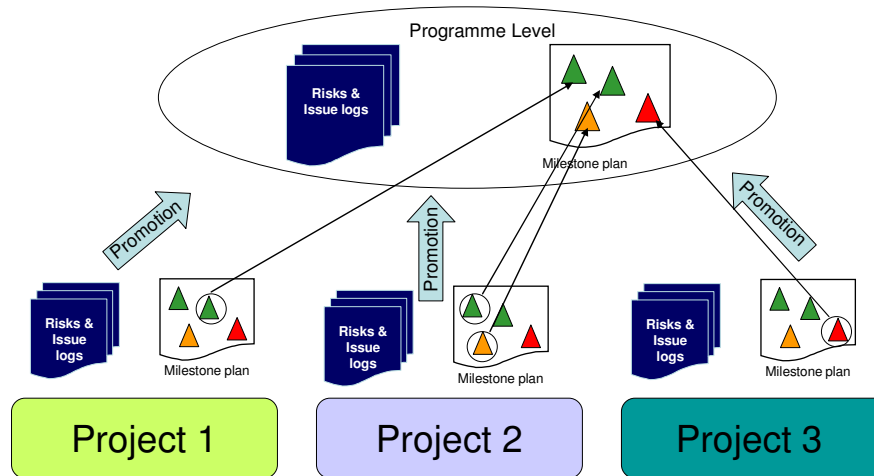
3. **Highlight and track key programme milestones, risks and issues.** For a programme manager to know what is going to threaten the delivery of desired outcomes, he or she needs help from the project managers. It is these individuals who will know, in conjunction with the programme manager, what project milestones are crucial so that if they 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 that I have run, we have a process of 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 I knew that if a particular software pilot failed it would have serious consequences for the success of the programme. This milestone was then escalated to the programme level so I could monitor its progress closely. This promotion of key milestones was carried out for all projects which resulted in a programme plan containing promoted milestones and other programme level milestones, (e.g., approval of a business case). This 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 this was a promoted milestone, then this slippage would appear on my programme plan. This would be a signal for me to 'drill down' and get more involved.

Similarly, I had programme risk and issue registers which contained programme level risks and issues as well as promoted risks and issues. When one of these risks was not being mitigated or an issue was 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



Hopefully, your programme will not resemble a battlefield. Instead it will be well planned, structured and you will take the general's strategic view of your programme and only dive down into the battle when it is essential to do so. However, if you constantly get involved in the hand-to-hand fighting, it will be the programme manager who is likely to be the first casualty, probably taken out by 'friendly-fire'.